

Year end look at Toronto transit: Ashton

By THERE IS A HUNGER FOR GOOD TRANSIT IN TORONTO AND THE GTA. WHY CAN'T WE BUILD MORE OF IT, FASTER, WITHOUT BANKRUPTING THE CITY?

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A former TTC Chair's primer on The Good, The Bad, and The Essential!

The Good! Despite a 25¢ fare increase last year, lousy economy, and customer service outrage, 2010 ridership is rising to record-setting heights of 477 million rides, while other transit giants like Chicago and New York experience flat numbers.

When it comes to customer service, we discovered this year it needed a good shake. An independent blue-ribbon panel investigated and made 78 recommendations last August.

The Bad! What drives me crazy, the public, and I'm sure the TTC, is a city that can't seem to get its transit head around getting more reliable, cost-effective service to where it's needed. Just look at the ridership figures and you know there is a hunger for good transit in Toronto and the GTA.

Why can't we build more of it, faster, without bankrupting the city?

Quite simply, there is far too much politics involved in Toronto's public transit. Too many funders and decision-makers who want to put their crayons to the transit map. Throw into the mix a seemingly endless parade of elections, you find visions and plans being changed faster than a flat tire on a tired bus.

Former chief general manager Rick Ducharme, a tough talking, no-nonsense transit man, always had a stack of slides at the ready listing the number of decade-dusted and failed plans for transit in the GTA — a veritable acronym graveyard.

Who can ever forget the grievous waste of public money when the Eglinton subway extension was cancelled in 1995 by the Harris government and buried under tons of dirt.

Most recently, the city was offered mayor David Miller's Transit City, a spider web network of new age, second-generation streetcars operating in dedicated right-of-ways — cheaper to build and run and Mother Nature friendly. After five years of network planning and scratching for provincial and federal bucks, work has started.

Cue history and along comes an election that delivers a new mayor who believes he heard the public wanted subways and not streetcars. On Day 1 of his new term, and with promises to honour, Toronto's vocal mayor summarily heaved Transit City into the waste bin.

With reportedly \$130 million already cashed out for Transit City, and over \$1 billion of contracts signed, are we doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past?

Maybe not. Fiscal common sense might give rise to a compromise hybrid plan involving both subways and streetcars. You won't get as much new service as promised by Miller because of the cost of subway construction, but you can, if politicians holster their crayons, get some higher order subway service where it's needed.

The Essential! This week Toronto council will vote on making the TTC an essential service. A popular Ford promise that will easily pass.

But consider the price you pay for no transit strikes. By stripping the union of its right to strike, all management/labour conflicts go to arbitration. History will tell you arbitration generally favours the unions and the rider and taxpayer pays more — \$11.2 million in 2005 if TTC was then an essential service.

There is more behind the curtain. Management control over work rules and practices will be lost as issues march to arbitration. You can bet costs will not go down.

You can cheer for the record-breaking ridership and labour peace, but who is being taken for a ride?

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