

IMFG

No. 26 / 2019

perspectives

Transit in the Greater Toronto Area: How to Get Back on the Rails

Matti Siemiatycki and Drew Fagan

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IMFG is funded by the Province of Ontario, the City of Toronto, the Regional Municipality of York, the Regional Municipality of Halton, Avana Capital Corporation, and Maytree.

Authors

Matti Siemiatycki is Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Planning, Canada Research Chair in Infrastructure Planning and Finance, and Interim Director of the School of Cities at the University of Toronto. His research focuses on large-scale infrastructure projects, public-private partnerships, and the effective integration of infrastructure into the fabric of cities. He has undertaken studies on major cities in Canada and around the world including Vancouver, London, Los Angeles, Sydney, Bilbao, and Delhi. He was a member of the City of Toronto and TTC's Expert Advisory Panel on the Ontario-Toronto Transit Realignment Review. Full disclosure: Matti Siemiatycki's wife is an employee of Metrolinx.

Drew Fagan is Professor at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto and Senior Advisor with McMillan Vantage Policy Group. Prior to his present roles, he spent 12 years in leadership positions with the governments of Ontario and Canada. In the Government of Ontario, he was Deputy Minister of Infrastructure and Deputy Minister of Tourism, Culture and Sport with responsibility for the 2015 Pan/Parapan American Games. He was a member of the City of Toronto and TTC's Expert Advisory Panel on the Ontario-Toronto Transit Realignment Review.

Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance (IMFG)
Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy
University of Toronto
1 Devonshire Place
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 3K7
email: info.imfg@utoronto.ca
<http://www.munkschool.utoronto.ca/imfg>

Series editors: Philippa Campsie and Tomas Hachard

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ISBN 978-0-7727-1024-6
ISSN 1927-1921

Executive Summary

Toronto is an emerging global city. Yet the failure to build rapid transit in step with the explosive growth of the past 40 years is one of the city-region's biggest impediments to inclusive development and prosperity.

The GTA needs fit-for-purpose processes to make transit decisions. It needs political leadership that respects evidence of what works. It needs to learn from others, while recognizing that every city-region has distinctive characteristics. It needs to act decisively with more focus and discipline, and yet also with greater inclusiveness.

More specifically, there is a need to:

- Think regionally in terms of structures, possibly using an empowered Metrolinx as the central focus, and think locally less, especially when it comes to narrow self-interest; structures need to be put in place that drive coordination without losing local impact and input and with sufficient opportunity for meaningful public involvement;
- Reduce the influence of politics on decision-making and increase the importance of evidence, drawing examples from like-minded countries and cities, while taking into account the limits of evidence-gathering; publicly released cost-benefit analyses should be required and political “workarounds” should be viewed as incompatible with an effective transit system;
- Improve service coordination among transit agencies for all modes of transportation, not just subways and other rapid transit, but also bus routes that cross regional boundaries, car-sharing schemes, and bicycle rights-of-way;
- Integrate transportation and land-use planning more effectively by encouraging mixed-use, transit-oriented development near rapid transit stations;
- Optimize public engagement and transparency while guarding against process stasis; public consultation should focus on regionally important projects with a realistic chance of funding; mechanisms should be improved for politicians and planners to work together publicly on long-term approvals;
- Ensure that the GTA enjoys stable, coordinated, predictable long-term transit funding from the federal and provincial governments and through other funding mechanisms, for both new construction and ongoing maintenance.

Most immediately, the subway “upload” initiative launched by the Government of Ontario should become the basis for a regional discussion and negotiation about how to improve transit across the board, not just the TTC subway system.

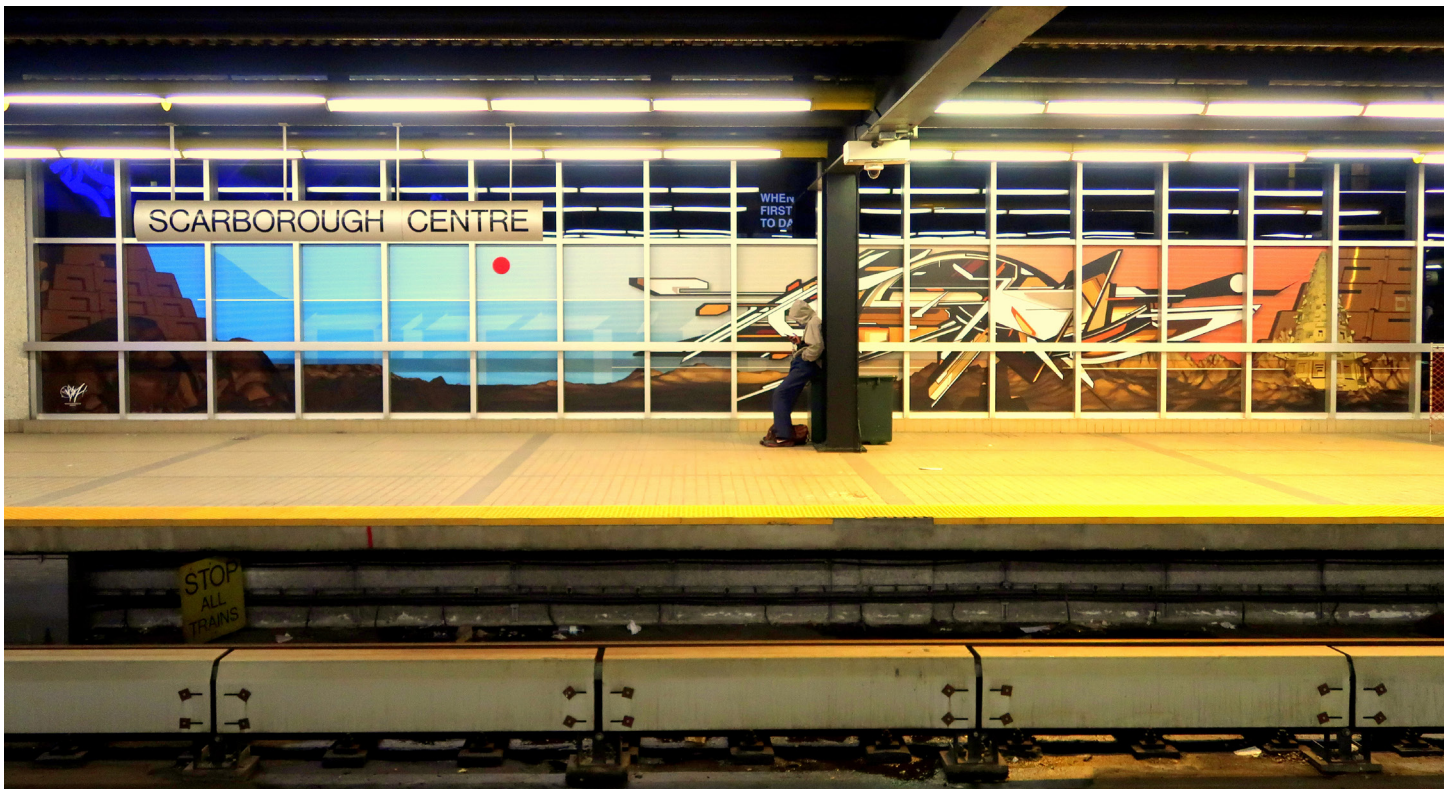


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Transit in the Greater Toronto Area: How to Get Back on the Rails

Introduction

It is often said that transit planning in Toronto is uniquely dysfunctional. It can take decades to gain approvals. The city's lengthy list of priority projects far exceeds committed funding. There is interminable wrangling among different levels of government. And political considerations often seem to supersede evidence in project selection, resulting in investments that do not necessarily deliver the greatest benefit.

Indeed, a recent study¹ finds that no major rapid transit project in Greater Toronto since 2000 has proceeded from initial conception to approval in less than a decade, and some have taken as long as 50 years. Meanwhile, the city's population has boomed, as has transit ridership, and road traffic has steadily worsened.

Toronto is hardly alone; other Canadian cities have faced similar situations. In Vancouver, the decision in the early 2000s on a new light rail line connecting the downtown with the airport and the suburb of Richmond became one of the most chaotic and vigorously debated in years. The B.C. government imposed a controversial public-private partnership model as a condition for funding. The project was twice rejected by the board of the regional transit agency before being approved in a tense third vote. Similarly, in Montreal, a new provincially supported light rail line is under construction, despite a critical report by Quebec's environmental review agency that questioned the merits of the project.

While some cities have developed a reputation for building well – Madrid comes to mind with its steady system expansion, as does London, with the success of the Crossrail expansion, although this, too, is facing turbulence of late – other cities have also come to be known as places where things don't get done. The recent opening of the long-delayed and massively over-budget Second Avenue subway in New York City was for many another indication of how difficult it is to build in New York at almost any price.² And in Washington, D.C. – the capital of the world's richest nation – many fewer people ride the Metro than a decade ago, despite booming population growth, due to service and reliability failings.³ The longest line-segment shutdown in Metro history took place in 2019 to rebuild structurally deficient platforms.⁴

Transit planning presents many challenges, from the prosaic (knowing exactly where to dig when mapping is often inadequate) to the technological (mastering the latest sensing equipment) to the communal (overcoming NIMBYism). But two interrelated challenges rise above the others to affect all aspects of transit planning, construction, and operations:

1. the structural hurdles posed by unclear and often competing responsibilities among different levels of government;
2. the uneasy relationship between technical evidence and politics in transit decision-making.

In this paper, we will focus on these two issues with regard to the situation in Greater Toronto, and suggest ways to do things better.

Who does what and why it matters

The Greater Toronto Area has recently spent months debating which level of government should be responsible for the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) subway system. Should it be the City of Toronto, which has historically held this role, or the Province of Ontario? The Province has proposed to “upload” (that is, take over responsibility for) the TTC subway system on the basis that it can build faster and better due to its larger fiscal capacity and its experience in region-wide planning.

The uploading announcement came as a shock to Toronto City Council, the city’s public service, and possibly some provincial officials as well. But that doesn’t mean the idea is necessarily misguided. A city-region as big as the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), with 6.5 million people and five regional governments (including the City of Toronto), requires a system of transit governance equal to the scope of the territory and the task at hand.

This was the rationale behind the establishment of the provincial transit agency Metrolinx in 2006. It was created to build rapid transit within the GTA funded primarily by the Province. A few years later, it took over responsibility for the existing GO commuter transit system, which reaches beyond the GTA. Working with Infrastructure Ontario, the province’s infrastructure delivery agency, Metrolinx is in the midst of completing the largest rapid transit expansion in Toronto since the opening of the Bloor-Danforth TTC Line in 1966 – the Eglinton Avenue LRT. Even before the upload

announcement, then, the province was planning through Metrolinx to own the newest rapid transit line in the City of Toronto. An arrangement is in place for the new line to be operated by the TTC and integrated into the wider regional network.

In this context, the proposed upload could make sense as another step in a pattern. The TTC subway system is no longer limited to the boundaries of the City of Toronto – the extension of the University/Spadina Avenue Line in 2017 includes stops in York Region. The Ontario government’s latest plans for subway expansion – announced at \$28.5-billion in capital costs – include additional stops in York Region, in this case a northward extension of the Yonge Street Line.

It is best practice to plan regional transit regionally and local transit and transportation services locally. In a panel discussion earlier this year organized by the University of Toronto’s Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance, transit planning expert Michael Schabas pointed out that every major city has unique characteristics: legacy transit

investments that constrain future choices, geography and development patterns that impact cost and service viability, political expectations and policy blind-spots. But as he noted, certain principles remain universal: regional transit should be planned regionally, or at an even higher level of government, and integrated with land-use

planning and regional economic strategies, while local transit should be planned locally but with integrated fare structures and service patterns.

In the GTA, Metrolinx is the regional player, although it lacks some attributes that many analysts say should be vested in a regional transit authority for maximum effectiveness, including greater planning and revenue-raising powers. Meanwhile, the TTC has long been working with its transit partners across the GTA to coordinate travel (with Mississauga since the 1990s and with York Region and GO for the past decade).

The result is a system of overlapping roles and responsibilities and, thus, confusion among the various transit agencies. The provincial government’s subway upload plans, which remain unclear in their scope and design, do not resolve the institutional tangle that characterizes transit planning in the GTA. By focusing only on uploading TTC subway infrastructure to the provincial government, the proposal leaves unresolved issues of regional governance, service coordination across modes, and revenue-raising powers.

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The process involves solely the provincial government at Queen's Park and the City of Toronto, although the TTC already services York Region and will likely reach into other regions in the coming decades. Why doesn't the process involve all affected governments?

Government restructuring, including transit, is complicated. Having started it, why not try to take maximum advantage of the proposed upload by considering all aspects of a regional approach – including greater coordination between the City and the surrounding regions for bus service and closer coordination between GO transit and local transit services? In fact, the Ontario government is moving in the other direction, if anything, having recently decided to eliminate a subsidy to reduce the transfer cost for those who use both GO and a local transit service.⁵

This clumsy process hasn't been approached with sufficient forethought about how the upload could advance Greater Toronto's collective transit system. The proposal was made, seemingly, without adequate evidence of potential costs, benefits, and impacts. And this is the second deadly sin of Greater Toronto transit planning – the over-dominance of politics.

Evidence is a key tool in decision making, not the final word on which projects get approved and built.

The benefits and limits of evidence-based planning

Imagine you are a politician responsible for approving major transit projects in Toronto. One comes across your desk which is popular and viewed by all orders of government as a priority. But the evidence contained in a publicly available business case shows that the benefits of the project only slightly outweigh its costs. And if construction costs escalate, as typically happens, the project's impact turns negative.

What would you do? Would you vote to approve the project in spite of the tepid business case, knowing it has broad support? Would you request further study to see if it uncovers new evidence of benefits? Would you recommend stopping the project in its tracks, and look for more effective ways to spend billions of dollars of public money?

This might seem like a reference to the Scarborough subway extension, an approved but yet-to-be-built project that has been much maligned but continues to have municipal, provincial, and federal government support. (It was deemed by *The Guardian* in late 2017 one of the 10 most wasteful infrastructure projects in the world.⁶)

In fact, this situation describes the proposed downtown subway relief line, now expanded into a proposed "Ontario Line" from the Ontario Science Centre in northeastern Toronto to the vicinity of Ontario Place on the waterfront.

In February 2019, Metrolinx released an update on the relief line proposal, a project that experts and politicians agree is a top priority. The update showed that the project's benefits only marginally exceed its costs, and that the line is highly sensitive to rising costs that could significantly undermine the value-for-money result.⁷

The finding was highlighted in a slide presentation at a public meeting of Metrolinx's board of directors.⁸ But it does not seem to have led to public questions. In subsequent months, the Province took over relief line planning from the City, renamed it the Ontario Line, redesigned the route, altered the proposed train technology, and revamped the construction schedule. After all this work, a new Metrolinx business case on the Ontario Line released in late July 2019 showed that while the new project delivers significant benefits in terms of ridership, congestion relief on other parts of the subway network, improved transit for low-income

communities, and opportunities to support land development, it has a benefit-cost ratio of less than 1.0.⁹ That is, after considering economics, strategic benefits, community building impacts, and deliverability, the costs

actually exceed expected benefits. This finding also received little attention, and all political leaders continue to agree that the project remains a top priority.

The Ontario Line may well still be, as many transit analysts believe, the most important next step for the subway system. But in the world of transit megaprojects, the relative merits and drawbacks of a project depend on the relative weight given to individual criteria: projected ridership and capacity, construction and operating costs, land redevelopment opportunities, environmental amelioration, equity of access in terms of the communities served. Moreover, studies that project costs and benefits over decades are highly sensitive to factors such as interest rate assumptions.

This example speaks volumes about the application and limits of evidence-based transit planning. Evidence is a key tool in decision making, not the final word on which projects get approved and built. The evidence produced on the merits of a transit project is based on assumptions about unpredictable future events and must be understood within the context of alternative projects being reviewed. Evidence is easily disregarded in the absence of formal processes or supportive institutions that regulate how evidence is to be used in decision-making.

Cost-benefit studies cannot quantify the real if ill-defined symbolic benefits of a project. For instance, proponents of the Scarborough subway extension have touted it as an important symbol of inclusion for residents of a part of Toronto who have felt neglected by not having a subway connection. “Scarborough deserves the respect and dignity that comes [sic] with a subway,” stated the *Toronto Sun*.¹⁰ Should the correcting of a perceived grievance be a legitimate factor in making a multibillion-dollar transit investment, and if so, how?

Evidence is fallible in other ways too. Evidence-based project evaluations can be undermined through biases caused by the frailty of human psychology or by wilful misrepresentation. According to Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman and Dan Lovallo, humans have a cognitive bias towards over-optimism. People tend to exaggerate their capabilities and the level of control they have to successfully execute a project. Organizational psychology also lends itself towards anchoring forecasts about a project to an initial starting point, making it difficult to adjust as new information calls into question the original thinking.¹¹ During long-range exercises such as the development of transit plans, these biases, if left unchecked, can unwittingly distort the results of evidence-based assessments.

While optimism biases are undoubtedly a source of error in project assessments, their impacts are magnified by what Professor Bent Flyvbjerg from Oxford University calls wilful strategic misrepresentations.¹² Within transit planning agencies, staff can feel pressure from their political masters to report favourably on priority projects, while burying unfavourable study results. In the GTA, media reports have documented how Metrolinx was pressured to approve projects of marginal benefit by revising technical studies to make the projects look more beneficial.¹³

As well, once evidence is produced it tends to be cherry-picked and “spun” by proponents and opponents of a project to support their existing positions. In any case, it is not at all clear that technical transit project assessment studies, often hundreds of pages long and produced at great cost, have a dominant role in influencing political decisions about what projects should be built. Anyone listening to transit debates in Toronto will notice that technical evidence is just one input alongside a host of factors.

And yet fewer attempts to evaluate and rank project proposals costing billions of dollars – Ontario’s long-term infrastructure plan projects average spending of about \$15 billion annually – is hardly the answer either.¹⁴ In an

age of populism, when slogans seem to matter more than dispassionate analysis, evidence – fairly arrived at, to the extent possible, and broadly promulgated, to the extent that recipients care – remains the best defence against poor decision-making.

Decisions about major infrastructure investments do come down to a political choice about priorities. Politics is the expression of our democratic system, and political oversight of major infrastructure decisions is critical to ensure appropriate accountability and civic engagement.

But those multibillion-dollar decisions must not be based on polls alone. A 2014 study on transit governance in Toronto, Washington, and New York City concluded that the planning process was actually most political in Toronto, a remarkable finding given the broad coverage in the U.S. press of short-sighted political game-playing in the other two cities.¹⁵

As Jonathan Swift wrote in 1710, “Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it.” In that context, how can government be structured more effectively so that evidence, fallible though it is, wins out more often in the struggle with political considerations? To this end, Canada should look to other countries which have designed more sophisticated processes.

In Australia, for example, Infrastructure Australia (IA) was established as an arm’s-length agency in 2008 to build the capacity of the domestic infrastructure industry – government analysts and private-sector operators alike. Projects of significant scope for which national government funds are sought must be evaluated by IA for likely overall benefit using standardized, publicly available methodologies. The study results are public and receive careful attention, given the rigour of the methodology followed and the credibility that IA has built – not without controversy – and the structured independence it was given by government, which was deepened a few years ago.¹⁶ Cabinet ministers may ignore IA’s advice, but they do so at their peril.

The United Kingdom has set up similar institutions that focus both on broad infrastructure issues – what sectors should be investment priorities, for example – and project-specific issues, such as assessing and rating the quality of the evidence produced to support projects being considered for political approval.¹⁷

Canada has no such institution or process. The Canada Infrastructure Bank – the closest equivalent – was established in 2017 to provide advisory services to all orders

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of government on how best to perform cost-benefit analyses, among other things. But it was established primarily to fund projects deemed “bankable” by pension funds and other investors.¹⁸

Nor are Canadian public servants prone to speaking up when their political masters pursue policy paths that may be politically expedient but not in the public interest. Researchers interviewed the most senior ranks of the public service in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada for a book on bureaucratic processes; the research found that deputy ministers in Ottawa were the least likely to speak up. The study did not look at provincial deputy ministers, but there is little reason to think the result would be different.¹⁹

In GTA transit planning, the evidence behind project selection is sometimes public, sometimes not. Sometimes, there is barely any evidence produced, although that has been less the case in recent years.

In other words, evidence and politics are better coordinated elsewhere.

How *should* Greater Toronto transit be planned, then?

The common perception in the GTA, as we noted earlier, is that transit planning is a story of much talk, no action. But this isn’t actually the case. There’s plenty of talk, certainly, but there’s also action. A visitor would be struck by the amount of transit construction currently under way or projects recently completed.

The long-awaited University/Spadina subway extension, connecting downtown to York University and the City of Vaughan, is open. A rail connection to Toronto Pearson Airport is open. Union Station is being rebuilt in stages, with parts of it finished and promising a brighter future in terms of both capacity and historical charm for Toronto’s core transportation hub. The St. Clair Avenue streetcar right-of-way, much criticized when it was under construction, is providing an efficient surface transit service and catalyzing mid-rise developments along the route. The pilot project to close downtown King Street to most vehicle travel has been made permanent, supported by a careful evaluation process managed by the City of Toronto. Construction is well under way on the Eglinton Crosstown, one of the largest transit expansion projects in North America. The often-maligned TTC even won the North American Transit System of the

Year in 2017, although the criteria remain somewhat unclear. In the suburbs, new bus rapid transit systems have been built in York Region, Mississauga, Brampton, and the Region of Durham. GO rail service levels are being increased and expanded to enhance regional connectivity.

None of these projects has been without challenges, whether during planning, construction, or operations. Progress has also been slow in implementing improvements in pedestrian and cycling infrastructure as part of a citywide “Vision Zero” initiative to eliminate traffic-related fatalities. But this is not the picture of a city that has stood still or is an abject failure on the transit file. Progress *is* being made.

Of course, there is more work to do. For Torontonians jammed into a transit system seemingly bursting at the seams, the next round of transit expansion cannot come too soon. And the political maelstrom of transit-related

debates complicates the business of making evidence-based decisions in the best long-term interest of the city. We have just muddled along to this point. As the GTA grows and becomes more deeply integrated as an economic super-region, finding ways to more efficiently govern and invest in the transportation system is imperative.

Transit systems everywhere are faced with the two thorny issues: governance (who decides) and funding (who pays). In the GTA, there is often little correlation between the two roles. Municipalities control most infrastructure and land-use planning decisions, but have much less spending power. The Canadian constitution assigns ultimate decision-making authority for local public works to provincial governments; municipalities operate according to the terms set by their provincial masters, terms that can be altered at will. This situation isn’t going to change, especially where transit is concerned, as there is general recognition that the overall importance of the service for the economy and citizens of an emerging global city-region warrants its being treated as a priority for all levels of government. But greater coherence can be brought to the system to improve decision-making and operations. Here are five proposals to that end.

1. Improve service coordination (who operates transit matters less than who coordinates it)

There have been calls in recent years for a “big bang” amalgamation of all the transit services in Greater Toronto, such as the Toronto Region Board of Trade’s Superlinx proposal.²⁰ But TRBOT itself recognizes, as do others, that

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better coordination might be sufficient to improve daily service significantly, without enduring the complexity and controversy of major restructuring.

Toronto needs a body that coordinates service, scheduling, and fares – not only among different modes of transportation (subway, bus, streetcar, bike, car share, etc.), but also among service providers (GO, TTC, York Region Transit, MiWay, etc.). Metrolinx carries out some but not all of these tasks at present. But Metrolinx has greater powers under its enabling legislation in this area than it currently uses. With provincial approval, Metrolinx could draw on the models of Vancouver’s TransLink and of Transport for London, in which a region-wide organization plans and coordinates transit services and fares on a regional scale. In Vancouver and London, bus, subway, streetcar, and ferry operations are carried out either by public subsidiary companies of the regional organization (Coast Mountain Bus Company, Skytrain, SeaBus, London Underground, etc.), or by private firms through concession contracts (Canada Line, London bus service, etc.).

This change would entail a larger reorganization of transit governance in the GTA than the provincial government currently envisions through its subway upload proposal. But a regional approach makes sense, not just for subways, but for all transit and transportation services in the GTA.

In proposing these changes, we note that subsidies for transit service vary significantly by operator across the region, due to differences in population density, land use, service levels, operator wages, and other factors. Finding ways to balance funding needs and service levels in different parts of a large urban region will be challenging. A governance board structure would be required that preserves democratic accountability for the participating municipalities, while avoiding tensions that arise among different parts of the region seeking to claim scarce resources – a recent challenge at the TransLink Mayors’ Council.

Metrolinx’s board of directors has no political representation; it may be advisable to create a similarly structured mayors’ council to give the organization added legitimacy as Metrolinx’s role across the GTA grows. As with TransLink in Vancouver, a mayors’ council would be responsible for political oversight of the strategic transportation plans and capital projects, while an expert

board of directors would oversee the operational management of the organization.²¹

2. Put politics in the appropriate place

Politics is an essential and legitimate part of the transit decision-making process. But politics cannot be the dominant factor. A common analogy is that elected representatives should steer the boat while civil servants do the rowing; that is, politicians set policy directions while the bureaucracy delivers public services. Or as Lovallo and Kahneman write, “The ideal is to draw a clear distinction between those

functions and positions that involve or support decision making and those that promote or guide action.”²²

But what does it mean to steer? And, for that matter, what does it mean to row? Doesn’t one do both at the same time in a canoe?

A key challenge in Ontario – and the GTA in particular – is that responsibility for transit planning and funding is so diffused among municipalities, provincial departments, and the federal government that, at the political level, there are often mixed messages amid competing interests. Moreover, much of the intergovernmental discussions about investment priorities are carried out behind the scenes, undermining the transparency of decision-making.

A new public forum is required that brings together political leaders from all levels to debate and identify the guiding principles and priorities for transit in the Greater Toronto region – and to do so in a more transparent manner than is now the case.

Furthermore, the civil service – from Metrolinx to Infrastructure Ontario to ministries and departments at Queen’s Park and in city halls across the region – needs greater assurance through formal mandates from political masters that evidence is *de rigueur* and that technical studies of project alternatives and cost-benefit impacts are always carried out and always made public.

Metrolinx, in particular, should provide evidence-based business cases for all proposed projects with a capital value of more than \$50 million, free from political intervention. As an added step to ensure the independence of the evidence-based business cases, Metrolinx should be required to report any direct interventions from politicians in the production and content of the business cases. Greater emphasis on the rigour and independence of the business cases might ensure that such studies receive more public attention.

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The credibility of Metrolinx as an arm's-length agency free from political interference has been weakened by provincial Bill 57, passed in 2018, which gives the provincial minister of transportation greater powers to amend and alter transit plans produced by the agency.²³ At the very least, there should be a public record of the amendments to transit plans that have been designated by the transportation minister; politically initiated changes should not be made in secret.

An expert review board composed of individuals with international expertise in transit project evaluation should also be established to assess the business cases and accompanying technical studies by Metrolinx and provide a public assessment of the quality of the work and the reasonableness of the conclusion. This sounds like additional bureaucracy, but such reviews are common in countries such as Norway and the United Kingdom to improve the accuracy of project planning.²⁴ Another of the insights from Lovallo and Kahneman's research is that external scrutiny and comparisons of a project against a similar reference class of projects is the most likely way to produce accurate project planning.²⁵

Following these steps, the process would return to the political arena for a decision. Politicians may certainly go against the technical evidence, which is their prerogative as elected officials representing their constituents, but they should be expected to state their rationale for overriding the weight of evidence. Ultimately, of course, it is the electorate that will be the judge.

3. Integrate transportation and land-use planning

To get rapid transit right, it's as important to add appropriate density around stations as it is to put the lines in the appropriate places. Mixed-use, transit-oriented development is critical to the planning and construction of complete communities. It increases the number of people with easy access to high-quality transit and thus drives ridership growth and revenues. Land-use intensification can also generate funds through land value capture mechanisms to pay some of the costs of building transit, although – despite the publicly expressed wishes of some politicians – they generally pay only a small fraction of the total cost.

It is striking that there are still stretches along Toronto subway lines and the GO rail network where little land-use intensification or redevelopment has occurred. This is changing, to be sure, as the redevelopment of surface parking lots, low-rise buildings, and shopping malls

picks up momentum near rapid transit stations. Recent changes to the provincial *Planning Act* endorse the need for significant density adjacent to transit stations and propose means to expedite such development. These powers may be advantageous in cases in which parochial politics, “land banking” by developers, and entrenched local opposition has stalled transit-oriented land-use planning.

Successful transit-oriented development is about more than just increasing overall density, however. Municipal planning departments play a significant role in the detailed design of individual buildings and communities, which is key to ensuring that new developments are transit-oriented and livable rather than merely transit-adjacent. Variance in terms of the height and style of buildings helps. It may be appropriate to construct towers of 30 storeys or more in some locations, but strategies are necessary to make it financially viable and quicker to build mid-rise buildings elsewhere.

At the ground level, streetscapes should support transit-oriented communities. Many existing transit stations and

even newly proposed ones are in auto-oriented locations that are threatening to pedestrians and cyclists. Plans are in place across the GTA to implement “road diets” – reduced lanes, lower speeds, more traffic lights, more cycling lanes and sidewalks – but they

invariably cause political indigestion. It should be better understood by local politicians and their supporters alike that, if they want to be successful in getting new transit funding, they need to be supportive of the kind of intelligent intensification that will help ensure that those transit lines will succeed.

Finally, thriving transit-oriented communities require a mix of housing at different income levels, work and retail spaces, parks, and civic facilities such as schools, libraries, recreation centres, and social services. Mixed-income and mixed-use communities can help ensure that the benefits of transit are widely distributed. Broad provincial policy is in place for building complete communities near transit stations. Local planners are best positioned to do the detailed work of knitting transit-oriented developments into the fabric of livable cities.

4. Improve public engagement and transparency

In western democracies, citizens expect to be consulted, and not just on election day. Likewise, they expect to be kept informed. Secrecy breeds suspicion.

At the very least, there should be a public record of the amendments to transit plans that have been designated by the transportation minister; politically initiated changes should not be made in secret.

Public engagement and transparency is fundamental to effective transit planning; few other government processes draw so many citizens to meetings. Yet finding the right balance on how best to manage such engagement, to maximize information-gathering and sharing while minimizing delay, can be a challenge.

The current provincial government has expressed a desire to expedite transit planning and get projects built, responding to complaints that it now takes far too long to get anything constructed. Queen's Park's "solution" has been to centralize the planning of priority transit megaprojects, especially within Metrolinx, so that little information flows to the public or other levels of government. But without engagement, transit projects risk losing social and democratic legitimacy; proper community participation can even provide helpful insight into local conditions that can assist the work of the experts.

In the case of the Ontario Line, Metrolinx has planned it almost entirely in secret. There have been few opportunities to provide meaningful feedback, so it is virtually impossible to assess the merits of the plan. The provincial government's approach of backroom planning mixed with occasional leaked documentation and rare press conferences is unaccountable and potentially self-defeating.

Conversely, of course, sprawling public consultation and endless political debate isn't the way forward either. A report by Les Kelman and Richard Soberman on the construction of dedicated streetcar lanes on St. Clair Avenue found that open-ended consultations caused delay and increased costs. A vocal group of community opponents used the consultations strategically to slow approvals. Ample opportunities for legal review dragged out the process even further.²⁶

At some point, consultation and debate need to end and a decision must be made and implemented. A few key principles should prevail to get the balance right. To begin with, broad political and civic engagement should focus at the strategic level, to identify which major infrastructure projects are regional priorities and the order in which projects should be constructed. Municipal and regional transportation plans in Greater Toronto often include maps showing many future projects, as if all are of equal importance and can be constructed simultaneously. Such maps create false hopes and unrealistic expectations.

As part of future regional transit planning, the newly strengthened Metrolinx should lead the difficult but necessary

public exercise to prioritize the allocation of scarce resources towards the construction of an enhanced transit network, with an assurance that the process of identifying priority projects will be updated at regular intervals. A regional list of priority projects, identified with the help of broad civic engagement, will make it easier and more effective to allocate funds to projects as money becomes available. It also will build a level of civic legitimacy that increases the odds that decisions will stick, even as governments and elected officials change.

Next, detailed public consultation should proceed only on projects that are a regional priority and have a reasonable prospect of funding. As things stand, significant funds are spent discussing projects that have little chance of being built. For priority projects, clear timelines and processes should be set out. And to enable meaningful community engagement, key planning documents should be made public in advance, such as supporting business cases and technical studies. These should be accompanied by summary documents in non-technical language and a letter from the expert review board

certifying the quality of the evidence, to ensure that non-experts who want to participate in the process are not put at an unfair disadvantage. Fair-minded, well-informed scrutiny and debate are important correctives to the optimism bias that tends to creep into technical reports

produced by project sponsors and other advocates.

Finally, better mechanisms are needed to facilitate collaboration among project planners and civic officials from different orders of government in a city-region with overlapping jurisdictions for transit. In Greater Toronto, interagency coordination has often been hampered by institutional rivalry, power imbalances, differing cultures, and simple mistrust. True interagency collaboration will require the creation of structures to build trust and collaboration; the additional powers vested in Metrolinx are key to this goal. Leadership from top transit managers across the GTA to encourage collaboration will also be key to breaking down organizational silos. At Queen's Park, the leaders of Metrolinx and Infrastructure Ontario work closely together and have even given speeches together to underline the point. But an "all-for-one" culture across the region, among the dozens of organizations involved in transit, is fundamental.

5. Provide stable, predictable long-term funding

The federal and Ontario governments both have long-term funding strategies for transit infrastructure. In 2018, they

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signed a bilateral agreement which specifies that Ontario will receive \$7.6 billion over a decade for transit from the national Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program. Nevertheless, their joint commitment to GTA transit suffers from a lack of transparency, with protracted negotiations on which projects to support and to what extent. This was evident when the Ontario government announced funding for its \$28.5-billion transit plan without sign-off from Ottawa (meaning the announcement was more a negotiating tactic than a significant step forward). With high-level funding commitments in hand, Ottawa and Queen's Park should agree on a joint long-term plan for GTA transit projects – the biggest infrastructure priority for the biggest urban region in the country.

While much of the transit discussion in the GTA tends to focus on funding for new, high-profile megaprojects, long-term, stable funding needs to be allocated for the operations and maintenance of the existing transit system. Operating and maintaining aging transit infrastructure is expensive. The TTC alone estimates that it needs \$33.5 billion in investment over the next 15 years to keep the system in a state of good repair, of which roughly two-thirds is at present unfunded. The costs required to keep GO, Mississauga, York Region, Brampton, and other municipal transit systems in the region functioning represent a similar concern.

Ontario municipalities had been relying on a doubling of funds from gas taxes to pay for a portion of their transit operating costs, but the gas tax increase was cancelled by the Conservative provincial government in April 2019. In response, the City of Toronto should consider reintroducing plans to charge road tolls on the Don Valley Parkway and Gardiner Expressway, with the proceeds going towards transit upkeep. Toronto City Council approved tolling in 2016 but it was overruled by the Liberal provincial government of the day, which promised the additional gas tax funds. Now that the Conservatives have cancelled the provincial part of the bargain, the City should press Queen's Park for tolling approvals once again. Other municipalities should explore tolling locally controlled highways in places where a viable transit alternative exists, and directly dedicate revenues to transportation infrastructure.

Conclusion

There is consensus across the GTA about rapid transit's fundamental importance to prosperity and livability and the

need to plan and produce it more intelligently, more quickly, more coherently, with greater foresight. One of the fastest-growing regions in North America, and one emerging onto the global stage, requires no less.

But a common understanding that we have a common challenge is only the first step. The GTA is a world champion in drafting transit plans. The region knows the features that make up a sustainable transportation system. The problem lies in a region-wide implementation deficiency caused by governance and funding failures.

Simply put, the GTA still plans and operates transit as it did a generation (or two) ago. Construction *has* accelerated over the past decade, with new services opened and the extended Eglinton LRT well on the way to completion. But the stop-gap, ad hoc, beggar-thy-neighbour approach to building – or not building – transit remains.

Planning reforms have been inadequate, such as Metrolinx's incomplete authority for regional transit.

Politics still commonly trumps evidence, as in the Scarborough subway extension – the most obvious example, but hardly the only one. Local interests still impede a collective, regional approach. Funding has risen significantly, but is still insufficient to

meet needs. While Ontario is a leader in public-private partnerships in construction and operations, it is only now focusing on coordinating transit with appropriately intensified development. It remains a laggard in other ways, such as the use of land value capture financing. And, above all, no decision ever seems to be final, even, or perhaps especially, the best-considered ones.

The GTA today has about 75 rapid transit stations with about 75 kilometres of track. The Madrid region, which has roughly the same population as the GTA, has four times as much of each. But the two cities weren't so different only a few decades ago.

The Ontario government, by proposing the "upload" of the TTC subway system, has opened the door to a wider discussion about transit – the way plans are made, projects prioritized, processes optimized, funding raised and allocated, and leadership chosen to oversee it all. This broadening of the discussion was likely inadvertent. The whole point of the exercise seems to have been to get shovels in the ground faster, not to start a conversation. But, to put a twist on an earlier analogy, there's little benefit in rowing faster if steering is inadequate or the destination unclear.

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Residents of the GTA deserve better rapid transit and thus have a stake in the outcome of a process launched by Queen's Park that should be far broader in its scope. It should not be a process focused solely and narrowly on the upload. The Province has the authority to make changes by diktat, but it should act only after dialogue.

The reforms suggested in this paper would not be a panacea for what ails GTA rapid transit. But they would help set the region on a path towards making up for lost time.

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