

James: Richmond Hill knows the better way to get a subway

Political moves, not merit, leads to subway extension of the Yonge line



Rene Johnston / Toronto Star File Photo

Extending the Yonge line to Richmond Hill faces many issues, including riders. There may be too many of them, writes Royson James. They are expected to swamp the Yonge line, already challenged at Finch and at Sheppard, already over-crowded at Eglinton, already beyond capacity south of Bloor. In other words, this will be a successful extension piled on top of a very successful line. Success piled on success may be too much to handle.

By: Royson James Toronto Politics Columnist, Published on Tue Mar 15 2016

Don't blame the ambitious politicians of York Region for their elevated advocacy aimed at landing a subway to Richmond Hill.

In launching a very public and political campaign to extend the Yonge subway north (as many as five stations and 7.4 km) the advocates are following a well-worn path that has proven successful.

The playbook of transit approval reads thusly: make a project as political as possible and you have a good chance of success. The political stars will align over a 20-year cycle. And strident

advocacy increases your chances of not being overlooked or eclipsed by some other big-mouth advocate.

As exhibits, see Sheppard Subway, the Spadina York Subway Extension, and now the extension of the Bloor-Danforth subway up to the Scarborough Town Centre. None of those projects got where they are today on merit.

A transit idea may not stand up to independent scrutiny, it may be total folly, or even injurious to the future of the transit network; that's irrelevant to its eventual success.

Political support is. And you build that by doing what the York politicians have started doing with their recent push to move the Richmond Hill extension closer to the top of the priority list.

It's an irresistible proposition – the Richmond Hill subway.

The demand is there – in greater numbers than other corridors that have landed the Holy Grail of transit. The Sheppard subway will never in your lifetime carry as many passengers; neither the Bloor-Danforth extension as proposed. The Spadina extension is headed into near green fields at Highway 7. So, Richmond Hill asks, reasonably, "What about us?"

The extension of the subway up the region's main street, an established corridor with definable increases in densities and demonstrable potential growth, is supported by official plans and strategic plans. The TTC says it's good – just not yet. Metrolinx, the agency ultimately in charge of such extensions, is onside. Nobody is saying – "No, don't be silly. Never" – the way one is forced to shout at Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti and those who oppose the light rail transit along Finch Ave. W. while cruelly misinforming area residents they will get a subway instead.

No, this is legit. The numbers show there are 2,500 bus trips in the corridor per day. By 2031, when the subway would arrive, the Richmond Hill Centre area would have 25,000 jobs, another 23,500 people, and 165,000 riders a day – with 20,000 in the peak hour.

The issue is not riders. The issue is, maybe, too many of them. They are expected to swamp the Yonge line, already challenged at Finch and at Sheppard, already over-crowded at Eglinton, already beyond capacity south of Bloor. In other words, this will be a successful extension piled on top of a very successful line. Success piled on success may be too much to handle.

So, the TTC has said that before the Richmond Hill extension proceeds, other features (improved signaling and automatic train control which increase capacity) and projects (Richmond Hill GO line and construction of the Downtown Relief Line that divert demand) must be in place. That is a reasonable approach.

Richmond Hill politicians can take that quietly or they can do what politicians have been known to do – pull strings to get their pet projects at or near the top of the list.

When Premier Mike Harris set about killing subway lines in the 1990s, he chopped the Eglinton subway headed to NDP Leader Bob Rae's ward; he ignored the Spadina extension heading into Liberal Greg Sorbara's territory; and he backed the Sheppard subway that Mel Lastman demanded.

Sorbara, when he became a big wig in the Liberal party, was able to help deliver the Spadina extension to Vaughan – and trumpet it in his memoirs as justifiable political patronage.

Rob Ford changed the channel on the LRT to Scarborough and the political landscape shifted so dramatically beneath that project that four years later John Tory could not change it back from subway to LRT without paying a political price.

Tory is tied to his vigorous branding of SmartTrack. So, when SmartTrack is exposed as being too close to the Scarborough Subway, the logical conclusion is to kill one or the other. He can't sacrifice his own political baby without affecting his re-election prospects. And the provincial government won't allow him to slay the Scarborough Subway because that might lose them some seats in Scarborough.

So we get both lines – even as Eric Miller, the University of Toronto guy crunching the ridership numbers says out loud, this doesn't make sense.

And you wonder why Richmond Hill politicians are running up to the federal government Ottawa and now launching a public campaign to promote their subway?

The Richmond Hill subway, at least, is supposed to pay for itself.