GO TRANSIT EXPANSION A BUMPY RIDE

It is too early to say GO Transit's planned expansion might be coming off the rails. But it's not too early to worry about whether the timing and the scope of the expansion could be in doubt.

The GO Expansion plan is intended to transform what is essentially a commuter railway into an all-day, two-way transit network with service as frequent as every 15 minutes in core areas. When fully rolled out the expansion could boost ridership from current levels of about 70 million to 200 million by 2055. It also involves electrification of core parts of the transit network.

According to documents obtained by The Toronto Star, provincial transit agency Metrolinx and Infrastructure Ontario (the agency responsible for delivering major public infrastructure projects) are being compelled to reconsider how the procurement process for the expansion is working. Companies in charge of executing the expansion are raising concerns about how the province is contracting out the work, and the amount of risk private sector bidders are being asked to assume through the public-private partnership model being employed.

The leaked documents also warn that changing procurement procedures at this point could delay the final phase of the expansion which is supposed to be complete by 2025.

What, if any, impact will the procurement concerns have on the scope and timing of the project? We don't know, because GO and Infrastructure Ontario aren't saying, but it is telling that Infrastructure Ontario would not confirm whether the final phase will be completed as planned and on time.

Toronto Star transportation reporter Ben Spurr broke this story, and in his reporting he asked a Metrolinx spokesperson about potential delays and was told "GO Expansion is not delayed," but the same person declined to speak about the schedule for future work. Not exactly a ringing endorsement for the current timetable.

This isn't the only situation regional transit advocates should worry about. Metrolinx is currently studying the possibility of reducing free parking at GO stations and increasing the number of paid parking spots. One of the options being considered is converting up to 50 per cent of GO parking inventory to paid by 2022. Metrolinx says that objective has not been approved.

The problem, apparently, is that so many commuters drive solo to the nearest GO station, so the parking spots are disappearing long before passenger capacity is reached. Supporters of paid conversion argue it would encourage more drivers to share with passengers and reduce the cost. But critics warn too much conversion to paid will just cause commuters to stick with their cars and ignore GO altogether. Metrolinx is also looking into partnering with ride-share services on reduced rates for riders heading for GO stations.

There may be a strong case for more paid parking, but it's also an additional $1,176 annual cost, which together with GO fares makes commuting by GO an increasingly expensive prospect. At some point that could become counterproductive in the effort to take more cars off our congested highways.

SNAPSHOT

David Clayton photo

This male ring-neck pheasant has been seen several times recently in the Silver Creek area. Got a great local photo you'd like to share? Send it to sleblanc@metroland.com, along with a brief description.

KNOW THE FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF A SPOUSE'S PASSING

HERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU SHOULD BE AWARE OF, WRITES PETER WATSON

PETER WATSON
Column

Emotionally surviving the death of a spouse is hard. Financially surviving makes a devastating time even tougher. Young widows have many important financial decisions to make.

According to Census Canada, the average age of becoming a widow is 56. It's understood that older husbands usually pass on before their wives. But for the average age of widowhood to be only 56 underscores how many husbands die when their wife is in their 20s, 30s, and 40s.

Most of these younger deaths are a result of an accident which means widows haven't had any time to consider the financial implications of their husband's death.

The starting point of any financial consideration is insurance. Was their husband insured and if so what is the anticipated payment?

The first decision isn't to decide what to do with any insurance proceeds. The first decision is mapping out a comprehensive financial plan that covers all options, including the widow's plans to earn an income and her lifestyle choices, such as remaining in the current home or downsizing.

If there is no insurance, the financial implications of losing a husband's earning power are much more significant.

If the widow is suddenly thrown into single parenting will there be additional costs in raising the children? Do they have a support network that can assist?

The foundation of any comprehensive financial plan is cash flow. Regardless of your circumstances, it is cash flow that provides your standard of living.

Continuing a certain lifestyle while going into debt or selling investments will eventually make your financial challenges more severe.

What level of cash flow outlays can you afford? Building a new lifestyle around that financial reality is critical.

The thought of becoming a widow at a young age isn't thought about by most people. But everyone should be prepared in case the worst happens.

Peter Watson, of Watson Investments MBA, CFP®, R.F.P., CIM®, FCSI offers a weekly financial planning column, Dollars & Sense. He can be contacted through www.watsoninvestments.com

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