

Untangling the realities of the daily commuting slog: James

Despite its shortcomings, Toronto has one of the best-integrated transit systems in the world, and 1 in 3 of us gets to work without a subway ride.



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Buses remain the workhorses of the TTC system.

By: Royson James Toronto Politics, Published on Mon Feb 23 2015

A recent poll has half of us admitting that we get to work late quite often. The Commute is a convenient scapegoat.

The Commute could mean the ride, the journey, the traffic, the highway pileup, the subway delay, the bus wait, the time it takes to get from point A to B, the experience, the cost.

Or all of the above.

Across the conurbation of Greater Toronto and Hamilton, numbering 6 million people on the way to 8.6 million by 2031, The Commute conjures up different images for different citizens. The one constant is that trend lines point to more lost time and money — if measures are not taken to halt congestion.

Metrolinx, the provincial agency set up to address our commuting woes, plans to spend \$2 billion a year for 25 years to triple the number of rail and bus lanes. Today, GTHA residents take 2 million auto trips in the morning commute. The number trends towards 3 million auto trips by 2031. Correctly, Metrolinx sees relief not in more highways, but in more transit.

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The plan is to bring transit closer to more people. Now, 42 per cent of GTHA residents live within two kilometres of transit; Metrolinx aims to almost double that to 81 per cent, making transit more competitive.

Some 38 per cent of us now have a reasonable and tolerable 45-minute commute to work by transit; the percentage will worsen to between 26 and 30 per cent without a huge transit build-out. Metrolinx aims to push that number to as high as 56 per cent. How? By more than tripling the length of transit service to 1,725 kilometres.

The pricetag is \$50 billion or more. The cost of doing nothing is this: Already, congestion costs GTHA residents an estimated \$3.3 billion a year, growing to a projected \$7.8 billion in 2031.

Opinion polls show that Toronto residents — weaned on subway service that tends to be most predictable and reliable — consider anything less than subway to be inferior service. That view is encapsulated in the Rob Ford war cry: “Subways, subways, subways.” But a look at how we get around the GTHA makes a liar out of the subway-or-nothing proponents.

In fact, as most commuters know, the bus is the workhorse; the streetcars carry more than the GO trains. And it takes car, bus, streetcar, RT, subways and GO trains to move the masses.

Ridership and jobs projections — the two key elements that make a transit service viable — suggest that a subway along Sheppard is a money-loser; a subway in the Scarborough RT corridor is providing a bus where a minivan is required; and calls for a subway on Finch West any time before the next century are akin to the ranting of a deranged politician.

The challenge is, and always will be, which technology is best for a particular service in the short, medium and long term? Meanwhile, Toronto's integration of travel modes — with fare integration also on the horizon — is the envy of the world.

“This is the best service integration anywhere, between bus and subway,” says David Crowley, a former TTC planner who has international experience planning transit. “It's a very positive thing. It's the key to the TTC's success. We don't understand how good we have it.”

In many other cities, travel on the bus is a separate activity from a trip on the Metro. Here, the trip is so integrated that one is critically linked to the other. As such, it makes little sense to expend great energy pursuing rail service while ignoring the state of the bus fleet.

When John Tory arrived at city hall days after his election last October as mayor, the TTC seized the opportunity to deliver that message, often muted by the Ford regime. Former chief general manager Gary Webster was fired essentially for sticking to his conviction that LRT service is good for some corridors, subways for others. Anyone else at the TTC who had that view learned to suppress it — until the political landscape changed.

With a new mayor, TTC staff showed Tory how interconnected Toronto's commute had become. For example:

- More than 10 per cent of TTC riders start their day on a streetcar, before transferring to a bus or subway. And 6 per cent of them use streetcar only.
- The 504 streetcar carries more passengers than all of Edmonton transit, all GO buses. And, more than the Sheppard subway.
- More than a third of TTC riders never see the subway, completing their commute on buses or streetcars. That's 562,000 people a day.

Chris Upfold, the TTC's chief customer officer, says the bus network, following the city's excellent street grid, doesn't get the respect it deserves.

"Buses are the backbone of the TTC," Upfold says. "More than half of the riders are taking a bus at some stage."

Not surprisingly, Tory boosted the city's subsidy to the TTC to improve bus and streetcar services.

As the Toronto region looks to tame traffic congestion — a near impossible task, historically — missteps will be costly, in terms of cash outlay and the tenuous relationship between commuters and the transportation authorities.

There is a remnant of commuters who still think more highways are the answer. But the majority now know that the law of traffic prevails. Build more roads and more cars follow — and more congestion shortly after. The only chance the Toronto region has is to pursue with vigour a transit build-out like the one being contemplated by Metrolinx in the Big Move.

Still, the public is skeptical.

The reason Toronto citizens opt for subway over everything else is their experience with the various modes. Subway service is frequent, reliable and predictable. Bus service and streetcar service rise and fall with political regimes. What commuters want is a service that arrives frequently and deposits them where they need to go.

When I need to get to Rexdale from downtown, I know I can go to Kipling and hop on the 191 Express right to Albion and Martin Grove — for one fare, with one transfer at Kipling. To expect a subway to Rexdale is premature. When that area of Etobicoke becomes a jobs destination, the subway will follow.

My normal commute from North York to Toronto city hall is as good as it gets, except for those living close to work — the 36 per cent of TTC riders who travel five kilometres on one vehicle (bus, streetcar or subway).

Like four in every 10 TTC users, I have one transfer: the typical pattern, from bus to subway and a short walk to work.

The commuters who need some coddling are the heroic ones who make multiple transfers to complete the morning commute. One in five commuters must complete two transfers before ending the journey, averaging 16 kilometres. And 4 per cent, representing more than 67,000 trips, must make three transfers, covering 22 kilometres on average.

Finding ways to lighten their journey will tax transit planners.

In essence, our wasteful land development patterns, coupled with low population densities and less-than-adequate concentration of jobs is bound to tie us in knots.

Everything Metrolinx does is only forestalling chaos. Every misstep, like building a subway that doesn't link people to a jobs destination, frustrates progress.