

Tory pleads 'guilty' as SmartTrack and other public transit projects chug along

Chris Selley | March 9, 2016 11:29 PM ET



Aaron Vincent Elkaim for National PostSmartTrack will run exclusively along existing GO lines. Plans call for four to eight stations to be built; peak service would run between six and 11 trains hourly.

John Tory's signature \$7-billion SmartTrack plan edged somewhat closer to reality on Wednesday — or what remains of it, anyway. Executive Committee approved a staff recommendation to focus on two possible options that fall well short of what Tory stumped for during his election campaign. The plan will go next to city council.

SmartTrack had been a 53-kilometre “separate but parallel” service along mostly existing rail corridors, from Markham via Union Station to the Airport Corporate Centre, with quarter-hourly service and 22 new stops. It is now essentially a plan to beef up the province's future regional express rail (RER) program, running exclusively along existing GO lines. Between four and eight new stations would be built; peak service would run between six and 11 trains hourly.

Tory has played up his flexibility in the face of staff advice. But his critics have rightly accused him of deriding concerns about SmartTrack during the election campaign, only to see many of them validated by staff. Notably, a western spur that was to serve the Airport Corporate Centre proved unfeasible, and will be replaced by a westward extension of the Eglinton-Crosstown LRT.



Dave Thomas/Toronto Sun/Postmedia Network Mayor John Tory, left, confers with Toronto City Councillor Paul Ainslie during a city hall meeting about public transit on Wednesday, March 9, 2016.

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“If I stood behind it too enthusiastically, then I'll plead guilty,” Tory offered at a press conference. But he stood firmly behind the plan.

“Whatever the exact characteristics of SmartTrack, it will utilize existing GO track rail lines that run through the city of Toronto to increase local transit options for local residents,” Tory said. That was the point, and he thinks we should be pleased.

In the short term, we should be.

Also on Wednesday, Executive Committee approved the latest plan for Scarborough: a one-stop extension of the Danforth line to Scarborough Town Centre, and an eastern extension of the Eglinton LRT to the University of Toronto's Scarborough campus — a vastly better expenditure of \$3.5 billion than Rob Ford's three-stop Scarborough subway.

Furthermore, staff at committee unveiled their preferred route for the Downtown Relief Line (DRL): along Queen or Richmond from Nathan Phillips Square, then north to Pape station. The line is still many years and perhaps \$3.5 billion away, but chief planner Jennifer Keesmaat told committee it had never been closer to hand. It has never been more essential to take some heat off rush-hour traffic on the Yonge line, as any passenger can attest. A new downtown-bound transfer point at Pape would do just that.