

By: Royson James Toronto Politics, Wed Jan 27 2016

## Let's ask some pointed questions about the transit rehab: James

**Why not trade a one-stop subway for a remade SRT? And will SmartTrack bolster the mess at Union Station?**



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Why build a pricey one-stop subway when a rehabilitated SRT would better serve the neighbourhood at a fraction of the cost, Royson James asks - among other inconvenient questions.

Mayor John Tory's executive committee meeting on Thursday promises to be a love-in. The mayor's popularity has never been higher. And SmartTrack, his Achilles' heel of a transit policy, has been politically rehabilitated.

A few well-placed questions could temper the celebratory mood. Wanna play the skunk at this party? Ask two questions:

Instead of a \$2.5-billion one-stop subway, why not just re-make the Scarborough RT, like the modern version in Vancouver? Same RT corridor. Huge savings, real alternate transit, serves the neighbourhoods and east-west corridor in the Town Centre that is now orphaned.

And certainly, this "optimized" plan renders the Downtown Relief Line redundant?

Chief planner Jennifer Keesmaat will wax on at length as to why the DRL (she calls it RL, Relief Line) is needed now, tomorrow and forever, no matter if SmartTrack diverts 17 per cent of riders off the Yonge line.

If Tory's hand-picked committee can take the time to be level-headed and restrained in the midst of all the back-slapping, they could stumble upon a query or two about the so-called subway peace treaty deal that is on the agenda seeking their rubber-stamp.

Y'know how that works: staff, with the mayor's backing, present a new plan missing key details. But don't worry, accept it in principle, subject to further studies. Everyone nods. And before long the new approach is the new standard, even though it's neither fully tested nor approved.

But ask one question and it leads to another, and before you know it, a new world opens or assumptions unravel.

Does the compromise proposal address the transportation needs of people in Scarborough or the political promises of the mayor? Will the new plan ease the movement of commuters across Scarborough or clear their journey downtown?

Do the plans gum up the GO Transit express service from the hinterlands? And if more stations and passengers on the GO Stouffville line result in diverting passengers from the subway, does it create another problem by funneling them into the massively crowded Union Station?

In briefing the media last week, Keesmaat, said her department took a "network-based approach" in analyzing the competing plans from the mayor, GO Transit and city council.

So, observe how many executive committee members focus on the transit network — not subway segments that deliver them votes, but few riders.

City staff — and those at Metrolinx, the provincial agency that runs GO — have a good idea what the answers are. So, ask them:

- Is Metrolinx able to, and are they in favour of, increasing service to five-minute intervals from Unionville to Union Station along the Stouffville line? The current plan is to double the frequency to every 15 minutes. Getting to every five minutes is a massive increase. Instead of two trains an hour, you'd have 12. Considering the need for high capacity, new trains, staff, operating costs, improved infrastructure and higher subsidies, how much does that cost Toronto?
- Ridership data must have informed staff's conclusions. What are the numbers? And how do they compare to earlier Scarborough subway forecasts that claimed 9,000 riders per peak hour in the peak direction using one set of assumptions, and 14,000 using another set. Credibility of the forecasting exercise is at stake.
- Keesmaat's reports envision that passengers would use the new five-minute service on GO lines only if fares are integrated and reduced to match TTC's. Does Metrolinx agree? Who pays for this? Will the fares be "like the TTC" but cost 50 cents to \$1 more; or would it be \$2 more per ride, bordering on unacceptable?
- Will the one-stop subway extension from Kennedy to the Scarborough Town Centre spark development there? There has not been office development there since the early 1990s and never near the growth predicted. Keesmaat claims the area can become a "vibrant urban focal point." What's the source of that cheery outlook?

Of every 100 Scarborough residents travelling on a given commute, only six are headed downtown. And half are getting there by transit. What is the plan to move the 60 per cent travelling around Scarborough?

Finally, if Keesmaat is bullish on the DRL and SmartTrack and the Scarborough subway, is she blind to the chaos that will be the Union Station pinch-point?

She'll tell them the DRL will avoid Union Station like the plague. Any day now, city staff will release their DRL plan that shows those trains running in a U from east to west, dipping down and across Queen Street, not into Union.

Could also ask about TIFs, the mayor's far-fetched plan to pay the city's portion of SmartTrack costs. But, never mind.