



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Traffic appears to be moving well in this view of the interchange at highways 404 and 407 in Richmond Hill but motorists know that's not always the case.

# U.S. may hold congestion answers

Fourth in series about congestion in the region

BY MIKE ADLER  
Staff Writer

For a few years, York Region has tried hard to be more like Portland, Oregon.

It committed to a big, bold rapid transit plan to get a Portland-sized ridership boost, 51 per cent during the 1990s. And its politicians and planners returned from Portland praising its "travel demand management" clubs for weaning employees off the single-occupant commute.

Ontario's new Liberal government has Portland fever, too. A page in its platform, "Lessons from Portland," praised the city's growth boundary for holding the line on congestion-producing sprawl. Now Ontario is planning a greenbelt to steer new development south of the Oak Ridges Moraine.

But what if it's all a mistake? After all, York Region can't change what it is: low-density homes, office parks and big box stores.

Only a few of our neighbourhoods and commercial zones are being built with transit in mind.

Yet York has bet it can hold gridlock at bay by boosting transit ridership sixfold over the next two decades, raising its peak-hour transit percentage from eight to 33 while the population doubles.

Some American thinktanks say what Portland did made its congestion worse and argue other fast-growing, sprawl-plagued cities such as Atlanta shouldn't follow its exam-

## Cross Roads

York's congestion challenge

ple.

Neither should York, because transit can't solve congestion, according to John Charles of the Portland-based Cascade Policy Institute, who says many Portland politicians are trying to increase traffic woes and punish motorists.

They're not trying to solve the congestion problem — they like it," he says, before denouncing TriMet, Portland's transit agency, as a "Soviet-style monopoly" stealing money from taxpayers.

Other experts aren't that extreme, but warn against unrealistic goals for transit ridership.

"You're not going to turn fringe suburban communities into Munich," says Frank Moretti, policy and research director at TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based group promoting policies relieving traffic congestion.

People have an unfortunate tendency to ignore planners and act in what they see as their best interest, he adds.

Still, TRIP's recommendations for Atlanta read much like York's own transportation shopping list: widened roads and expanded cost-efficient transit, intelligent transportation systems that give

minute-by-minute information to drivers and the region, plus support for programs that curb peak-hour trips.

The Cascade Institute, perhaps more ideologically driven since Mr. Charles refers to free roads as "socialist," promotes the auctioning of roads to entrepreneurs who will price travel on them according to congestion.

What is his shining example of what other regions should do with their roads? The 407 ETR.

Ottawa, facing about the same growth rate as York, has decided to concentrate spending on more dedicated busways and a light-rail network. Its goal is increasing peak-hour ridership to 30 per cent from 15, says Dennis Jacobs, the city's planning, environment and infrastructure policy director.

"Even if you widen roads, all it does is encourage more traffic," he says.

"It's not a strategic way to spend your money."

York's plan to reach 33 per cent is ambitious but it isn't impossible, says Michael Roschlau, president of the Canadian Urban Transit Association.

Unlike Portland, York isn't focused on serving one downtown, but transit in the region is already stronger than it is in most U.S. cities, he says, adding much will depend on outside factors such as oil prices and how serious the province is about containing sprawl.

## Free parking could be thing of past

It may finally be time to discuss the ultimate suburban heresy — paying for parking.

Free parking tops the list of reasons people keep taking the car instead of a bus. It's more important to commuters than gas prices or congestion because it's a visible cost, says Michael Roschlau, president of the Canadian Urban Transit Association.

In Markham, for instance, charging for a parking space isn't just an unpopular idea, it's illegal for landlords to charge for spaces mandated by the municipality.

Exceptions to the bylaw include commercial parking lots (which Markham doesn't have), public institutions and hospitals. The town says other buildings — an office tower, for example — could charge for "prestige" parking.

If they start charging drivers to

park at Markham civic — steps away from Hwy. 7 — or at the York Region headquarters in Newmarket, would there be riots? Would people stop coming?

The region is looking for a way to ease the parking situation at its Yonge Street building, which opened in 1992 with 600 employees. It now contains 1,000-plus visitors and community groups that use it for meetings.

Little wonder, then, that the lot is often full. The region is working on plans to expand it and a dedicated visitor's area with a gate and a fee is an option, though not one politicians or staff have discussed the matter, property services director Barry Crowe says.

Although the headquarters is on a major transit route, the region is desperately promoting as an alternative to the car, Mr. Crowe says the

region believes many of its staff have no reasonable transit route to the building if they are charged for a parking space.

Space will be more valuable in new urban centres the region plans in Markham, Vaughan and Newmarket so expect some parking charges there, says Paul May, the region's infrastructure planning director. Hospitals already do it and large employers and institutions should start, he adds.

About half of the region's 26 public high schools (typically not the ones in rural areas) charge students a yearly parking fee. York District school board spokesperson Ross Virgo says. Set by the principal, it's usually quite low, but as much as \$90 in one case.

—Mike Adler



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