

Not everyone's aboard subway train yet

Charlene Callaghan

News

A subway car heading north to Richmond Hill is crowded with enthusiastic transit boosters and steered by a new group of conductors.

But it can't leave the station. Not yet, anyway.

Metrolinx and the TTC — the two players holding the chequebook and shovels — are yet to get onboard, though York Region's Yonge Subway Advisory Task Force met for the first time Wednesday.

Metrolinx, which has been given funding powers by the province, is working on a draft plan greenlighting GTA transit projects. The draft is expected in July.

"I can't give you any particular ranking for the Yonge subway relative to other projects," Metrolinx chair Rob MacIsaac said last week. "Metrolinx doesn't expect the whole world to stop while we're doing our plan, but there should be no doubt that our plan is what will govern what projects proceed, at least the projects with provincial funding, and the order in which they proceed."

The region's task force, made up of elected and citizen appointees from Vaughan, Markham, Richmond Hill and York, aims to help planning north of Steeles Ave., and convince Metrolinx of the extension's merits, task force member Councillor Alan Shefman says.

And, he added, it's not only Metrolinx that needs convincing.

"Our goal really is to move this ahead as fast as we can, to see Toronto also on board, if we can," Shefman said. "Their interests are very much to their own transit initiatives, but obviously the first two kilometres of the subway extension are in Toronto."

The TTC is tentative on the Yonge subway extension because it prefers to wait for Metrolinx before making up its own mind, TTC spokesperson Danny Nicholson says.

The transit commission assumes the proposal to extend the subway north from Finch will be included in Metrolinx's report, Nicholson said.

Though it could opt out even after a Metrolinx thumbs-up, he said the TTC would support the subway extension.

To date, the region has done a considerable amount of preliminary work on the Yonge extension. A January report by the York Region Rapid Transit Corporation put the subway's price tag at between \$1.5 billion and \$2.1 billion, depending on route and station placement.

But not everyone is convinced enough serious consideration has taken place.

"The Yonge St. subway is already overcrowded," said Richard Soberman, transportation expert and author of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario study titled Transportation Opportunities in the Greater Toronto Area.

"If you extend it, it's because you want to attract more passengers," he said. "If you want to attract more passengers, you have to increase the capacity of the entire line, not just the part that you're extending."

The Yonge subway line can currently cope with 28 trains an hour, Soberman said, not nearly enough for current ridership, let alone new suburban passengers.

"The textbook says you can run 40 an hour," he said. "I'll settle for 35, but you can't do 35 with the existing train control system or signalling system."

Designed in 1948, the signalling system simply needs updating, Soberman said.

Metrolinx's MacIsaac says Soberman is right.

"That's why in our 'quick win' projects, which were funded in the last provincial budget, we allocated (\$293 million) for a new signalling system for the Yonge subway line, which would include new subway cars," he said.

Planning for the Yonge St. subway extension was kicked into high gear after the province announced its \$17.5-billion Move Ontario 2020 plan in June. Listed as a priority was the Yonge extension.

Later that month, regional council set aside \$3 million to begin initial planning.

"I think for the first time, maybe the first time ever in the GTA, there is a commitment to rapid transit," Shefman said early last week. "It's dollars and cents, it's provincially funded and it's guided by overall consideration.

"It's not Toronto. It's the overall GTA approach to rapid transit. That's the only way that this will work."