

Issues & Answers

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE NEWS AND THE NEWSMAKERS

Gridlock: Getting nowhere fast

As traffic clogs the region's roads, commuters demand better and quicker ways of travelling

BY JENNIFER BROWN
AND LISA QUEEN
STAFF WRITERS

To beat the morning rush hour, Amanda Yeldon leaves her Markham home before 7 a.m.

As long as she's on the road by that time, she can make it to her job as a director of client services at Sheppard Avenue and Leslie Street in less than half an hour.

But if something holds her up, Yeldon knows she'll spend 90 minutes or more battling traffic.

She is also traditionally a prisoner of the afternoon rush hour, which, she complains, lasts for several hours from late afternoon to early evening.

Road rage? You better believe it.

"I've seen it out there. And I'm probably just as guilty as anyone. I catch myself swearing," Yeldon said, while she filled her tank at a gas station at 14th Avenue and McCowan Road.

She would be willing to use public transit — the Sheppard subway extension will eventually stop right outside her office — but it's inconvenient and costly.

As far as Yeldon is concerned, traffic problems have definitely compounded since she moved to Markham 10 years ago.

And she fears it will only get worse as York Region grows from 665,000 residents today to 1.1 million in 2021.

"Things have to get worse. There's only so many exits out of town and everyone leaves at the same time in the morning," she said.

"I just think they (politicians) need to assess the road problems before they get worse."

The region's transportation commissioner, Kees Schipper, did assess the state of York's transportation network for this year's budget process.

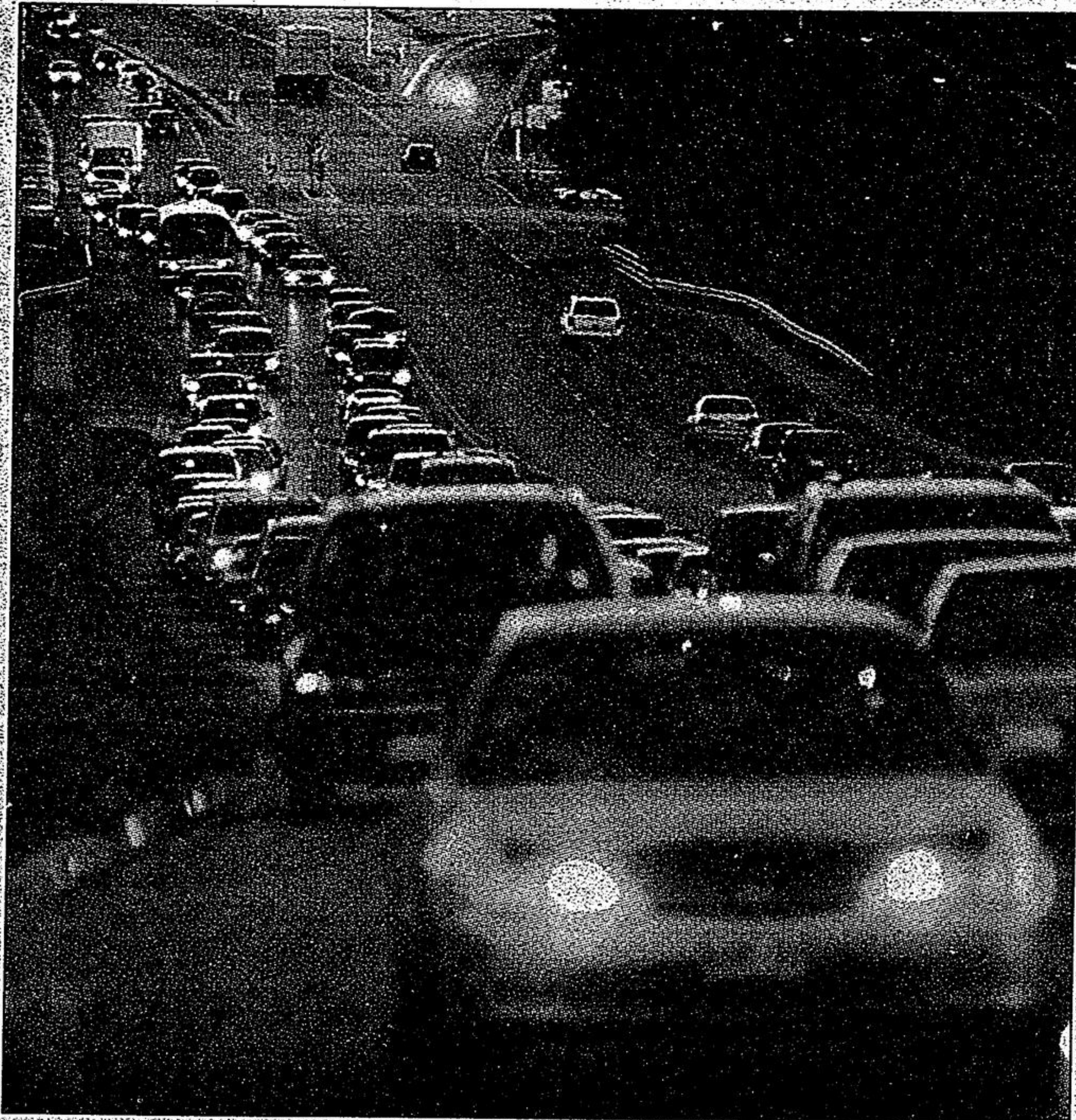
His warnings were so severe, council agreed to immediately boost the road budget by \$10 million, after several years of cuts.

York will now spend between \$50 million and \$55 million a year on roads — a combination of taxes and development charges on new construction — for the next two decades to handle growth.

Georgina Councillor Danny Wheeler had repeatedly warned that York would face a day of reckoning — decaying roads, gridlock, loss of economic development opportunities — by neglecting the roads year after year.

This year, council listened.

Markham Councillor Gord Landon



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Northbound traffic backs up along McCowan Road towards Hwy. 7 at the start of evening rush hour Thursday.

would like to go further.

He wants politicians to block new subdivisions until developers finish building new roads or expanding existing ones to handle new traffic. It's a logical step, he reasons, but not common practice now.

"The east end of Markham is totally paralyzed. The road system is not working now," he said.

"We're seeing gridlock. If it's just a case of putting in more homes, forget it."

According to Schipper, York is facing a number of transportation hurdles including:

- the region's rapid development; After a slow down of growth during the recession, York's residential development is reminiscent of the frantic pace of the 1980s;
- the loss of provincial road subsidies;
- the downloading of provincial highways and the uploading of local roads, which has increased the region's road network by 26

He stressed a good transportation system is essential to York's quality of life and economic development.

Not only do people need to get to work, school and shopping, but more and more companies are relying on the road and highway system to deliver their products.

"Companies are looking for just-in-time delivery. The railways are carrying a smaller proportion of freight," Schipper said.

"Truck traffic has been increasing dramatically. Industries don't want to warehouse a lot of products or parts. They want their warehousing done on wheels."

That's an added challenge in a region already struggling to keep up.

Not only is York the fastest growing region in Ontario, it is also enjoying the GTA's fastest employment growth. The region is expected to add another 110,000 jobs by 2001.

There are now as many workers travelling into York every day as those who commute out of the region.

However, York's transportation profile is worrisome.

The 1996 Transportation Tomorrow Survey showed York residents have more vehicles per household and make the highest number of automobile trips per day compared to other GTA regions.

Meanwhile, at 5 per cent, York has one of the lowest transit usage rates in the GTA, adding more pressure to the clogged roads.

Julie Kranitz-Andrade and her husband Victor were astounded by traffic levels in the GTA when they moved from Montreal to Newmarket four years ago.

"I have one major bone to pick (with services in York Region) and it's transportation," said Julie.

She is also "shocked and dismayed" about the state of the transit system, including the fact there are only two GO Trains a day between Newmarket and Toronto.

And she's concerned about the cost of running inefficient local transit systems.

"It's nice to pay lip service that people should take transit, but it's chicken and egg. They can't improve the system until more people use it. And more people won't use it until they improve it."

Newmarket Councillor Gail Parks is a member of York's fledgling transit task force.

She's flabbergasted by York's failure to have an integrated transit system in a region of 665,000 residents.

Her ambitious plan calls for subways, light rapid rail lines and dedicated bus lanes throughout the region.

"We're looking at millions and millions and millions of dollars to do what we have to do. We're looking at mortgaging our future to do it. But I equate it to a mortgage for a house," Parks said.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

The fifth in a series of articles examining York Region's growth and how it affects the people who live here.

per cent since 1994;

- a disjointed transit system;
- the province's decision to pass responsibility for GO Transit on to the Greater Toronto Services Board, which is in danger of being delayed for a fourth time. There hasn't been a major capital investment in GO infrastructure in York for most of this decade and there's no reason to believe that will change soon.

"It's hard to see municipalities being able to afford hundreds of millions of dollars needed for GO over the next 10 to 20 years," Schipper said.

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