What Toronto's big transit plans are forgetting

Richard Gilbert

Polls suggest that transit is the biggest issue in Toronto's ongoing municipal election campaign. Among the main candidates for mayor, David Soknacki, former city budget chief, had the most comprehensive, fiscally responsible, and relevant transit platform. His withdrawal from the campaign for lack of poll support is a sad reflection on the state of municipal politics in Toronto.

The biggest problem with the proposals of the remaining three main candidates for Toronto mayor is their relative lack of attention to the current poor performance of the buses, streetcars and subway trains of the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC). (Kevin Van Paassen for The Globe and Mail)

The biggest problem with the proposals of the remaining three main candidates for mayor is their relative lack of attention to the current poor performance of the buses, streetcars and subway trains of the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC). Several transit systems in third-world countries provide users with a better experience than transit users have in Toronto, where crowding, decay, and daily indifference to the plight of users are endemic.

"Toronto needs improvements to transit now" are the key words in the TTC's August, 2014, report "Opportunities to Improve Transit Service in Toronto." It invites Toronto City to fund numerous improvements, notably a change in what a fare purchases: from a single ride by the most direct route to two hours' unlimited used of the system.

Olivia Chow supports the report's recommendations. Rob Ford supports most of them but balks at a proposal to reduce monitoring of fare payment. "I have problems with the honour system," he said. John Tory opposes the recommendations because they are not funded. He may not know that funding such service changes is city council's job, not the TTC's.

The "Opportunities" report hardly addresses the TTC's major current problems: crowding during rush periods and insufficient ridership to justify reasonable service levels at other times. Mr. Soknacki had

addressed this by proposing free or discounted fares during off-peak periods. This suggestion could be improved by raising rush-period fares and introducing lower shoulder and off-peak rates, designed to level out ridership throughout the day. Mr. Soknacki was also alone in addressing "bunching" of buses and streetcars and in advocating automation of subway train control, to increase route capacity and reduce operating costs.

Charging for transit by time of travel requires widespread use of a smart-card fare-payment system. The TTC should have introduced such a system years ago. It will not have Presto fully implemented until 2016 or later. No candidate seeks urgency in this matter. Presto will allow major operating efficiencies and, as important, provide much better user data than the TTC now has available.

Ms. Chow proposes early, system-wide improvements in bus service, mostly beyond what the TTC is now proposing. They would be funded by an additional $15-million grant from City Council, raising the average home's annual property taxes by about $14 (about a third of the annual amount being levied to pay for the Scarborough subway – see below).

No candidate is proposing truly radical and likely effective early solutions to Toronto's poor transit service. These could include no-cost solutions, such as allowing cab companies to run jitney services along busy routes during rush periods, and relatively low-cost solutions including adding cars to subway trains.

The candidates are even more silent on another major transit issue: the lack of co-ordination between transit planning and land-use planning. The strongest example of Toronto's remarkably inept co-ordination is the subway's Spadina branch, installed more than 35 years ago and still with little development along this underused route. The Bloor-Danforth line, nearly 50 years old, is almost as bad as the Spadina branch in having too little associated development, as are most parts of streetcar routes.

The way to approach ideal loading of transit vehicles – when about three-quarters of seats are occupied for most of the day – is to have mixed residential and commercial development at and near every station and stop, substantial amounts of it in the case of rail routes. On average throughout the day, well under a quarter of transit seats are occupied, allowing scope for a doubling or more in the number of users. A doubling could raise annual fare revenue by more than $1-billion.

Transit planning today seems designed to serve users produced by previous development decisions. Giving transit's overriding importance for Toronto, a better approach would be to guide development so that it results in the most efficient operation of transit.

Toronto's chief planner, Jennifer Keesmaat, who has inherited much of the responsibility for poor planning co-ordination, has complained that in formulating their transit platforms the mayoralty candidates may be ignoring evidence and data and "scratching transit plans on the back of a napkin."

The centrepiece of planning for expensive new rail-based transit services in Toronto is the 19-kilometre Eglinton Crosstown Light-Rail-Transit (LRT) line. At $280-million/km it may be the most expensive LRT line ever built – in part because 10 km of it is to be tunnelled. The line is to be in service by 2020 and paid for by the Ontario government. Mr. Ford would change this plan, putting the whole line in a tunnel at an additional cost of $3.4-billion (my estimate).

Mr. Ford is the only candidate who would change the plans for two other additions: 24 km of LRT lines along parts of Sheppard and Finch Avenues, to cost about $90-million/km, paid for by the provincial government and to be in service by 2020 or later. Instead, Mr. Ford would construct subways along about 19 km of these routes at an additional cost of $6.8-billion. He would also construct a downtown relief line costing $2.8-billion and, in a later phase, construct a further 38 km of subway routes costing $18-billion (my estimates). Thus, Mr. Ford's proposed expenditure on subways totals $31 billion, none of which is committed. He claims these funds could be made available without raising property taxes.

The fourth planned investment is replacement of the Scarborough Rapid Transit line with a 9.9 km, 7-stop LRT costing $2.1-billion or a 7.6 km, 3-stop extension to the Bloor-Danforth subway costing $3.6-billion. City Council first chose the LRT, which would be fully funded by the provincial and federal governments. Last October, it switched to the subway option, covering the additional cost with a property tax increase averaging $42 per household per year for 30 years.

Tory's SmartTrack proposal builds on proposed upgrading of regional rail routes to provide "a 53 km, 22-station surface subway relief line" running from near Pearson Airport to Unionville via Union Station, with a "conservatively estimated ridership of 200,000 per day" and a cost estimate of $8-billion. No details support these estimates. No funds have been committed for what he is proposing, which would depend heavily on provincial and federal contributions and municipal borrowing.

The final proposal on the table is for a downtown relief line. As well as Mr. Ford, Ms. Chow supports this. She would use the roughly $1.5-billion saved by reverting to the Scarborough LRT proposal and would likely fund the balance through a further tax increase.

In summary, Ms. Chow's plans seem mostly grounded in fiscal realities, Mr. Tory's and Mr. Ford's proposals may be what Toronto's Chief Planner had in mind when she talked about "back of a napkin" planning. All the candidates, especially Mr. Tory, fall short in addressing the TTC's current performance, and they all fall very short in plans to coordinate land-use and transit planning.

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