



Good governance essential for regional transit

July 21, 2008

Christopher Hume

It's the how that matters most now, not the what.

Everyone agrees on the need for regional transit in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area. Indeed, we're 20, even 30 years behind where we should be.

The question is how to make it happen.

According to an expert panel assembled earlier this year, there's cause for concern. Despite pledges of more than \$11 billion from federal and provincial governments for public transit, we have yet to determine who or what would run a regional transit authority.

The obvious answer, of course, is Metrolinx, the agency established specifically to implement regional transit. But these observers were skeptical about whether it has the authority needed to do the job.

Virtually all the speakers at the session made the same point: Unless the governance issue is sorted out, regional transit's doomed to failure.

"We're never going to get it right if we don't have a good governance model," said eminent University of Toronto civil engineer and transportation guru, Richard Soberman.

"The weakest part of this whole effort," said former TTC general manager, David Gunn, "is the governance issue."

"I actually think governance is a more serious issue than financing," said former Trent University economics professor Harry Kitchen. "That's the critical thing."

At a time when the traditional governmental boundaries are being broken down by the harsh fiscal realities of the 21st century, lack of good governance has become a recurring theme.

Think of the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corp., set up in 2001 by the three levels of government. It never got the powers it needs — including the ability to borrow money and expropriate — and at this point, it's safe to say, never will.

This hasn't kept Waterfront Toronto, as the TWRC is now known, from doing its job, but it has made it harder and slower.

The fear is these agencies could become happy hunting grounds for politicians eager to enhance their public profile.

Think of federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty's out-of-the-blue scheme announced in the last federal budget to run a GO train from Toronto to Peterborough.

In so doing, it would have to make a stop in his own riding. No one took Flaherty's proposal seriously but it illustrates the sort of politically motivated nonsense that will happen until an independent regional transit authority is created.

According to these experts, it needs serious powers to meet its mandate. For instance, will Metrolinx have the power to levy road tolls? Should it? Some also suggest that its members should be elected.

The trouble, of course, is that we have politicized transit to the point where the last subway to be built runs under Sheppard

Ave. E. It loses money with every train. At the same time it was approved " in the days of former premier Mike Harris and ex-mayor Mel Lastman " the Eglinton subway was killed. Anyone who knows anything will tell you it should have been the other way around.

Then there's the problem with politicians' reluctance to let go of power, even when clearly necessary.

Many local leaders would view the revenue-generating capacity that Metrolinx needs as a direct threat.

Metrolinx must also have the muscle to fight off the NIMBY challenges that will come from every corner of the region. If it is to do more than waste vast amounts of time and money at Ontario Municipal Board hearings, it must be empowered.

Given the rivalrous relations between jurisdictions and institutions, it's no surprise the benefits of regional action elude us.

More and more it seems, politics, and certainly transit, are too important to be left to politicians.

Christopher Hume can be reached at chume@thestar.ca.