

YORK REGION RESIDENTS PLAY THE DAILY COMMUTER GAME CALLED FRUSTRATION

GRAPPLING WITH GRIDLOCK

BY PATRICK CASEY
Staff Writer

It's a daily dose of craps. A weekly round of roulette.

Commuters play the game every morning, selecting their vehicle or public transportation as the mode of travel between home and work.

Steve Kinnari understands the battle all too well, often left cursing if his decision backfires.

A Newmarket resident employed by a financial institution in Toronto, choosing his car or the GO train is often dictated by outside factors — weather, construction or business away from his office.

But it doesn't make life any easier when Kinnari's vehicle is stalled on the Don Valley Parkway for 35 minutes because a fellow driver has slammed his car into the guardrail and everyone slows to sneak a peak.

Or he misses the 5:27 p.m. GO train from Union Station and has two choices to make — wait 70 minutes and take another train into Richmond Hill or catch the subway to the Finch station. Both options require a GO bus ride north to Newmarket and a taxi back to the train's parking lot to fetch his car.

"It's horrible, to say the least," Kinnari said. "When it rains or snows the morning tour lasts at least 90 minutes. There's also construction. And there's accidents on top of that and you don't know when they are going to happen."

The government can no longer take a hands-off approach to transportation. They have to become partners with the municipalities.

A survey last summer by the central Ontario chapter of the CAA discovered 79 per cent of respondents recognized a lack of transportation funding as the No. 1 problem creating congestion and gridlock for frustrated Greater Toronto motorists.

The issue remains a hot election topic as the Nov. 13 municipal election draws near.

"Municipalities and the region lack the necessary infrastructure to service the development before it happens," said Jeff Holec, a Keswick communications consultant who is challenging incumbent Rob Grossi for mayor of Georgina.

Holec, who worked for the Town of Markham and Richmond Hill during rapid growth periods in the 1980s, states large, multi-unit developments must be stopped.

"GO Transit has historically been biased toward the east-west corridor and I may not be alive to see the widening of Hwy 404 to Georgina. We need more infrastructure because a 2-1/2-hour commute to work does not improve your quality of life."

In May, the provincial government



STAFF PHOTO/SJÖERD WITTEVEEN

unveiled \$200-million worth of improvements to provincial highways across Greater Toronto, part of a \$1 billion project to pay for expansion, resurfacing, lighting and paving.

The money included three York Region highways before the government announced another \$37 million in August to widen Hwy. 404 north to Aurora and extend the road from Davis Drive to Green Lane.

Kinnari appreciates the work on Hwy. 404 but wonders why it was limited to one additional lane north and south when there's ample room for two or three. And he pleads for more GO train service, noting every time new cars are added, they are filled to capacity.

But GO officials admit it's not that easy, especially since existing parking lots are overflowed with vehicles and scheduling lines with CN Rail becomes an issue.

Although York Region's 2000 operating budget committed \$347.1 million to transportation and works projects this year and a new seamless transit system will be operational across the region early next year, the Ontario Road Builders Association says it's just not enough.

The association has released two brochures to municipal election candidates pointing out traffic congestion can be improved and road-related injuries and deaths reduced through improved conditions to provincial roads and bridges.

"Mass transit is not going to solve all of the transportation congestion. We have to

expand the road system," said association spokesperson Stephen Damp. "The GTA's economy is dependent on that."

"The reality is cars are always going to be on the roads. We will never have a carless society."

Other possible remedies appear endless.

The Greater Toronto Services Board has identified \$4.1 billion in upgrades needed to the GO Transit rail system over the next 14 years, including more than \$1 billion in expansion to rail lines in York Region.

The same board also adopted a 20-year, \$5-billion plan to address immediate and future transportation needs in the GTA.

Meanwhile, York Region has launched two task forces with similar agendas — leading the Toronto subway into the region.

At the same time, a group from Richmond Hill and Markham is lobbying for a subway extension up Yonge Street to the Langstaff GO terminal in Richmond Hill. Vaughan is anxious for the subway to be extended to York University and the city's planned corporate headquarters on Hwy. 7.

"People talk about vision," said Richmond Hill Mayor Bill Bell, who is seeking his fifth term in office. "It is time to get beyond that and get a few things done."

"It makes more sense to run the subway up the centre of York Region than to the western part of the region. The subway to Langstaff will certainly help but so will all-day GO train service hooking into that subway

FAST FACTS

- Population across Greater Toronto will increase to over 7 million residents in the next 20 years, an increase of 2 million people.
- There will be 1 million more vehicles on local roads, totalling 3.7 million cars and trucks.
- Rush hour car trips in the GTA will increase by 50 per cent, to 3.6 million per day, by 2021.
- Traffic congestion creates lost productivity and more costly goods movement, impacts personal health and safety and environmental damage. Smog from congestion has become an acute health problem.
- Ontario exports 91 per cent of its products to the United States and over 75 per cent of those exports move by truck on our road systems. Canada-U.S. trade is expected to double over the next five years.
- Congestion adds about 10 per cent to the cost of moving goods, as much as 35 per cent in the GTA.
- One hour lost to congestion per employee, per week means over 80,000 person-years of lost productivity in the GTA.
- Over 70 per cent of the freeway network in the GTA is congested in rush hours, with some spots now experiencing 14 hours of stop-and-go traffic each day.
- Travel on Ontario's arterial roads is increasing at a rate of almost 4 per cent each year, much more in some urban areas.

(Left) Some commuters opt to queue up for the daily GO trains, but service levels remain a problem.

That would be a major help to gridlock. To get that we need a dedicated source of funding."

"We can't rip off property homeowners any more."

Bell is also concerned the majority of crucial infrastructure ventures are consistently tied to a successful bid from Toronto for the 2008 Summer Olympics.

"What happens if the Olympics go to Beijing? The projects just can't die," he said. "We need improvements whether or not Toronto wins the Olympics."

However, regional chairperson Bill Fisch said York Region is doing its own part. And he points to the recent three-way \$1.5-billion agreement between the federal and provincial governments and the City of Toronto to revitalize the city's waterfront as a significant step toward joint partnerships.

But Fisch realizes the next two years are desperate times to address transportation concerns.

"If work is not done, we are going to fall into a crevice that we cannot escape," he warned. "We don't have any choices left."

Markham Mayor Don Cousens insists the crisis has reached a critical level with Queens Park and the federal government pledging new money for transportation upgrades.

"The governments can no longer take a hands-off approach to transportation. They have to become partners with the municipalities," he said. "Our lifestyles are starting to detract because of it."

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