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City urges `relief' subway line from Pape to Union

Toronto wants it put ahead of the \$2.4 billion plan for a Yonge extension north to Richmond Hill

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A TTC "relief" subway line, a 20-year-old concept that died in the late 1980s, was resurrected this week at Toronto council amid heightened sensitivities over the future of mass transit in the region.

Councillors voted 31-13 to ask Metrolinx to give a higher priority in its 15-year plan to the downtown relief line – a subway or underground light rail that would run south from Pape or Donlands station to link directly to Union Station, and potentially continue west and north to Dundas West or Keele station.

The line is included in Metrolinx's regional transportation plan, but on a more hazy horizon of 25 years.

Toronto now wants it put ahead of the \$2.4 billion plan to extend the Yonge line north to Richmond Hill.

Mary-Frances Turner, vice-president of the York Region Rapid Transit Corp., was cool to any idea of revisiting the long-term plan.

The relief line's spot in the queue was determined after thorough consultation with a lot of parties, including Toronto, Turner says.

"We'd want (Metrolinx) to be very careful about that kind of significant change to a plan that was two years in the making."

But Toronto councillor and former TTC commissioner Michael Thompson, who steered the relief line discussions this week, says Metrolinx should revisit its plans because Toronto's system is bursting at the seams, with riders sometimes waiting through three or four downtown trains to get on.

"Everyone is looking into the extension into York. What's going to happen to the system in the downtown core? No one is dealing with that," Thompson said.

Before this week, Toronto already had a list of conditions before giving its blessing to the Yonge line expansion, slated to open in 2017.

The relief line was a hot topic in the late 1980s and a priority in Network 2011, a blueprint crafted by planners from the old Metro government and the TTC. Its proposed subway improvements called for a relief line estimated then to cost \$565 million. (TTC officials this week put the cost of the eastern portion at \$2.1 billion.)

By 1990, the idea was dead.

Transit advocate Steve Munro says the scheme lost momentum when more attention began to be paid to growth in the outer suburbs.

The early 1990s recession led to lower ridership and, eventually, transit cutbacks.

Only recently has overall demand for mass transit returned to historic Toronto levels, Munro says, and the downtown subway system as constituted is no longer able to keep pace.