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A Low-Cost Test of the Missing GTA Transit Link

For the foreseeable future, governments will be hard pressed to provide the magnitude of investment in public transit – rail-based transit in particular – that is necessary to reduce traffic congestion in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area.

In addition to cost issues, a shortcoming of Toronto's rapid transit expansion plans is that they are focused on the City of Toronto only, with little regard for the congestion impacts of longer-distance and cross-border traffic to and from Peel, York and Durham. Traffic planners know that congestion is directly related to the number of vehicle-kilometres traveled. A 20-kilometre trip has twice the traffic impact of a 10-kilometre trip.

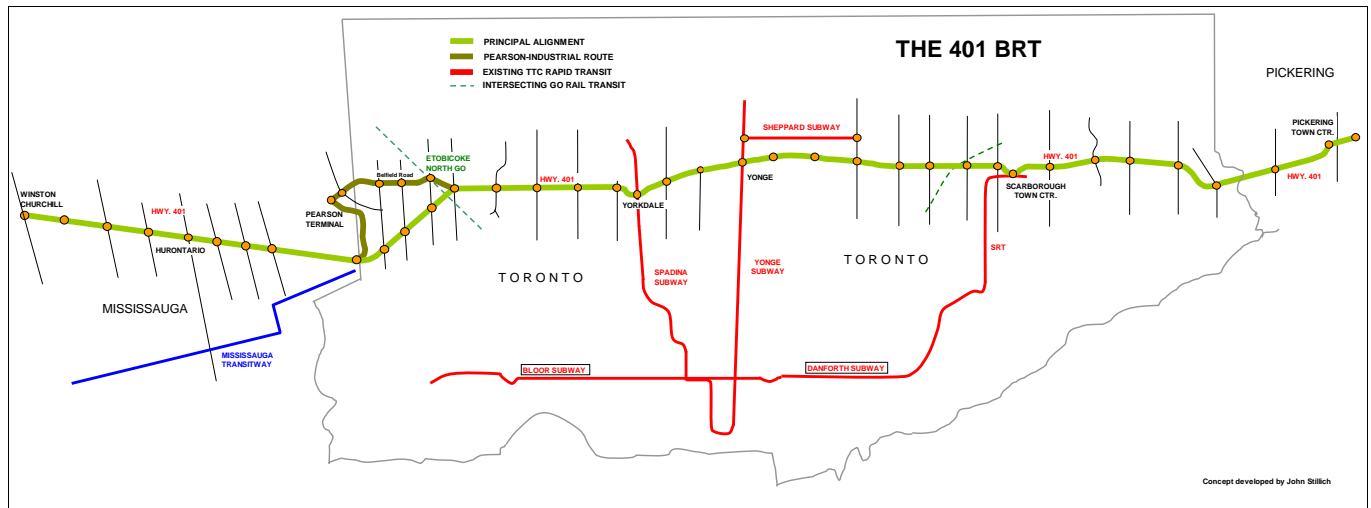
In the past, the Sustainable Urban Development Association (SUDA), a GTA-focused organization based in Mississauga, has suggested to Metrolinx that it consider a singular East-West rapid transit line from Pickering to Mississauga using, in large part, the Highway 401 and 409 corridors. The 401RT, as it is called, was proposed to cost \$8 billion for a mostly at-grade 50-kilometre distance, use subway technology, and increase transit ridership by 150,000,000 by 2031.



The concept reflected a recognition that the problem of congestion in the central portion of the GTA will only get worse until there is a way to get rapidly across the middle of the region by public transit. Save for a few express buses, there is no opportunity for a traveler to, for example, go quickly from Pickering to North York, or from Scarborough to the Pearson airport employment area, except by car. And for many people, taking a slow bus from Etobicoke or Scarborough to get to the Spadina or Yonge subways is not an option.

Beyond congestion, imports of cars and petroleum for transportation are an annual drain of roughly \$30 billion per year in Ontario, and as the price of oil will rise rapidly over time, the negative economic impacts to Ontario will worsen. And as the Toronto Star has reported, families are already giving up some of their discretionary spending in order to pay for the rising cost of gasoline.

The viability and potential benefits of closing this missing link on the GTA transit system – a cross-GTA rapid transit service through the middle of the region – should be tested, and it can be done with a variant of the original 401RT idea, by using buses on existing road infrastructure at the edges of Highway 401, some ramp modifications, and enclosed shelters at every transit stop.



Over a two- to three-year test period, the pilot would provide a high-frequency bus service from central Pickering through Toronto and across Mississauga, connecting to perhaps 40 intersecting north-south transit routes and to nearby urban hubs. A secondary diversion can directly serve Pearson International Airport and the employment area to its east. The test should include both arterial-to-arterial service and express services (for example, from Hurontario Street in Mississauga non-stop to Pearson Airport and then locally across the industrial area).

The implementation cost of this 74-kilometre service would be less than \$100 million – overall, much less than the price of a single kilometre of subway or two kilometres of LRT. The cost excludes possible ‘Kiss and Ride’ facilities; buses on arterial routes can also be added to improve overall functionality. Ridership and price structure would determine operating viability. Break even ridership could be roughly 5.4 million total riders per year (about 20,000 per day).

If the pilot test is a success, the service can become a permanent alternative to the cost and frustration of driving. Success also means that ridership on a 401 BRT would offset the traffic impacts of converting a single highway lane to transit, whether it be a bus-only lane or the rail-based concept of the 401RT.

One thing is clear – continuing the high dependence on private cars as population increase is unsustainable, and alternatives that are cost-effective are needed urgently.

Example of typical BRT / Arterial Road Intersect

