

Transformed Transit City just the ticket for Toronto

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December 5, 2010

Transit City is Toronto's plan to add 52 kilometres of light-rail transit (LRT — streetcars mostly on their own rights-of-way) by 2020, and more later. With the election of a new council, the plan is up for discussion again. This could provide an opportunity to do something much better than is now proposed, within the same budget and respecting purchase orders already issued.

The biggest problem with the current Transit City proposal is that it does so little. The revision set out below would add 136 kilometres of electrified transit route by 2020 rather than the presently proposed 52 — while adding two new subway lines — all in addition to the ongoing nine-kilometre extension of the Spadina subway line.

Until recently, the two most authoritative voices in energy matters, the International Energy Agency (IEA) and the U.S. Energy Information Administration (USEIA), resisted the notion that there will soon be major problems with the world's oil supply. This has changed. Last year, USEIA warned that by the late 2020s current and anticipated sources of crude oil production will be producing only half as much as now, and there is little idea as to how to bridge the potentially massive gap between demand and supply. Last month, IEA confirmed this conclusion.

Ontario is especially vulnerable to a disruption in world oil supply. Every drop used here comes from or via another country. The imperative to switch transportation away from oil is strong. Electrifying transit is a tried and true means of doing this.

The fastest and cheapest way to electrify transit is to install electric trolleybuses, such as the 224 state-of-the-art, made-in-Canada vehicles recently purchased for Vancouver. Trolleybuses on their own rights-of-way can provide the same capacity as LRT at a tenth of the capital cost. Replacing most of the planned LRT routes with trolleybuses would allow electrification of all proposed Transit City routes by 2020 rather than less than half: 124 rather than 52 kilometres.

Two LRT routes should be proceeded with. Work has already begun on the Sheppard East route and should continue. The Malvern route from the east end of the Bloor-Danforth subway would be a relatively low-cost installation that could share resources with the Sheppard East route.

Almost unbelievably, 10 kilometres of the proposed Eglinton LRT route — from Keele to Laird — is to be tunnelled, at a higher per-kilometre cost than the Spadina subway extension. It would make sense, and save money, to install a subway line there instead, using trolleybuses for the remaining 23 kilometres of the proposed route. Equipment has already been ordered for the tunnelling. This equipment could be used to install a subway line.

An Eglinton subway should be fully automated, which would reduce operating costs substantially. Lower operating costs would reduce the need for the redevelopment at proposed stations that would be required to justify a subway line. Substantial redevelopment along this part of Eglinton Avenue would still be required, and there is much scope for it.

Enough funds would remain to build another subway line. This should be a westward extension of the Sheppard line to Downsview station on the Spadina line, providing a valuable northern link between existing lines. Redevelopment along these five kilometres of Sheppard Avenue West would be required to justify the subway line. There is even more scope for it there than along Eglinton Avenue. Tunnelling equipment for the Spadina extension could be readily used for the Sheppard line extension.

Not all the LRT vehicles ordered from Bombardier Inc. would be required. New subway cars would be needed. Negotiations to replace some of the LRT vehicles with subway cars should be straightforward and leave the TTC with no added liability.

Refashioning Transit City in the above manner would result in major, earlier improvements in service along the proposed routes. It would add two valuable east-west subway lines. Above all, it would leave Toronto's transit system much better prepared for the oil challenges ahead.

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