

## Public transit: No place for politics?

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Tess Kalinowski



Richard Soberman, who is critical of the choices made by transit boards made up of politicians, cites the Sheppard subway as one mistake: While it's gaining riders now, it would have been better to invest the money in an Eglinton line.

TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

As Mayor-elect Rob Ford considers which city councillors to appoint to the TTC board, a respected transportation expert is saying it's time to take the politicians out of public transit altogether.

If transit agencies want to get customer service right, they must be run by boards with the necessary skills, according to the latest report by Richard Soberman, who earlier this year wrote a damning appraisal of the TTC's management of the St. Clair streetcar project.

Politicians usually lack objectivity and transit expertise, and they are prone to micro-managing transit staff, says the former chair of civil engineering at the University of Toronto.

His report recommends transit boards be composed of business and community leaders nominated by professional associations, and by citizens who would apply for the job.

“You have to create a culture in an organization that actually says, ‘Serving customers is our priority.’ In other words, it is demand-oriented. Typically all transit organizations are supply-oriented,” Soberman told reporters.

If the Toronto area is going to more than double transit ridership in the next 25 years to avoid choking on gridlock, it has to attract riders who could drive their cars but choose transit because it is a better option.

That kind of customer service has to come from the top of the organization, and that will only happen if the agency has neutral oversight, said the report.

He cites as examples of transit mismanagement by politicians the Scarborough RT, which he says should have been a subway, and the Sheppard subway, which has growing ridership but represents an investment that would have been better spent on Eglinton.

Soberman, who does consulting for the TTC, would not talk about the TTC’s specific customer service issues, saying only that all companies have customer problems and that public transit agencies have to balance service against resources.

He noted that the TTC’s public service panel was also appointed by the politicians on the TTC, not the management.

“If you’ve got a problem with customer service, then it should be the management that says: ‘We’re going to deal with this.’ The people who run the organization know what the problems are. They know where the complaints come from,” he said.

“The TTC is the second highest recipient of (city) taxpayer dollars after the police. Having direct oversight of the people who distribute those dollars is very important,” said outgoing TTC chair Adam Giambrone.

Some people who advocate for political boards say private-sector appointees tend to have limited knowledge of public transit and often come with their own political affiliations.

During the municipal election campaign, Ford’s campaign supported the idea of putting private-sector leaders on the TTC board as well as “fiscally responsible and experienced city councillors.”

Soberman's report, published Tuesday by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, also calls for guaranteed, ongoing funding from senior governments, rather than the one-off project funding that is the norm.

Governments will also have to consider new sources of revenue to build transit — most likely a gas surcharge or road tolls via GPS-based metering.

"We are very supportive of anything that gets infrastructure off the ground," said RCCAO executive director Andy Manahan.