



How to cut commute times

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Setting aside solutions to the cross-GTA travel — the Bowmanville to Burlington monster commute, for example — what could be done inside Toronto proper, Etobicoke Creek to the Rouge, to reduce commuting times and cut pollution and other deleterious effects of auto dependency?

Toronto's transportation planning director Rod McPhail says the transportation infrastructure to get people into downtown Toronto is more than adequate, especially with the growth of downtown living and the fact there's been no increase in the number of cars crossing south into the city for the past 40 years.

"The biggest challenge is non-downtown trips," he says.

What to do?

- Move, if you can, closer to your work. If you land another job, move again.

Hundreds of thousands of residents are doing that in the GTA. For example, the number of cars travelling across the Toronto border into downtown each day has not increased since the 1970s. And the population inside Toronto is increasing. So how is that possible? A huge number of people are living downtown and walking or cycling to work.

Of course, moving is never easy. For a kid growing up in south Etobicoke, a move to Scarborough is tantamount to moving to Montreal. As well, when one spouse works in Oshawa and the other in Oakville, there is no move that will solve that commuting problem.

- Intensify. Densify. Pack `em in to take advantage of the infrastructure already built. The price of land is already forcing this. More is needed. Do it vertically, where possible and feasible. The celebrated Minto project at Yonge and Eglinton, I wager, will not create nearly the level of disruption and problems the resident community claims.

Go up to Yonge St., between Sheppard and Finch, and see the intensification that has occurred there, while stable, residential neighbourhoods thrive on either side of Yonge. With two subway lines nearby, this is appropriate. Along Finch Ave. W., post-war bungalows on ridiculously deep lots have given way to townhomes and semis, adding more people to fuel transit routes. Many such opportunities exist along arterial roads across the city.

- Acknowledge that for those far from the subway, and even for many whose condos sit right on top of a subway station, there's this: All things being equal, most people would rather drive their car than

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be driven in a bus, or even in a subway.

- Make transit more attractive for those willing to try it. Turn Toronto into Transit City. No, not the way the city has gone about it, improving bus routes here and there. Do it with impact and boldness.

In the Transit City, residents would be within 20 minutes of a subway line or rapid transit line. That means taking rapid transit closer to Malvern and the zoo; Rexdale and Humber College; south Scarborough (though GO Transit might be the ticket there) and south Etobicoke.

Transit City would take the present ridership growth strategy and ramp it up tenfold. Its aim would be to make transit competitive and reliable.

McPhail says a travelling future hooked to transit takes money and political will. I say the problem isn't a shortage of either, but that neither is being used effectively and boldly.

"My solution is to blanket the city with streetcars (on their own right-of-ways), but that would offset the drivers," McPhail says.

"Toronto's not ready for it. Congestion isn't bad enough. We're not ready to give up a lane of traffic yet. We're not hurting bad enough," he says.

- If we're not going to give transit vehicles priority on the limited road space, taking out a lane of traffic, then get on with subway construction.
- Develop a subway plan that takes rapid transit out to northeast and northwest Toronto, the forgotten corners.

Finish the Sheppard subway, taking it at least to the Scarborough Town Centre.

In the 30 years between 1955 and 1985 Toronto built 60 kilometres of subways, or two kilometres a year. Since 1985, we've built six kilometres.

This pathetic record needs to be reversed.

A strong, visionary, bold leader — a mayor, say — would run on a platform of two kilometres of subway a year as part of turning Toronto into a Transit City.

Money? I'd give the city a 1 per cent tax levy, dedicated to Transit City.

On the average house, that's roughly a \$20 charge. Heck, I'd pay \$50 a year, with \$10 toward an ongoing maintenance fund.

- Inside Toronto, where you have relatively high densities and potential for intensification, have the political guts to implement a radical transportation plan.

Include a levy on vehicle licences, a dedicated portion of gas taxes, tolls on selected streets and parking surcharges.

- Allow private-sector providers to offer service along routes the TTC considers non-profitable.

That would show clearly if the reason service is absent is bureaucratic bungling or lack of interest from riders.

- Meanwhile, provide express bus service to the under-served areas at the edges of the city.

If the TTC says it is not profitable to do so, then open these routes and services to the private sector.

The TTC can't have it both ways. It can't argue that the routes are not profitable then turn down proposals from firms that want to have a go at these routes.

Now, regarding cross-GTA travel? Still searching for answers.

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