

Cost of Transit City seems way out of line

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Published on Thursday January 20, 2011

<http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorialopinion/article/925600--cost-of-transit-city-seems-way-out-of-line#article>



A streetcar on the St. Clair Ave. W transit right-of-way.

HENRY STANCU/TORONTO STAR

Transit City, Toronto's plan to add 52 kilometres of light-rail transit by 2020, is under review. One aspect that deserves special scrutiny is the plan's projected cost, estimates for which were developed by Toronto Transit Commission staff. The estimates seem extraordinarily high.

The refashioned St. Clair West streetcar route is the model for Transit City's surface LRT routes. On St. Clair, streetcars formerly running in mixed traffic now have their own right-of-way and the rest of the roadway has been redesigned around it.

This project is generally regarded as having been one of the worst managed in Toronto's recent history and yet its cost per kilometre is only a fraction of what's being budgeted for Transit City.

Even if generous allowances are made for vehicles and for their storage and maintenance yards — not needed for the St. Clair route — the route's final per-kilometre cost was well under half that budgeted for Transit City's surface portions: \$37 million compared with \$90 million per kilometre, in 2010 dollars. Moreover, at least one of the yards for Transit City may be funded privately rather than from the Transit City budget (with the private funding causing higher operating costs down the road).

The St. Clair route's costs are similar to those for comparable projects elsewhere, when converted into 2010 Canadian dollars. For example, an 11.4-kilometre LRT line under construction in Norfolk, Va., is costing \$31 million per kilometre. A 12-kilometre line being built in Angers, France, is costing \$29 million per kilometre, and that includes a river crossing and an expensive section where, for esthetic reasons, the vehicles are powered from below rather than from an overhead wire. The cost of Transit City's surface routes seem extraordinarily high by any standard.

Even more out of line is what appears to be being budgeted for Transit City's underground portion: 10 kilometres along Eglinton Ave. No separate costing is available for the tunnelled part, only for the whole 19 kilometres proposed for construction by 2020, which also includes nine kilometres of surface rail. The average cost for the 19 kilometres, in 2010 dollars, is \$202 million per kilometre. If the cost of the surface portion is the same as for Transit City's other surface LRT routes (\$90 million per kilometre), the tunnelled LRT portion would appear to be costing an astonishing \$338 million per kilometre.

How does that compare with the cost of a proper subway? Consider the ongoing addition to Toronto's subway system: the extension of the Spadina line. Trying as far as possible to compare apples with apples by factoring in shares of vehicle and yard costs, and putting everything in 2010 dollars, the Spadina extension appears to be costing about \$290 million per kilometre. That is well below the cost of the tunnelled part of the proposed Eglinton LRT.

If we look elsewhere, we can see that the projected cost of the Spadina subway extension may itself be unreasonably high. For example, a second line under development for the French city of Rennes, mostly tunnelled and fully automated (i.e., driverless), is budgeted to cost about \$140 million per kilometre, or less than half the unit cost of the Spadina extension.

The TTC's cost estimates do not appear to have been rigorously scrutinized either by the provincial government, which is to provide nearly all funds for Transit City, or by Metrolinx, the provincial agency responsible for disbursing the funds.

The apparent lack of diligence could have been an attempt to avoid exacerbating what have often been acrimonious relationships between the province and Metrolinx, on the one hand, and the TTC and Toronto City Council, on the other.

Overly high estimates could well have resulted in a flawed planning process and an unduly modest transit plan. It's possible that much more could be done using the funding already committed.

Scrutinizing the TTC's estimates should be a priority for the province and Metrolinx, and also for city council, especially the nine councillors who constitute the TTC.

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