

Subways we already have are doomed by built-in flaws: James

Pinch point at Bloor-Yonge may be "TTC's original sin," to say nothing of crowded Union Station.



Marcus Oleniuk / Toronto Star Order this photo
Riders pack the platforms at Bloor-Yonge station at rush hour.

By: Royson James Toronto Politics Columnist, Published on Wed Mar 02 2016

Tuesday's shutdown of the spine of the transit system underscores a basic flaw that leaves Toronto commuters all too vulnerable. We are too dependent on the Yonge line and on the Yonge-Bloor interchange.

Put bluntly, the TTC screwed up this essential east-west-north-south distributor when it constructed the Bloor-Danforth subway some 50 years ago.

Planners wanted to focus the Bloor-Danforth line farther south into downtown; TTC opted for the idea of sparking land development farther north. Planners advocated for options that allow specific east-west trains to head downtown without forcing passengers off the train at Yonge. The special interchange was put in, but TTC abandoned it after a six-month trial.

Today, the need for it is obvious. Consultant and former planner David Crowley calls it the "TTC's original sin."

Ed Levy, one of the deans of transit planning, goes near berserk when he talks about it.

“It’s got to the point where the Bloor-Yonge station is dangerous. They desperately need to separate the two directions and can’t think of it with Hudson Bay (office tower) sitting on top of it.”

Then, with 80-storey towers planned for Bloor-Yonge — “It’s nuts,” Levy says. “It will have to be improved, absolutely. The coming density is equivalent to midtown Manhattan. Towers going up that will double the density in a few years. Every single block is going to be redeveloped. And it is the most heavily used junction of two-track subway lines in the world.

“It was never meant to be such a heavy transfer point.”

You don’t hear much talk about that.

There is another choke-point, already at the point of strangling, in successful and desirable downtown Toronto. It’s Union Station, under renovation and at near capacity as soon as the current fix-up is done.

Fixing those two most critical transit links is much more important than running new subways into the suburbs. They should be priority number one for the tall foreheads analyzing our transit future.

And these planners and number-crunchers should be emboldened to scream bloody murder when politicians and developers interfere to divert our attention from this essential reality.

Projections show that downtown jobs will continue to grow and attract thousands of new riders over the next 25 or 50 years. That’s good news. Jobs generate transit riders. Jobs concentrated in a defined area generate even more riders, and at the least cost.

Be very skeptical of those who quote you the numbers of condos or residential units or people in a particular corridor and use that as justification for a subway. Exhibit A is the Sheppard Subway. More than 20 condo towers are going up around the Bessarion station, between Bayview and Leslie. But don’t expect ridership numbers there to skyrocket past what are the absolute lowest ridership numbers on the entire subway system: 2,380 a day. (The next lowest is Summerhill, at 5,770 users, based on 2014 TTC statistics).

Sheppard Ave. residents are fanning out to jobs all over the GTA, and the car beats transit to those disparate locations, almost always.

They call subways “mass transit” for a reason. They are designed for corridors that generate four to eight times the number of riders we get along Sheppard.

You don’t have to be a planner or politician to wonder if the following makes sense:

City council and the TTC, and Metrolinx, have agreed that the Yonge subway will not be extended up to Richmond Hill until capacity concerns are addressed. The new stations would

attract lots of riders, including new ones, but they would just add to the crush south of Eglinton, and at Bloor-Yonge, and at Union Station (already near capacity.)

That's tough for Richmond Hill residents, but it passes the smell test. (Add capacity to the GO Richmond Hill line, make the fares attractive and that will buy us some time on the Yonge line.)

If that makes sense, why not a similar take on these two head-scratchers:

First, Mayor John Tory has railroaded his SmartTrack plan to the top of the priority list, even though all the SmartTrack passengers will be funneled through the Union Station pinch point.

Second, Tory promotes, in tandem, the extension of the Bloor-Danforth subway to Scarborough Town Centre — a project that will dump even more passengers into the challenged Bloor-Yonge interchange. Nearly half the Town Centre commuters are headed downtown.

You can anticipate that some councillor will point out the twisted thinking when city council debates the issues in June. Don't expect a reasonable explanation.