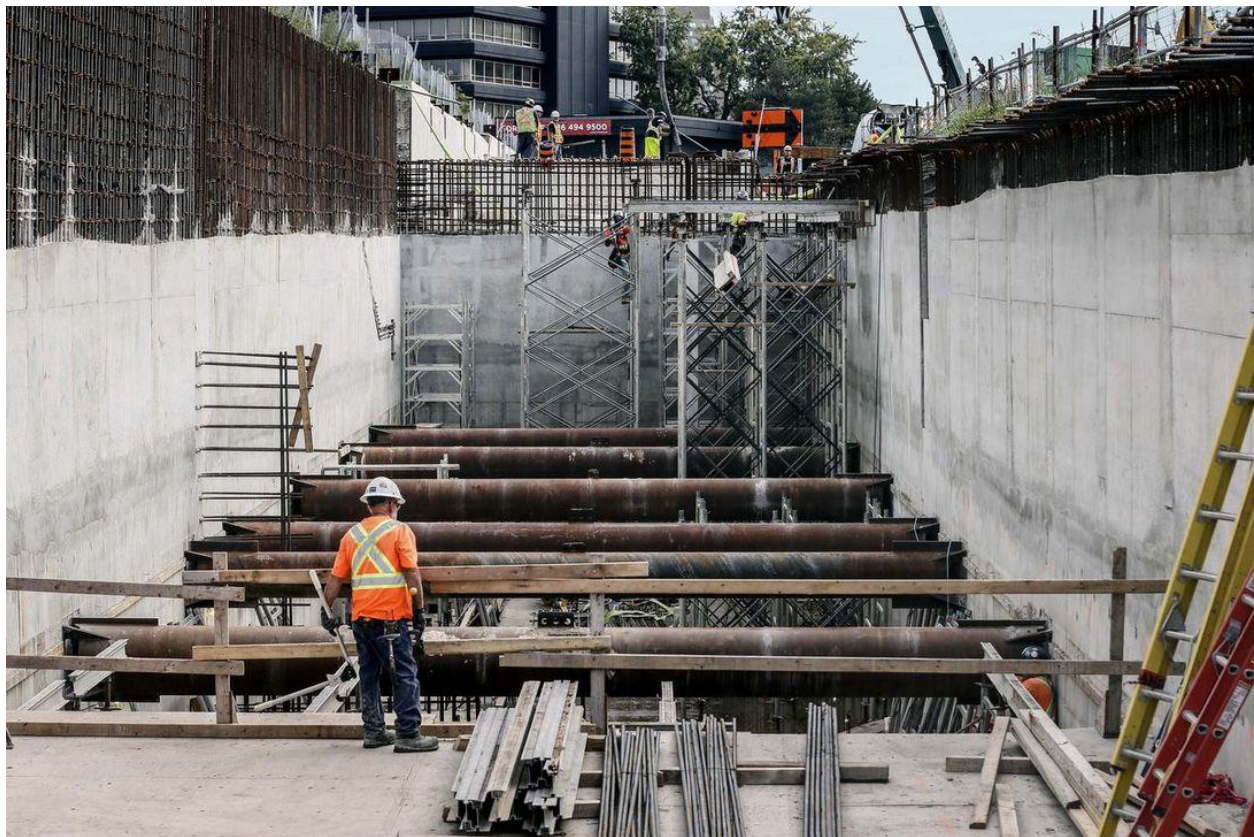


COVID-19 likely to force long delays in major GTA transit projects, experts warn

By Ben Spurr Transportation Reporter
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[The COVID-19 crisis](#) could force significant delays to major Toronto-area transit projects, experts warn, a development that would be a painful setback for a region that was already decades behind in building an adequate network.

While it's still not clear how long the crisis will last and how much damage it will wreak on the province's economy, it has the potential to affect lines already under construction, like the Eglinton Crosstown LRT, as well as those still in the planning stages, like the Ontario Line and other projects in the Progressive Conservative government's \$28.5-billion network expansion plan.

And on Wednesday, Crosslinx Transit Solutions, the consortium building the \$5.3-billion LRT, said a work site had been closed after three workers tested positive for COVID-19 and two more were awaiting test results.

Crosslinx spokesperson Kristen Jenkins said the Black Creek and Eglinton site office will undergo deep cleaning and was expected to reopen next week.

“Overall I think the pandemic will have a negative impact on completion dates” for transit projects, said Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, which represents labour and management construction groups across the province.

He said in the short-term, projects are likely to be delayed by health precautions that prevent construction crews from working normally, and in the long-term could be affected by disruptions to global construction supply chains and government funding constraints caused by the economic downturn that’s already started to grip the province.

Anne Marie Aikins, spokesperson for Metrolinx, the provincial transit agency that oversees transit expansion in the region, confirmed Tuesday that transit construction is exempt from Premier Doug Ford’s order to shut down non-essential business across the province.

That means work should continue on the Eglinton Crosstown, the 19-kilometre midtown line that’s been under construction since 2011. Early works for the 11-kilometre Finch West LRT, scheduled to open in 2023, should also move ahead.

“However, there is a clear expectation for all of our contractors to ensure the health and safety of all of their workers and if that cannot be guaranteed work must immediately cease,” said Aikins.

Even before the COVID crisis hit, the Eglinton Crosstown was [set to be delayed past the province’s September 2021 completion date](#).

On Tuesday, Jenkins, the Crosslinx spokesperson, said the consortium had changed shift schedules and taken other steps to allow for social distancing, but declined to say whether it believes the LRT will be further delayed by COVID-19.

She noted Crosslinx has seen an increase in absenteeism as workers self-isolate, call in sick, or simply don’t show up for their shifts.

A spokesperson for the Laborers’ International Union of North America Local 183, which represents about 350 people working on the Crosstown, said although the government is allowing construction to proceed, work will likely have to slow to allow crew members to follow public health recommendations to keep two metres apart.

“I would imagine that the level of productivity would be reduced under these circumstances,” said Jason Ottey, director of communications for LIUNA Local 183. He said construction

schedules on the Crosstown will likely have to be adjusted to account for “spreading that work out appropriately” and allowing for social distancing.

The Crosstown’s completion could also be affected by Bombardier’s announcement Tuesday that [it’s suspending non-essential production](#) at its Ontario and Quebec facilities as a result of the pandemic. The company is building the fleet for the Crosstown, and delays to vehicle production could force the LRT’s opening day to be pushed back further.

Bombardier spokesperson Sandra Buckler said work on the Crosstown vehicles is continuing at the company’s Kingston, Ont. plant, but didn’t answer directly when asked whether the company will meet fleet delivery deadlines.

She said as a result of COVID-19, the company is “experiencing many supply chain issues; however, we are continuing to do what we can.”

In the longer term, the outbreak could also disrupt plans for the four transit projects that make up the provincial government’s \$28.5-billion GTA expansion—the Ontario Line, Yonge North subway extension, Scarborough subway extension, and Eglinton West LRT.

According to the schedule Premier Ford announced last April, the Ontario Line is slated for completion as early as 2027, a timeline many experts had warned was unrealistic before the crisis. The other projects would be finished between 2029 and 2031.

Although the province cited financial constraints in its cancellation the Hamilton LRT last December before the outbreak began, Aikins said the provincial government “has provided assurances” that funding for its four GTA projects “will not be impacted by the COVID pandemic.”

She offered less certainty about whether Metrolinx stands by the original timelines for the four projects.

“I cannot say at this point. We have no updated timelines for our projects at this stage,” Aikins said.

The COVID outbreak has already impacted the procurement for two of the projects. Infrastructure Ontario confirmed Tuesday it has pushed back the submission deadline for a request for qualifications for work on the Scarborough and Eglinton West projects by six weeks, to the end of May.

The delay is minor but could be a sign of things to come. Procurement for multi-billion-dollar transit projects is predicated on receiving competitive bids from groups of multinational corporations, some of [which had already expressed concerns about the financial risk of Ontario transit projects](#), and whose global operations won’t be immune to the expected economic downturn caused by the pandemic.

When asked whether Infrastructure Ontario expects provincial transit plans to be delayed as a result of the COVID crisis, agency spokesperson Ian McConachie said Tuesday the organization is “working closely” with the private sector and other partners, and “will reassess our procurement schedule, if necessary, as the global situation continues to evolve.”

Toronto transit expert and writer Steve Munro said past experience indicates that if the economic fallout of the pandemic is as bad as expected, new lines will certainly be delayed. He cited the Ontario Liberal government’s decision to cut funding for Toronto’s Transit City LRT plan in the wake of the 2008 recession.

“We’ve been here before, and I fully expect things will be deferred,” Munro said.

He argued that much of the GTA’s transit plans are predicated on demand projections that assume the region’s population will grow by about 100,000 every year over the next decade. A global economic downturn could slow that growth, as could international travel restrictions enacted in response to the pandemic.

Already, the TTC has reported a 70-per-cent drop in ridership of COVID-19, and while demand can be expected to rebound once social distancing measures are eased, whether transit use will return to pre-pandemic levels isn’t assured. The TTC lost about 20 per cent of its ridership during the recession of the early 1990s and didn’t fully regain it until 2007.

Lower transit demand, coupled with tighter government budgets, could make public investment in transit seem less of an urgent priority. Those factors will “be used as an excuse to not build,” Munro predicted.

Munro pointed out that aspects of the Ontario PC’s transit strategy could be particularly susceptible to an economic downturn. The provincial government’s plan for GO Transit expansion and relies heavily on private developers paying to build new rail stations in exchange for assets like development rights near the lines. The plan would be undermined if development activity slows.

While the region’s transit plans look to be facing serious headwinds, Shoshanna Saxe, an assistant professor of civil engineering at the University of Toronto who studies transit infrastructure delivery, cautioned that when the province emerges from the crisis, it will need to double down on expanding the GTA’s network, not shy away from it.

“At the end, be it six weeks, six months, or a year and a half from now, we’re going to go back to a city that has major infrastructure deficits. And we need to invest in that,” she said.

Saxe argued that new transit will be needed more than ever in a post-pandemic GTA. “In an economy that needs stimulus, investing in large infrastructure projects,” particularly ones that would improve transit access for thousands, “have historically proven to be a really good thing to do,” she said.