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Light rail transit called best value for Toronto

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Light rail transit expansion in Toronto versus subway growth could be cheaper for municipal coffers, states a sustainable energy think tank.

The Pembina Institute recently told Toronto city council that the estimated cost per kilometre of \$300 million for subway transit, versus the \$85 million per kilometer for above-ground light-rail-transit (LRT), does not provide the best value-for-money proposition.

“The current LRT plan would deliver more than twice as much service for every dollar invested, compared to the proposed subway plan,” a report by the institute noted.

The institute compared two transit options in its study for council: the Metrolinx-funded four LRT projects that have committed provincial funding and the proposed subway expansion plan of newly elected mayor Rob Ford. Either option will provide steady business for construction since they can include work like tunnelling, rail yards and roadbuilding.

The four light rail projects are a Sheppard LRT east from Don Mills subway station to city limits at Meadowvale Road in Scarborough, upgraded LRT extended from McCowan station to Malvern town centre, an Eglinton crosstown LRT stretching from Kennedy subway station to Pearson Airport and a Finch West LRT line running between Finch subway station and Humber College. These projects would result in 52 kilometres of LRT rapid transit lines at an approximate cost of \$8.73 billion.

“LRT requires a minimum population density of 70 people per hectare to be cost effective and is effective for densities of up to 140 people per hectare,” the report noted. “The Sheppard subway extension has a population density of around 68 people and jobs per hectare, increasing to 102 by 2031.”

Subways require a minimum population density of 115 people per hectare to be cost effective, according to Pembina.

The proposed Ford subway plan involves redirecting the committed provincial funding toward extending sections of Toronto’s subway system, including converting the

Scarborough Rapid Transit (SRT) line to subway, Sheppard subway extension from Don Mills subway station to Scarborough city centre and a Sheppard west extension between Sheppard subway station and Downsview subway station. These projects would result in 18 kilometres of new subway lines at a cost of about \$6.2 billion. Potential additional costs include losses in cancellation of \$1.3 billion in signed contracts on the current transit plan, of which \$130 million has already been spent.

The Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO) has been an active voice in advocating for transit expansion in the city and it considers Pembina's analysis as important to the ongoing dialogue for Toronto's transit future.

"You could probably extend this analysis and say there are some compromise solutions," said Andy Manahan, executive director at RCCAO.

"The one thing lacking is that it basically looked at the Transit City plan or the Mayor Ford plan but at least it is a starting point. With an underground LRT, you could save some costs and hit higher ridership numbers. There could be a middle ground analysis that can still be done."

Pembina reported that the current LRT plan would place 290,000 Torontonians within 500 metres of an LRT line versus the 61,000 people the subway plan would.