

# Way is paved to better transit in the GTA

*Something must be done to ease congestion for the 600,000 trips made daily in and out of York Region*

BY LISA QUEEN  
Staff Writer

Every workday morning, Chris Sawczak leaves her Newmarket home to battle traffic for more than an hour so she can make it to her job near Pearson International Airport.

And every afternoon after work, she and her husband, who works in Stroud, take turns racing to two different day-care centres to pick up their son and daughter by 6 p.m. before heading home.

Sawczak, an account manager for a large computer software company in the Carlingview-Airport Road area, would love to leave her Honda CRV in her driveway and take reliable and affordable public transit to work.

"I think it's a great idea. I'd be all for it. It's stressful going to work and, by the time you get home, you're drained," she said.

Unfortunately, while there have been some GO Transit improvements in the last year that have helped get York commuters to downtown Toronto, Sawczak finds the expense and time of taking transit to the outskirts forbidding.

"It's kind of a vicious cycle. You want to live in York Region to live in a nicer area, but you need to work in Toronto for the money. And you can't afford to live in Toronto, so you need to commute," she said.

But it would be more economical in the long run, if there was transit and there would be fewer stressed people. Even if taxes went up a bit to pay for better transit, it would be worth it in the long run.

Alan Tonks, chairperson of the Greater Toronto Services Board, is floating an extensive plan to take transit into unserved communities of the GTA, although officials are stressing it is just one of many visions on the table.

The strategy would weave transit between Toronto and the growing regions, particularly York where public transportation has been sorely lacking.

The plan suggests several options, including running buses on Hwy. 407, building parking lots beside the 407 for commuters who want to drop their cars off before jumping on transit and establishing high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes along Yonge Street.

But perhaps the most ingenious idea is operating streetcars on under-used railway tracks. Initially, surplus specialized TTC streetcars would be used because their axle widths can be widened to run on train tracks.

York Region chairperson Bill Fisch, chairperson of the GTSB's transportation committee and a GO Transit board member, has set up a meeting Jan. 28 to discuss that plan and various other options.

One solution he's focusing on would see GO purchase freight lines from CN Rail so more commuter trains can run throughout the GTA.

While Fisch thinks some of the ideas Tonks is suggesting sound intriguing, he points out the plan doesn't address issues such as extending the Yonge subway to Richmond Hill or the Spadina subway up to York University and on to Vaughan's corporate centre at highways 400 and 7.

Regardless of the solutions ultimate-

ly settled on, Fisch argues transit deficiencies can no longer be ignored.

"I think it's become fairly clear we're facing major congestion in the region. We only have so much room to build roads in terms of space and dollars available," he said.

"It will get much worse if we don't do something about it. We'll still build the roads we require. But I think our economic well-being is going to be at risk (without improved transit). Transit is key to maintaining our economic well-being. If you can't move goods and services and people around, it affects our economy. It's a key economic linchpin."

Knitting together transit service between York and Toronto is a top priority.

Contrary to popular belief, as many commuters travel into York Region from Toronto each day as do travel into Toronto from York. About 600,000 trips are made between Toronto and York every weekday.

John Long is president of DS-Lea Associates, a consulting firm that has examined transit in the GTA and pulled together dozens of studies for the GTSB to investigate.

He believes running streetcars on railway tracks is an attractive idea because several cars can operate on the lines at the same time, as opposed to trains.

Streetcars, which can reach speeds

of 90 km/h, can start and stop faster than trains, allowing more stations to be built along the route.

Long is worried by the reliance of York residents on the automobile. Only 5 per cent of the region's commuters use transit, the lowest rate in the GTA.

He believes a reliable and affordable light transit system, such as the streetcar option, might provide an incentive to get those drivers out of their cars.

"You've got severe gridlock in the GTA. An accident on a major route can tie traffic up nearly all day long," he said. "We've got to start getting people out of their cars. You've got to provide a service and not just downtown in the morning and back up north in the evening."

Long said Canadian cities have fared poorly in improving their transit systems compared to urban centres in the U.S.

"Clearly in the States, they make much more significant investments in their transit and road systems to keep mobility and accessibility," he said.

Long estimated the cost of installing streetcar routes on rail lines at between \$5 million and \$15 million a kilometre — far cheaper than the \$125 million to \$150 million required for trains.

The total cost of running the streetcars on three rail lines is pegged at \$425 million.

Richmond Hill Mayor Bill Bell warned there's no way municipalities

can fund major transit projects like that without funding from Ottawa and Queen's Park.

Bell, chairperson of York's trans-

portation committee, said the GTA may be able to tap into a new federal provincial infrastructure program expected to be announced next year. The federal, provincial and municipal governments each pay a third of capital works.

But that would leave municipal taxpayers with ongoing operating costs.

Bell argues that will be impossible unless the upper levels of government agree to give municipalities a slice of gas taxes.

"If they're going to download (service), it's one thing to download all this responsibility and take the bows, but it's another thing to give people the resources to fund these things."

## TRANSIT UPGRADES

Here are the highlights of improvements to the GTA transit system being considered by the Greater Toronto Services Board.

- Establishing 85 kilometres of new streetcar lines along three underused railway corridors running between Toronto and the 905 regions.
- Taking one of those lines into the new Pearson airport terminal as a 35-minute transit link to downtown Toronto.
- Running buses across Hwy. 407 to serve large regional centres and the new streetcar interchanges.
- Eventually replacing these 407 bus routes with a GO Train or streetcar service along a transit corridor beside the highway.
- Establishing a string of large parking lots along the 407 to feed bus and streetcar links with Toronto.
- Running high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes on Yonge Street between the 407 and Finch Avenue to feed 905 commuters into the TTC subway by bus.
- Preserving the Finch Avenue hydro for future transit lines.

—Torstar Network

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