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Reassess Transit City - it has too many flaws

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Transit City is Toronto's plan to add eight streetcar lines over the next 10 or more years at a cost above \$10 billion. Toward this, \$7.82 billion has been committed by the Ontario government and \$0.32 billion by the federal government. The plan is firmly in the tradition of Toronto's 40-year record of inept decision-making about transit and associated land development. It should be reconsidered.

The lamentable record began with the decision in the early 1970s to route the Spadina subway line through a low-density residential area that has still not been redeveloped to justify a high-capacity transit service. The result is a hugely underused resource.

Other examples of ineptitude are failure to provide for sufficient development at stations along the Bloor-Danforth subway line; construction of costly, unnecessary streetcar tunnels at Union Station, Bloor and Spadina, and Bathurst and St. Clair; and installation of the absurdly expensive and soon-to-be-replaced Scarborough RT line.

The worst example has been the billion dollars spent on the Sheppard subway line, which has done nothing to increase ridership along that corridor. The \$2.6 billion being spent on extending the Spadina subway line could be almost as wasteful, chiefly because there is no plan for high-density redevelopment at its stations to provide ridership sufficient to justify the extension.

Transit City also lacks a coherent redevelopment plan. It has other glaring flaws that mostly result from a philosophy that streetcars – light rail if you prefer – should be the cornerstone of transit expansion in Toronto, whether appropriate or not.

This thinking has led to Transit City's greatest absurdity: the proposed construction of a 10-kilometre streetcar tunnel under Eglinton Ave. between Laird Dr. and Keele St. This will cost close to \$3 billion, the same per-kilometre cost as the Spadina subway extension. Thus, we could have a subway line along this stretch of Eglinton for the cost of the streetcar line.

This conclusion begs two questions. Would the subway cost more to operate, and would there be enough ridership to justify a subway line? Subway lines cost three or more times as much to operate as streetcar lines. However, subways can typically carry five or more times as many passengers. Thus, with sufficient ridership, subways can be a lot cheaper per passenger to operate.

At present, there seems to be enough TTC ridership along this part of Eglinton to justify a streetcar line, but nowhere near enough to justify a subway line. There could be enough for a subway if sufficient redevelopment occurred, but there is no plan for such intensification.

Transit City's other 110 kilometres of streetcar route are to be above ground, installed at an average cost of about \$70 million per kilometre, including vehicles and maintenance facilities. This cost seems high. The comparable 12-kilometre line planned for Norfolk, Va., is to have an all-in cost of about \$30 million per kilometre. (Norfolk also has plans for development along the proposed line.)

Whether expensive streetcar service can be justified for the other Transit City routes is hard to say. The TTC has poor ridership data compared with other transit systems, chiefly because it does not use smartcards for fare collection. Providing good data is a major advantage of smartcard systems.

It's possible that streetcar service is appropriate for all the proposed routes – or could be if there were plans to intensify development along the routes. It's also possible that the laudable Transit City objective of providing electrically powered service could be achieved more appropriately – at one-tenth of the capital cost – by installing modern trolley buses, such as are used in Vancouver.

What should be done about Transit City? Proceed with the Sheppard East line, on which construction has started. Reconsider everything else, especially the Eglinton tunnel. Give trolley buses serious consideration. Use some of the committed funds to introduce a smartcard system as soon as possible. Above all, put in place a detailed workable plan for substantial intensification of development along every Transit City route.

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