

Transit: our missing infrastructure

REGULAR READERS of the four Toronto dailies might be forgiven for discerning that the only live public transit issues are the slow or non-delivery of streetcars and light rail vehicles and the need for more money from Queen's Park for projects like the downtown Toronto 'relief' subway line.

Outside the city of 2.5 million, Ontario's other 11 million residents might be forgiven for suggesting that the Province is already spending far too much on improvements for Toronto's public transit system, particularly if they happen to live in an area that has lost its public transit.

And that's certainly what has happened in Dufferin, Grey and Simcoe counties.

Long before Dufferin came into being in 1881, there was a public transit service between Orangeville and Brampton, with two stage companies competing for business in 1867 and plans afoot that year for a narrow gauge railway to be named the Toronto, Grey & Bruce. (It finally reached Orangeville in 1871 and Owen Sound two years later.)

At its peak in the 1920s, rail passenger service out of Orangeville included Canadian Pacific lines to Walkerton, Teeswater and Elora, with two routes to Toronto, the original TG&B line via Bolton and the former Credit Valley line via Brampton and Streetsville.

Even with the paving of Ontario's trunk highways, rail passenger service continued into the 1970s, with steam locomotives being replaced by speedy diesel-powered Dayliner service in the 1950s which cut the travelling time between Toronto and Owen Sound to three from 4.5 hours.

Of course, that wasn't the only public transit available in that era. Gray Coach Lines, a subsidiary of the Toronto Transit Commission, ran several buses daily in competition with the passenger trains.

Sadly, the TTC sold off the intercity bus service to Greyhound, which has since abandoned virtually all the local routes once operated by Gray Coach, including the service along Highway 10.

So here we are in 2017, with no railway tracks left beyond Orangeville's western limits, all that's left is bus service, via GO Transit to Brampton and Can-ar to Toronto via Pearson Airport.

And although GO Transit now operates about five trips each way Monday through Friday, there's no GO service on weekends, with the Can-ar service between Port Elgin and Toronto literally the only intercity bus service on any weekend, with morning trips into Toronto Monday through Saturday and evening trips on Sunday.

One might think that with all the hundreds of millions of provincial tax dollars being devoted to improving public transit in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA), a relatively trifling amount could be spent extending GO Transit service to places like Owen Sound and Collingwood and providing at least some service on weekends. (Ironically, GO buses do run on weekends in cities like Brampton and Mississauga which have their own transit services in competition with them.)

It's also surely time for Metrolinx, as owner of GO Transit, to look at providing at least some service on all the railway lines radiating from Toronto.

Currently, some GO trains go well beyond the GTHA, with Kitchener and Barrie residents able to board double-decker trains for rides to Toronto's Union Station.

While it's fairly obvious that passenger volumes wouldn't warrant the double-decker trains going to Orangeville, Alliston or Peterborough on past or present CPR lines to the three centres, surely there would be enough to justify Dayliner-type service, either as new GO Transit services or through joint ventures with the federal government's VIA Rail service. Perhaps what we need is a little prodding by county councils on behalf of their ratepayers.