

# Practical fixes for Toronto's transit system

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If I were Toronto's Transit TSAR (Transit Supremo having All Responsibility), with no commissioners or councillors to worry about — just the job of providing users with the best possible transit system given available resources — here's what I'd do.

First, I'd set performance targets for the regular system. (WheelTrans, the service for people with disabilities, would have comparable targets.)

Within five years I'd ensure that for most hours of the day every transit trip within Toronto of up to five kilometres could be done in less than 30 minutes, including wait times. The time limits for trips of up to 10 and 15 kilometres would be 45 and 60 minutes. Normally, trips would take less than half these times.

Throughout Toronto, there would be a transit stop within 300 metres (a four-minute walk).

Every part of the transit system would be immaculate and well served. I once asked the head of Zurich's transit system, Europe's busiest per capita, to tell me his secrets. He said there were two: make sure transit vehicles are never more than seven minutes apart, and make all transit vehicles, stops, walkways, etc., acceptable to a bank president (of which Zurich has many).

Second, and almost as important, I would set financial targets. One would be to have the system cover its annual operating costs within seven years. The other would be to have the system cover its new capital costs within 15 years. The TTC would then be subsidy-free, as it was until the 1960s. Freedom from subsidy would mean relative freedom from political meddling. It would allow a focus on meeting the needs of users, who already provide by far the largest part of the system's revenue.

How would these apparent miracles be achieved? By applying best practices from elsewhere, and with some innovation. Here are five of the ways to go:



Vancouver's new subway, the Canada Line, runs from the waterfront to the airport.  
David Cooper/TORONTO STAR File Photo

- I would privatize the operation of Toronto's transit in the way Sweden and other places have done it. Sweden is the most left-wing rich country. Nevertheless, transit there was privatized in 1989 in order to maximize the quality of this essential service. Routes are franchised in batches that mix the profitable and unprofitable. Potential operators bid to provide strictly enforced high levels of service for the lowest subsidy. Public costs are down. Service has improved. Users and transit employees are happier.
- Cab companies provide transit service in 10 low-density parts of Montreal, in shared cabs on demand between designated stops, for a regular transit fare. The "taxibus" system provides a good service for residents of low-density areas at much lower public cost than a regular bus service. Using such a system, transit service could be extended to every part of Toronto.
- Vancouver has North America's largest fleet of electric trolley buses, recently renewed, which provide excellent service at one-tenth of the capital cost of an on-street light rail system. Montreal is moving toward using trolley buses to improve service and lower fuel and other costs. For the same reasons, and to reduce pollution and noise, Toronto should reintroduce trolley buses even more widely than before they were removed in 1992, in exclusive lanes where feasible.
- Vancouver's Canada Line — half of which is below ground with most of the remainder elevated — provides subway-quality service between the airport and the downtown at less than a third of the estimated capital cost of the proposed Eglinton-Scarborough Crosstown line, and at a much lower operating cost because the Canada Line is completely automated. During the 2010 Olympics, the Canada Line — in its two-car but frequent trains — carried almost as many daily passengers per kilometre as Toronto's full-scale subway system. Such a "mini-metro" could be a model for Toronto, running under Eglinton Avenue from Black Creek to Kennedy station, then along the existing elevated way to McCowan Avenue. In Rennes, France, the smallest city in the world with a subway (about 210,000 residents), a second underground mini-metro line is being installed at about the same per-kilometre cost as the Canada Line.
- The current plan to serve Toronto's fast-growing East Harbourfront and to-be-developed Port Lands by light rail is not working out well because of light rail's costs and the challenges of providing a terminus at Union Station. These areas provide a good opportunity for Canada to move to the leading edge of innovative transit technology. A call for proposals would produce extraordinary and productive responses, including proposals for a monorail such as the one Bombardier is installing for São Paulo, Brazil, and even better options.

I would take the job of transit TSAR only if I also had the power to facilitate intensive development at and near the stations of expensive transit lines (subway, mini-metro, light rail, monorail). This would be done by creating development corporations — such as the one for the Docklands in London, U.K. — that could expropriate land for double its current market value, dramatically raise permitted densities, and do everything possible to make transit-related development attractive.

Ensuring such development would be an essential requirement for meeting the above performance targets. It would also help the City of Toronto double its share of the Toronto region's population growth, thereby reducing sprawl and a myriad of costs to government.

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