

Transit platforms: Are the experts on board?

Is SmartTrack the smart solution? Can Olivia Chow really boost bus service? The Star asked the experts.

By: [Tess Kalinowski](#) Transportation reporter, Published on Thu Oct 09 2014



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People wait to board a crowded bus along Eglinton just east of Yonge street around the dinner hour

Toronto voters have spent the last four years begging their politicians to leave the transit plans to the planners.

But in the race for mayor, only one of the main candidates has resisted the urge to draw new lines on a city map, and she is trailing in the polls.

So what do the planners think about the lines the politicians are pitching? The Star asked a few who have watched the same election scenario play out many times.



Colin McConnell/TORONTO STAR

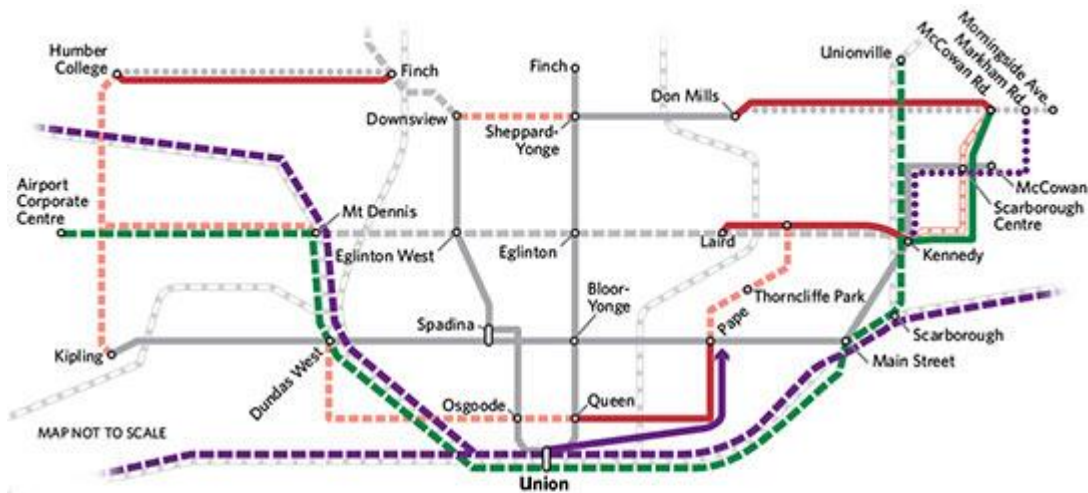
Historian Ed Levy isn't sure that John Tory's SmartTrack plan would accomplish its goal of relieving pressure on the Yonge line and that it ignores factors such as crowding at Union Station.

Ed Levy

In a city where everyone claims to be a transit expert, Ed Levy is the genuine article. He's the author of the definitive [history of Toronto's transit follies](#) and has six decades of planning experience.

A champion of the downtown relief line, he is skeptical of [John Tory's SmartTrack](#) plan. That platform is predicated on the provincial regional express rail strategy to electrify GO trains and offer 15-minute, two-way service across the system. Levy fears it will give politicians an excuse to put a relief line on the back burner.

He likes Olivia Chow isn't drawing lines on transit maps. Instead, she says she has ceded her platform to the professionals at city planning and the TTC, focusing instead on here-and-now issues such as overcrowded, infrequent TTC buses, and promising longer-term commitments to the downtown relief line.



Mayoral candidates' transit plans



But ask him who he's voting for in the Oct. 27 municipal election, and Levy says, "I'll vote for whoever appears certain to beat out Ford, so it would be Tory."

His reservations about SmartTrack range from the timing — he thinks Tory's seven-year promise is wildly ambitious — to Union Station's limited capacity. He's also skeptical that SmartTrack can provide sufficient relief from crowding on the Yonge subway.

"If you look at the map, the northeast and northwest extent of SmartTrack (Tory's proposed trains would run along the GO Kitchener and Stouffville tracks) is a long, long way from the Yonge corridor. There's no doubt that if it were buildable it would do something. But it would not compensate anything in the central core. ... It's too far east and too far west," says Levy, who notes that the congestion on the Yonge subway is due largely to riders from York Region.

Tory says SmartTrack would alleviate gridlock and act as a surface subway, running every 15 minutes through 22 GO stations, including some new ones, from the airport office hub to the Markham technology centre.

Levy has yet to be sold. Too many of the commuters to those job centres are travelling from outlying suburbs to outlying office parks.

"They want to drive their Mercedes and they have free parking. It's a completely different world out there," he said.

But, he concedes, "Anything would help, because we've done bugger-all the last several years."



David Crowley, who helped create the Transportation Tomorrow Survey, says people should be making better use of data.

David Crowley

A 40-year transit planner in the public and private sector, David Crowley helped create the Transportation Tomorrow Survey, the database that is, or should be, the foundation for planning decisions.

His latest project, a series of [four videos](#) called *Fact Check — Lessons from the Transportation Tomorrow Survey*, looks at how the Toronto region arrived at its current transit-starved state.

They are loaded with compelling statistics, including the fact that 75 per cent of 905-area commuters travelling downtown take transit.

The point of making them (with the sponsorship of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario) was to show how urgent it is for politicians to withdraw from transit planning.

“People should be making better use of the data we have to address the problems that matter to people today,” says Crowley.

Among those issues is the proliferation of poorly paid, part-time service industry jobs filled by transit-dependent workers.

Crowley worries that SmartTrack, Tory's version of the electrified, 15-minute GO service, threatens GO's greatest asset: its ability to carry long-distance commuters directly into the downtown rather than putting them on the subway.

"It ignores the fact that those three lines that serve south York Region (Barrie, Unionville and Richmond Hill), have already attracted more than 50 per cent of commuters. They demonstrated that it's not frequency we need; we need increased capacity. If we can slot in another train or two, we can divert 6,000 to 7,000 people from the Yonge subway," he said.

A 12-coach GO train carries 1,900 riders seated.

Crowley thinks the downtown relief line is a more urgent project, and it needs to run north of the Danforth to Eglinton.

"We're overloading the Yonge line. We're going to strangle the golden goose, the growth of the downtown," he said.

['s pledge](#) Mayoral candidate Doug Ford ([open Doug Ford's polycard](#))'s pledge to inject \$30 million into TTC bus service and treat the relief line as the first of several subway priorities, followed by Sheppard and the tunneling of the east end of the Eglinton Crosstown LRT, appeals to people who don't understand transit, said Crowley.

"I'm sure Doug Ford knows in his heart of hearts that these lines he's drawn on a map will never be built," he said.



Eric Miller says the SmartTrack proposal ignores the fact that three GO lines have already attracted more than 50 per cent of downtown commuters and simply need increased capacity. He cautions that putting too many stations on the GO lines will be counterproductive.

Eric Miller

The director of the University of Toronto's [Transportation Research Institute, Eric Miller](#), says there's a lot to like about Tory's SmartTrack proposal. He also applauds Olivia Chow's back-to-basics drive to boost bus service.

"I've never been a big fan of the downtown relief line," he said.

It's just too expensive for what it offers, he added, particularly in the short first phase running from about Pape Station on the Danforth line to somewhere around Union Station.

It would not divert a single York Region rider who boards the subway at Finch so that by the time the train gets to Eglinton, no one can get on.

It also would not divert any of the eastbound riders who switch trains at the Yonge-Bloor Station to head south into the downtown on the subway. The crowding there is adding to dwell time at the interchange and slowing trains all along the Yonge line, said Miller.

Because it runs through the heart of the city, the relief line also has limited development potential.

Tory's SmartTrack, he says, would attract Scarborough and Markham riders to the GO system. But Miller cautions that transit officials should avoid putting too many stations on SmartTrack.

“This has been a problem with the [Crosstown](#). The TTC and city view it as yet another kind of high-volume but kind of local service. Whereas Metrolinx has always viewed it as more of a regional (line) — ‘Let’s get across town as quickly as we can’ — so you have longer station spacings. ... Even on the Yonge line, as you get out (into the suburbs), the stop spacing stretches out,” he said.



Transit activist and councillor Gord Perks says the city shouldn't be too quick to dismiss Olivia Chow's plan, and that there are ways around the storage capacity issues city staff have cited.

Gord Perks ([open Gord Perks's policard](#))

Councillor Gord Perks (Parkdale-High Park), a transit activist long before he went to city hall in 2006, supports Olivia Chow's plan to expand off-peak bus service and build a downtown relief line. He doesn't necessarily buy [the TTC's assertion](#) that there aren't sufficient buses and garage space to immediately boost rush-hour service.

Chow has said she would increase off-peak bus service immediately and inject \$15 million from the city budget into more bus service. But transit staff say the system doesn't have enough buses to beef up the peak service immediately. Even if it did, it's \$100 million short of what it needs to build a garage to store and maintain the extra buses.

Perks suggests that leasing garage space and perhaps even buses might be one way to realize a more immediate solution.

“Yes, a leased bus or garage will cost more than if you're just buying them off the shelf. But we need to know what that figure is rather than being told, ‘We can't.’ And the order of magnitude for paying a premium because you're leasing a bus or leasing a storage facility, compared to electrifying the entire GO system, is substantial,” he said.

Perks says there is a dedicated group of transit watchers in Toronto who believe improving the frequency of surface transit, where crowding is endangering ridership levels, is the cheapest, fastest way to move people “and take a little chip out of our congestion problem.”