

Missing links in Metrolinx?

PERHAPS THE ONE THING everyone agrees on is that there is a pressing and ever-increasing need to deal with traffic congestion in the Greater Toronto Area and particularly in the City of Toronto.

But there surely isn't any consensus when it comes to solutions for the problem, apart from a general agreement that the area needs better public transit.

Last week saw the release of a new proposal that, if adopted, would see Scarborough get an extension to the Bloor-Danforth subway line, albeit a shorter one with two fewer stops than had been proposed earlier. The former borough would also get a light rail transit (LRT) line that would be a long extension to the Eglinton LRT line, which would also be extended through Etobicoke to Pearson International Airport.

A common feature of the changes would be better coordination with Toronto Mayor John Tory's brainchild, the SmartTrack ?surface subway? system, which would operate on existing GO Transit rail routes, offering commuters an all-day alternative to TTC buses and GO trains.

The routes chosen appear to be meeting with general approval, as does the apparent intention to convert all the GO trackage to electric operation, something that offers much faster acceleration and far less pollution than the current diesel-propelled GO trains. However, as we see it, the current plan doesn't go nearly far enough afield, particularly to the northwest.

Based on the maps shown at the time of the announcement, the SmartTrack trains would go only to Weston, instead of at least as far as Brampton. Nor did the maps show any service (either SmartTrack or GO trains) north into Caledon on the CP Rail line that shares a right-of-way with CN/GO at Weston.

Surely any plan designed to reduce congestion in Toronto should include frequent rail passenger service to Brampton and the Bolton area.

As matters stand, the only work currently under way to deal with congestion in north and northwest GTA is the widening of Highways 410 and 427, projects that will relieve congestion on those highways but greatly worsen it on the approaches to Toronto. As matters stand, we know there is a vague commitment by Metrolinx to offer GO rail service to Bolton, but no time frame or explanation as to why it would not ultimately go as far north as Alliston.

One thing that should be obvious is that no SmartTrack service is realistically possible on the existing single-track CP rail line between Woodbridge and Bolton, and it will take several years to add a second track, with the project likely requiring replacement of the existing bridge over Highway 7 as well as new underpasses for the major east-west roadways between Woodbridge and Bolton.

Equally obvious is the need for a fourth GO station and parking area in Brampton to relieve congestion at the existing stations (Downtown, Bramalea and Mount Pleasant in the west end). Although land beside the tracks is still undeveloped in Snelgrove, that won't always be the case, and it would make sense to have at least two GO trains operate to and from North Brampton.

Also missing from last week's and previous announcements was any indication of the type of trains suitable for the operation as currently conceived ? presumably a train every five or 10 minutes in peak periods and at least four times an hour between the rush hours and during the evenings and weekends.

It surely would make no sense for all the trains to be the current GO double-deckers, and if the idea is to have something similar to the Union-Pearson (UP) service, the orders should be going in this year and involve the use of natural gas to power electric motors ? an option that would permit quick and easy conversion to electricity as the lines are electrified.

As we see it, two perfect places to test the SmartTrack concept would be between Peterborough and Toronto and between Orangeville and Brampton or Streetsville, initially using refurbished diesel-powered Budd cars that can be purchased for about \$200,000 each. They could show just how attractive rail can be as an alternative to gridlock.