

The D in DRL stands for disrespect and disappointment: James

An idea that's been around for more than a century, but constantly derailed, the DRL is both desperately needed and just a dream.



Crowding on the Yonge line could be relieved, some say, by offering incentives to travel outside rush hours.

By: Royson James Toronto Politics, Published on Fri Feb 27 2015

Torontonians fancy the Downtown Relief Line (DRL) as their top transit priority, a recent poll reveals. Too bad. If history repeats itself, the “D” in DRL will morph into demoted, dethroned, derailed.

But never truly dead.

Despite a genealogy stretching back more than a century, constantly promoted and posited as the cure for the common downtown congestion, the DRL has been eclipsed more times than the sun and moon put together.

DRL might as well stand for the Doomed Relief Line. But doomsday never comes.

[DRL TIMELINE: 100 years of wishing and waiting](#)

Lately, its proponents have taken to removing the “D” — a shrewd move to avoid alerting the haters in the suburbs who sermonize that burghers from Scarborough and their 5,000 passengers per hour in the morning peak deserve a subway before the 30,000 strap-hangers spooned on the Yonge line trundling towards downtown.

Call it DRL, Relief Line, Yonge Relief, Downtown Rapid Transit (DRT), Queen Street Subway, Underground Queen St. Streetcar, or — wash our mouth out — SmartTrack, the common denominator is “D” eventually ends in disrespect and disappointmen.

“This is a city that doesn’t miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity,” says Ed Levy, one of the deans of transit planning in Toronto. The DRL has “reappeared virtually every decade” since 1910, under different names. “It’s a long and tortuous history.”

So, why does the dog keep returning to its vomit?

Because there’s something arresting about an idea whose leaves keep reappearing like those of a lopped-off banana plant. Maybe the 1910 Jacobs-Davies report was correct. Maybe, almost 60 years later, the TTC was right in telling the province:

“The Queen (Street) subway line is considered vital through the downtown area to provide east-west access to the developing core . . . Increasing high-density development in the Thorncliffe, Flemingdon Park and Don Mills-Eglinton areas already indicate that this line should be extended northerly to terminate north of Eglinton Avenue.”

Rarely does a transit study fail to include some iteration of the downtown relief line as a core need of the city’s transit system. Currently, the TTC, Metrolinx, City of Toronto planners and an untold number of consultants are studying its entrails. Again.

The city’s chief planner wants it. TTC boss Andy Byford backs it. Transit geeks salivate over it. Veteran transit watchers weep over its delay.

And still it languishes — this time, sidelined and maybe derailed by SmartTrack, the new hot thing, Mayor John Tory’s baby. SmartTrack would cost maybe \$8 billion, duplicate some of the current GO service, render redundant portions of the Scarborough Subway route and replicate some of the DRL service; but it has currency and political capital.

Y’know how politics tend to trump commonsense. Maybe, that’s at play here. Or maybe city councillors are wise to be questioning the DRL dogma.

“We are being told by the chief planner (Jennifer Keesmaat) and the transit intelligentsia that this is the be-all and end-all, the silver bullet,” says TTC chair Josh Colle, sounding awfully skeptical. With the full press on to promote the DRL, public approval should be at 70 per cent, not the [29 per cent who say it is the city’s most urgent need](#), he says.

Councillor Joe Mihevc, a transit-friendly, left-wing, midtown transit commissioner, surprises with this:

“What we have is a (capacity) problem for four hours of the day, two in the a.m. and two in the p.m.,” Mihevc says. “The rest of the time it will be a white elephant, I truly believe that.”

The DRL is something for the next generation, he says. Ouch. They said that in 1911. And in 1975.

Skepticism mounts even as citizens rediscover downtown and office towers sprout nearby to take advantage of a burgeoning downtown workforce.

A Neptis Foundation study in late 2013 suggested a [shuttle service on existing GO Transit lines](#), running from Main subway to Union, could supplant the need for a DRL and cost a few hundred million dollars.

DRL lovers remain apoplectic over that claim from Michael Schabas.

Figures in a report last May from chief planner Keesmaat, a DRL supporter, haven't advanced the cause. It says the new subway cars will accommodate 10 per cent more passengers; the opening of the Spadina subway extension will relieve demand on the Yonge line by 5 per cent to 10 percent; and upgrades to the subway signal system (automatic train control) will add 25 per cent capacity on the Yonge line.

Veteran transit watcher, planner and teacher Richard Soberman, now retired, doesn't buy the freed-up capacity claims from ATC.

“Balderdash! Says the guy who wrote the textbook when I was young and still honest,” Soberman writes in an email.

With all that new capacity, maybe the DRL can be deferred into the future, detractors say.

Brady Yauch, of the Consumer Policy Institute, a quiet think tank founded by urban guru Jane Jacobs in the 1990s, released a paper last year slamming the DRL designs as too costly and unnecessary.

Revamp the TTC's flat-fare policy, Yauch recommends. In fact, it would be cheaper for the TTC to offer free transit before the morning peak. The measure would divert 1.5 per cent of riders, he estimates, and the lost revenue would pale in comparison to the cost of the DRL — ranging from \$3 billion to \$8 billion, depending on the option chosen.

“It would solve the crowding issues currently experienced on the Yonge subway line, while saving the transit agency and its customers billions of dollars (\$1.5 billion over the next 10 years) in not having to build an expensive subway,” he said.

DRL proponents grow frustrated as detractors peck away at single elements of the advantages of the DRL, while ignoring its essential benefit: creating a crucial link in a missing network.

The DRL is supposed to:

- Divert passengers off the Bloor-Danforth line before they squeeze into Bloor-Yonge or Bloor-St. George, the TTC's colossal chokepoints. By 2031, passenger movements at Bloor-Yonge will jump by 45 per cent, planners estimate. The terminally under-designed Bloor-Yonge interchange is considered one of the TTC's biggest blunders of the last century.
- Move passengers off the Yonge line, already near capacity.
- Provide routes into the downtown core from east and west, a desperate need for a system that is dangerously dependent on the Yonge-University line. If something breaks or blows up in that corridor, the city grinds to a halt, they fear. This begins to provide some network flexibility.
- Relieve the frustrated urbanites now flocking to condo communities on the shoulders of the downtown, but unable to board the King or Queen streetcars as needed, or challenged to stomach the crammed streetcars from Liberty Village, for example.
- Serve a downtown core that is the envy of most in North America — population expected to jump 83 per cent to 130,000 people; employment pushing up 28 per cent to above 400,000 jobs by the year 2031. Transit demand in the downtown core is projected to increase 55 per cent over this time.
- Run along King or Queen in the downtown segment, opening the opportunity to create two Union Station-like terminals, east and west of Union, and provide capacity to the country's busiest and most critical transportation corridor. Under current projections, Union Station will absorb all its capacity a few years after the current expansion is completed.

Metrolinx reported last June that its joint study has rejected several solutions as “not feasible.” They include new subway from Bay to Union, subway lines below existing ones, express trains, creating a by-pass track at every subway station, running longer trains, and others.

“My view is that, even with other improvements, a relief line will be needed,” says Andy Byford, clinging to a position he's held since becoming CEO at the TTC. “Until and unless I see data that suggests otherwise, I shall not be swayed from that view.”

Byford has seen data that factors in the positive benefits of ATC, new trains, and other measures. “But the modelling still showed that by 2031, Line 1 would be unable to cope — especially at Yonge and Bloor. The other initiatives will help, and SmartTrack will have positive impact, but my strong sense is that these will only delay, not obviate, the need for the (D)RL.”

Byford says the modelling being undertaken will deliver the definitive answers. But some of the very planners and consultants who've done similar studies over the years trust neither the process nor the outcome.

“We all know that any study initiated by any mayor or premier always clearly demonstrates that the hypothesis is correct — whether it's Sheppard subway follies (Mel Lastman) or LRT Mania (David Miller),” says Soberman.

“This is what is fundamentally wrong when the mayor of the day is also the chief planner, and planning heads either corroborate these ideas through extensive use of consultants, or simply remain silent.”

David Crowley used to be a service planner at TTC. He spends a lot of time looking at transportation demand studies and is fearful that historical mistakes will come back to bite the city. The DRL will help correct the mistake of a missing transit hub or distributor or network that takes commuters from point A to any other point in the region.

“If we continue to rationalize away such visionary prospects, stagnation could well be our fate,” says Levy. “The DRL is, sadly, out of reach now, but we must uphold the vision.”