

REGIONAL AFFAIRS: Regional politicians decide today whether to move forward with transit system or keep the status quo

Region to decide if it's time to tackle transit

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

York Region councillors will prove today whether they're parochial politicians only interested in protecting their empires or whether they're looking to meet the needs of residents, Newmarket Councillor Diane Humeniuk says.

Humeniuk is chairperson of the region's transit task force. While the group has made some headway in improving transit, particularly for disabled residents, the task force has been stymied by a limited mandate and political squabbles among officials who don't want to give up jurisdiction over their local transit systems.

But today Humeniuk is drawing a line in the sand. At a workshop two weeks ago, she urged council to consider either creating a regional transit department, or better yet, a transit authority like the TTC.

At today's council meeting, councillors make the decision about whether to move forward or keep the status quo, a sub-standard network of disjointed systems.

"They'll have to answer to their constituents" if they don't proceed, Humeniuk said yesterday.

Humeniuk and countless others have predicted gridlock in York, and across the Greater Toronto Area, unless public transit is markedly improved.

Only 5 per cent of commuters in York use public transit, the worst record in the GTA. With another 400,000 people coming to the region in the next two decades, thousands of additional cars will be added to already over-burdened roads.

Humeniuk favours a York transit commission, which would be established over the next 14 months, because it would give transit more prominence.

A commission could either co-ordinate buses run by the four local transit departments — meaning municipalities could keep their names on the sides of their buses — or operate under a new York logo.

If council votes for a transit commission, the Tories would have to pass legislation authorizing the agency.

If council votes to make transit a regional department, a

triple majority is needed. That means a majority of regional councillors would have to agree, plus a majority of local municipal councils representing a majority of residents.

Markham Councillor Gord Landon is convinced the province would support either scenario — even if local municipalities were opposed — if York politicians showed they could improve transit service. And that wouldn't be hard.

He pointed out councillors agreed five years ago to a regional transit system, but it was never implemented.

A report by chief administrative officer Alan Wells going to council today talks about the advantages of improved transit.

"The benefits that were described in 1994 are applicable in the present environment and (are) even more critical as traffic continues to increase and percentage transit usage continues to decline."

Landon, who believes a commission would give transit the

clout it deserves, said service in York is pathetic.

"We've got (Toronto councillors David) Shiner and (TTC chairperson Howard) Moscoe sitting on our transit task force saying it's a mess, it's just a bloody mess," he said. "I agree with them. Now we have got just a bunch of disjointed systems."

Landon would like to see buses operated by the commission under a York logo.

Markham Mayor Don Cousens wants existing transit systems to remain, meaning municipalities' names would stay on the sides of buses. However, co-ordination between the systems could be improved with input from a commission.

"Each municipality keeps its autonomous service, but works to resolve the issues everybody's worried about," he said. "I think every one of these issues is solvable or addressable by having a voluntary sitting down of staff and politicians working more closely together."

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