

## Our neglect of Scarborough RT is shameful: James

**Much maligned SRT is actually TTC's most reliable service, despite years of neglect — so why the rush to far more expensive LRTs and subways.**

**By:** Royson James Toronto Politics, Published on Fri Feb 06 2015



Carlos Osorio / Toronto Star file photo

For years, experts have been pointing out that Scarborough Rapid Transit technology is our best bang for the buck. Yet LRTs and subways get all the headlines, laments Royson James.

“Notwithstanding criticisms and misinformation over the years, the Scarborough RT has been the single most-reliable service operated by the TTC.”

The words jump off the page of the January 2013 staff report to the Toronto Transit Commission.

Certainly, it couldn't be describing the SRT, the Rodney Dangerfield of Toronto's transit lines, the most disrespected 6.4-kilometre stretch of transit corridor in the system, the object of so much scorn that governments are prepared to spurn it at a cost of billions of dollars.

“The service has been very successful at attracting ridership and has been operating over capacity for a decade,” the report continues.

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The same RT that's been left to fall apart — abandoned like the discarded toy of some rich kid with eyes fixed on a shiny new plaything?

“For many years, it has carried daily passenger volumes of 40,000 people, with peak-period passenger volumes maxed-out at 4,000 passengers per hour, due to the limited number of vehicles in the SRT fleet.”

What? They can't buy new trains?

They could. And the TTC wanted to. A 2006 report made the case forcefully. It considered replacing the RT with a subway or an LRT. Staff rejected both as “not needed or warranted ... cannot be justified.”

But their political masters ignored the plea and ruined a good thing that the rest of the world came to embrace.

Now the Scarborough RT is so rickety, so rundown, so unloved, that to speak highly of it in its birthplace is to elicit ridicule. Vancouver bought the RT technology the same time as Toronto. It's expanding its near 50 kilometres of SkyTrain service, again. Here the RT's public image is that of a dinosaur.

A number of transit experts are risking extinction. They claim Toronto should not be debating whether it's best to replace the RT with a subway or an LRT. Neither is wise. Both are a waste of valuable transit dollars. Billions, in fact.

The best route is to fix up the RT. In fact, one option might be to expand the technology — now branded a mini-subway — to the Eglinton Crosstown and Sheppard and Finch LRTs for a viable, low-cost network that is suitable for the lower ridership in those corridors.

## Comparing transit in Scarborough

In 2006 the Toronto Transit Commission approved a study looking at replacement options for the Scarborough Rapid Transit (SRT) system. It looked at an upgraded SRT, a streetcar/light rail system and a subway. The study, the last on the matter, concluded that an upgraded SRT provided the best value and performance. In 2013, Toronto council approved a three-stop subway for Scarborough costing \$3.56 billion. Here is the report's comparison of the three systems.

MEASURE	OPTION 1 New Generation RT	OPTION 2 Streetcar/LRT	OPTION 3 Subway
<b>Stations</b>	No change	No change	Eliminates: McCowan, Midland and Ellesmere
<b>Support for Scarborough Centre development and intensification</b>	Good	Good	Superior (depending upon impact on Sheppard corridor)
<b>Capital cost (2006 \$ — includes vehicles)</b>	\$360 million	\$490 million	\$1,200 million
<b>Resources available for other transit initiatives</b>	Significant	Significant	None
<b>Service disruption up to</b>	Eight months	36 months	Uncertain
<b>Early capacity increase</b>	Yes	No	No
<b>Implementation risk</b>	Low	High	Very high
<b>Long-term capacity</b>	Meets needs	Meets needs	Exceeds needs
<b>Transfer at Kennedy Station</b>	Can be improved	Can be improved	Not required
<b>Expansion potential</b>	Limited	Most opportunities	Constrained by resources
<b>Stated public preference</b>	Low	Low	High

SOURCE: Toronto Transit Commission

TORONTO STAR GRAPHIC

“TTC could save \$2 billion by refurbishing and extending the Scarborough RT rather than throwing it away and building a [subway](#) that will do much the same thing,” says Michael Schabas, who’s authored an extensive report for the Neptis Foundation.

Dick Soberman, a long-time transit planner, consultant and expert on GTA transportation, emailed from vacation: “Being in Florida doesn’t help me understand why we are not simply buying new cars for the RT ... by far the cheapest, fastest, and most cost-effective thing to do.”

David Crowley, a former TTC bureaucrat and retired consultant and transit planner, smiles at the irony of the RT. When it was first sold to Toronto, as an upgrade to the streetcar plan already under construction for the corridor, the argument was that “Scarborough was too good for the second-class LRT.” Now the subway is the gleam in Scarborough’s eyes.

Federal politicians won’t hold news conferences to herald the purchase of new RT trains. Provincial candidates don’t get elected on promises to refurbish Ontario-made technology. City councillors turned transit commissioners garner votes fronting for [subways](#).

So Torontonians will be dinged an average \$41 per year for decades to pay for a subway that will run half empty for decades, ridership estimates predict. And the wasteful expenditure occurs because commuters have grown to hate a RT service left to fall apart.

Last July, Bernhard Steglich travelled to Toronto from Kingston, Ont., to get his unpopular pro-RT message heard. And now that he had the attention of a Toronto Star journalist, the clatter and noise from the object of his endearment was too much for the retired transit specialist, and one of the engineers who first sold the TTC on the virtues of the Scarborough RT.

This is intolerable, he shouted, above the clamour of steel on tracks. How could the TTC allow the line to so deteriorate? It’s almost as if they want it to die of neglect, he offered.

The arranged marriage between the TTC and the Scarborough RT was one of convenience, not love. The Ontario government forced the union and muted protestations by picking up the tab.

The Scarborough RT was to be a demonstration project and the world was the marketplace. Vancouver bought in. So did Detroit's People Mover. New York's JFK airport uses the technology. Projects are in scores of countries as Bombardier bought out the crown corporation.

Steglich, then an engineer with a government agency set up to showcase the new automated train system and technology, failed to arouse passion among TTC officials in the early 1980s. Service began in 1985. Steglich hasn't stopped trying.

Only now failure to listen could cost the city at least \$1 billion. No, make that \$2 billion. And counting.

Essentially, there is nothing wrong with the RT that a little tender loving care can't solve, Steglich says. The Transit City plan to replace it with an LRT is misguided. To build a subway, as currently planned, is overkill and a colossal waste of money. And if you think the retiree's head is gathering water, consider that there are many transit experts saying the same thing.

Back in Kingston after his ride on the RT with a journalist, Steglich fired off a letter of complaint to TTC chief executive Andy Byford. "In summary, the ride was horrible, mostly because of the unacceptable high noise," he wrote and urged Byford to repair the system.

How could anyone love the Scarborough RT when the TTC kept talking about it being at the end of its normal life? Talk like that has doomed the RT, Steglich says.

The TTC is using the same 28 trains it bought for the RT in 1985. Vancouver has changed and upgraded theirs since. In fact, the RT has shown its superiority by continuing to run, despite the neglect and failure to upgrade.

For example, the subway system purchased the H6 subway cars around the same time as the RT trains. The last of those subway trains were retired last summer, replaced by the new trains. Vancouver's system has new trains, including walk-through versions like the new subway cars.

TTC never adopted the automatic (driverless) system the RT comes with (other cities have). And it won't upgrade it. Instead it prefers to spend more than \$3 billion on a subway to replace "one of the best systems around the world, developed right in Kingston."

At a cost of \$150 million per kilometre, the TTC can expand the RT by four kilometres up to Sheppard. Add another \$400 million to retrofit and upgrade the system and the total is \$1 billion, less than half the LRT and a third of the subway cost, Steglich says.

"I was part of the technical engineering team negotiating the deal for the RT. The TTC was always afraid it was never going to work. Now, after 30 years, despite its successes everywhere, Toronto is going to take it out because you never liked it. Premier (Kathleen) Wynne just

celebrated its success. And you want to take the damn thing out. It's ludicrous. To consider the waste — when you ignore the options that could better serve the city — it eats me up."

So Steglich sends letters to the TTC, Metrolinx, the minister of transportation, the premier, MPPs, city councillors. He has a stack of letters with polite responses. But no one is listening.

Mitch Stambler, TTC's head of strategy and planning, knows how Steglich feels. His report to the TTC in 2006 outlines all the points. It argued for urgent upgrades and refurbishing of the RT. For about \$360 million, TTC would have the system running like new with public acceptance akin to Vancouver's SkyTrains.

But almost overnight "the political landscape changed," he tells the Star.

A year later, then-mayor David Miller introduced the Transit City LRT plan as a network of routes, including the Scarborough RT. This was the chance to bring the orphan RT line into the transit family. TTC agreed.

We all know how that turned out. Another pharaoh rose up in Egypt, er Toronto. And he wanted subways instead of LRTs. So the subway option everyone considered "overkill" or "overbuild" for a corridor barely dense enough for a fully separated LRT or RT, became a political talisman.

Projected ridership numbers fluctuate to match political designs. Costs are understated to prop up shaky options. Votes are traded to deliver seats for threatened political parties. And the RT technology has so vanished from political consciousness that it is not even an option presented to the people during public consultation, now underway.

And the average Toronto homeowner will be dinged \$41 a year for decades to pay the premium on a project the experts excoriate.

History shows no one pays for such shameful, indefensible hubris — except you know who.

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### **Excerpts from TTC's Scarborough RT Strategic Plan on Aug. 30, 2006:**

- "The evaluation shows that the huge capacity achievable with a subway is not needed or warranted in this corridor and, therefore, the very large capital cost premium of a subway cannot be justified."
- "The broader assessment of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks associated with each of the options concluded that the upgrading of the existing line to accommodate larger, new generation RT vehicles provides the best way of quickly improving rapid transit service in Scarborough while still allowing an expansion of rapid transit services in other corridors in Scarborough as identified in the city's Official Plan."
- "Upgrading the Scarborough RT line to accommodate larger, new-generation vehicles is the lowest-cost, and most-easily implemented, option for maintaining and providing the increased

capacity needed to accommodate the projected future increasing demand for rapid transit in the corridor.”