

# A planning headache, 50 years in the making

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The time has come when we must finally pay the price of the suburbs.

Ontario and the Greater Toronto Area, indeed all of North America, will have to spend the next 50 years dealing with the problems created during the last 50 years.

The process will be excruciatingly difficult, but failure is not an option. Every day it becomes clearer and clearer that the suburban model so beloved by Americans and Canadians doesn't work. In fact, the need for change has reached a critical moment, a point of no return.

Still, there's enormous pressure to keep our collective head buried in the sand and continue pretending that everything's okay. So many have so much invested in suburbia and all it entails, there are good reasons to wonder whether we can rise to the challenge.

But there's no shortage of plans; from Mississauga to Markham, suburban cities are trying to change their way, smarten up and grow intelligently.

According to Harry Kitchen, respected Trent University economist and author of a recent study for the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, transportation is key to solving the problem of suburbia. He argues that road tolls should be introduced on major highways. He also says that Metrolinx, the agency created to oversee regional transit, should have the power to levy a fuel tax.

But as Kitchen also observes, "There are no incentives to make efficient decisions."

Given the increases in the price of gasoline, that's starting to change. There's no better incentive than cost to force behaviour modification. In fact, there are signs that resistance to mass transit is slowly but surely disappearing.

"Politically, it's not always easy," admits Mary-Frances Turner, vice-president of York Region Rapid Transit Corp. "But you can't have densification without an infrastructure strategy, and transportation is

fundamental. The change is happening."

Turner is referring to Viva, the regional bus transit system introduced in September 2005. Since then, she points out, Viva has had 10 million riders.

"We have huge positive support for Viva," Turner says. "It's always about providing people with choices. If we can get people out of their car once a week, that's a start. If we don't buy our teenager a car when they graduate from high school, that helps, too."

Turner says Viva's biggest hurdle is the lack of dedicated lanes. It was never intended to travel up Yonge St. in mixed traffic, but those much-needed lanes have yet to be set aside for buses.

In its own way, this sums up the difficulty of urbanizing the suburbs. Getting politicians to commit to transit (and densification, for that matter) is every bit as tough as getting people out of their cars, even occasionally. Yes, we pay lip service to the idea of mass transit, but when it comes right down to it, we'd rather have it both ways — carry on as always, but with buses.

In Mississauga, where planners are remaking the future, at least one residents' group is fighting public transit; bad for property values, they say. Though Mayor Hazel McCallion makes no effort to hide her frustration, it speaks of a mindset that could be harder to alter than the built environment itself.

"I think most people see that we have to have higher-order transit to become the city we want to be," says Mississauga director of policy and planning, John Calvert. "And we're well underway with the BRT (bus rapid transit)."

That BRT will extend from the airport to Toronto and, Calvert adds, it will lead to new minimum height and density requirements in designated "city centres." He notes that parking lots around GO stations have been zoned to allow for high-density development.

But, McCallion says bluntly, the only thing that will get people out of their cars is "congestion."

There's no shortage of that. And it's getting worse. So far, however, Canadians would rather fight than switch.

But as newly appointed director of the University of Toronto Cities Centre, Eric Miller, points out, "The 21st century is going to be urban. We need to train ourselves to build cities again. But Canadians don't think of themselves as an urban nation. We have to start thinking about cities as a whole; the people in Mississauga, for example, don't see themselves as part of a larger city region."

Regardless, the end of cheap oil means the end of traditional suburbs. Urbanization, densification — whatever you want to call it — is the only alternative.

"Suburbs are not going to be cheap places to live any more," says Miller. "Instead of preparing for that, we have wasted the last 20 years. We should've been opening a subway station or two every year. We need to start now. We've been very good at talking, but now's the time to develop a sense of urgency."

Even in the communities that will be hardest hit by record gas prices, however, there seems to be little urgency. Mississauga has been touting its new transit plans for more than three years but has nothing to show for it. Funding has been arranged and routes designed, but BRT still isn't expected until 2012.

At that rate, it's faster to walk.

The problems of the city are many and varied, but they can be dealt with. The suburbs', on the other hand, will not be so easily solved.

"Success has its drawbacks," McCallion told the *Star* in 2006. "Nothing has been done about gridlock in the GTA for 30 years."

Now we're up to 32.