

The long wait for an airport train that never arrives

JEFF GRAY

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In civilized cities, you can take a train to the airport. In Toronto, you are forced into a \$50 cab ride, or an epic journey on the subway out to catch the bus from Kipling Station, a fate one does not wish on one's worst enemy - whom one offers instead to drive to the airport, chatting politely the entire 45 minutes. Why is this so?

First of all, blame history. Toronto Pearson International Airport and the city it serves came of age in the era of the car. YYZ is perfectly located at the dizzying intersection of countless lanes of expressways. Cars were the future, and trains were for the history books, the Last Spike and all that.

Fair enough. But you don't have to be London - where the Piccadilly Line takes you to and from Heathrow, if you can't afford the express train - to ride the rails to the airport.

In Chicago, to which Toronto is often compared, the subway trundles out to O'Hare, stopping along the way to pick up young people in McDonald's uniforms, airport security tags hanging around their necks, as well as harried business travellers.

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It would be nice to have a choice. What happens as Toronto continues to grow and so many cars clog all those lovely expressways to Pearson (and elsewhere) that we all start missing flights? Some 30 million people a year flow through Pearson, with just 1 per cent of those trips including public transit. If Toronto wants to pull some cars off the roads to ease congestion and reduce greenhouse-gas emissions - leave aside the ecological destruction caused by airplanes - isn't a train to the airport an obvious fix?

There are, in fact, two plans - little more than lines on maps at the moment - that would bring rail vehicles at least within spitting range of Pearson. Which is a good thing, since they have already built a train station there, waiting for a train that never comes.

Plan No. 1 is the infamous "Blue 22," a hastily announced private-public partnership with SNC-Lavalin to operate a high-speed express train from Union Station to Pearson. It is supposed to take just 22 minutes - hence the name - and cost \$20. After the federal Liberals proclaimed it in 2003, the project quickly became mired in the approvals process as people who lived along the route in the Weston area objected to trains they could not ride whipping through their community. It remains mired.

David Collenette, the former Liberal federal transport minister who spearheaded the project, said it would be up and running by 2008, which turned out to be a little optimistic. It could be 2012 before anything is completed, if ever.

With federal cash, it is GO Transit that is spearheading the process to get more tracks laid in the Georgetown corridor where Blue 22 would go, so GO can expand its service as well. It is a big project: All told, including GO improvements, the price tag could come close to \$500-million.

Some residents, and at last check, the province, seem to hope for a new plan to emerge that would allow for a train that stops in Weston and elsewhere along the way, instead of catering to business travellers coming out of Union Station. That might force SNC-Lavalin to back away,

or to demand some sort of subsidy, since the proposed service wouldn't resemble the one it thought profitable.

Plan No. 2, which doesn't really overlap with the original Blue 22 scheme, is Mayor David Miller's "Transit City," which calls for a much slower light-rail line, partially tunnelled, along Eglinton Avenue. This line could be extended out to Pearson, although airport officials aren't precisely sure how the streetcars would enter the airport. It is safe to say the glacial pace of these things means there is lots of time to figure all of this out before tracks are laid.

If both an express train from Union Station, and a slower, frequently stopping light-rail line along Eglinton, appear in the quasi-distant future, the cab ride to the airport could become optional again. But with Toronto's luck, these projects would be completed just as the world, trying to fight climate change, finally cracks down on air travel.

Dr. Gridlock appears Mondays.

jgray@globeandmail.com

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Phillip Crawley, Publisher