



IN A LANE OF THEIR OWN

Viva won't work without designated lanes, Roy Green writes

Rapid transit officially arrives in York Region this fall, but it won't be at its most rapid for at least another year.

On Tuesday, Sept. 6, a fleet of 85 rapid transit buses carrying the Viva logo will begin operations on four high-traffic routes in York Region — Yonge Street from Newmarket to the Finch subway station, Hwy. 7 from Markham to Vaughan and two north-south links serving the busiest corridors of Vaughan and Markham.

And although the region's venture into BRT (bus rapid transit) service, will improve travel times by up to 25 per cent over the conventional transit system, the sleek, double-blue Viva buses will be facing, for a while at least, the same problem we all have during rush hour — traffic congestion.

Until the BRT gets its own dedicated lanes, buses could be stalled in heavy traffic and the service won't be operating at peak efficiency, says Mary-Frances Turner, vice-president of the region's rapid transit corporation.

"The real key to putting the rapid in rapid transit is to have dedicated transit lanes separating Viva vehicles from mixed traffic," Ms Turner said. "That's expected to happen in the second phase of our plan. If

we get the go-ahead for the second phase soon, we could have some designated lanes in place by 2008."

In Ottawa, it took 13 years to complete a bus-only transitway, but that's the reason that city's system is so highly regarded, according to Michael Fitzpatrick of Ottawa-Carleton Regional Transit.

The first sections of the exclusive busway opened in 1983 and in 10 years, the system had carried 500 million riders. Today, it boasts 31 kilometres of exclusive busway.

Thus, it seems the only thing keeping York Region from truly rapid transit is the small matter of about \$500 million, the estimated amount of money needed to complete the second phase of the region's 20-year rapid transit plan.

Regional officials have been awaiting word on funding announcements from the federal and provincial governments since ... well, since all three levels of government kicked in \$50 million each for the first phase of Viva, the phase opening this September.

Funding, in the form of gasoline tax revenue already announced by the senior levels of government, is welcome, but more



Part three of a four-part series discussing public transit in York Region

infrastructure funding is needed, said regional chairperson Bill Fisch.

"I was anticipating it would be announced by now," he said. "The original plan was to get phase two into construction by

2006. We're still not off that target if there's an announcement soon, but we may have to wait another year."

Even without designated BRT lanes, Viva has initiated a number of improvements to speed up the process, including fewer stops, computerized signalling that gives buses priority at intersections, queue-jump lanes and intelligent transportation systems.

These will allow Viva vehicles to hold green lights longer and move through intersections faster, Mr. Fisch said.

To appreciate the immediate 10 per cent to 17 per cent improvement in travel times in Viva's first phase, one only needs to look at New York, where a recent report says some Manhattan buses crawl at 4 miles per hour, only slightly faster than the average human walks.

Transportation planners there say if they can make buses move even 10 per cent faster they can "revolutionize" travel in the five New York boroughs.

And they've initiated a program which includes most of the same features being used here — fewer stops, computerized signalling and, eventually, designated lanes.

In Los Angeles, the introduction of designated lanes and fewer stops has decreased bus travel times by 25 per cent.

Viva expects to be carrying 36,000 riders a day by the end of 2006 and as many as 140,000 passengers by 2021. Only about 8 per cent of residents use transit to get about, Ms Turner said.

YRT, however, needs to move that to a 30-per-cent split to meet its objectives — a significant increase, she added.

If Viva doesn't meet its ridership targets, taxpayers will feel the crunch, according to Newmarket Regional Councillor Tony Van Bynen, a member of the transit committee.

"We have to get revenues up to least 50 per cent of costs — the same level now being met by the conventional transit system," Mr. Van Bynen said.

"That's going to be a major challenge. If we don't, taxpayers are going to be paying too much."

In fact, the region may have to consider different taxation rates for urban and rural residents, Mr. Van Bynen said, citing Ottawa, where inner-city residents pay an annual transit levy of \$430 on their property taxes, compared to \$69 for rural residents.

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