

The Star Opinion/Commentary

What it will take to make Metrolinx transit plan a reality

By **PETER MIASEK**
GIDEON FORMAN

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Metrolinx unveiled its draft regional transportation plan in September and will finalize its public consultation in late November. It's an ambitious plan, proposing an additional 38 frequent rapid transit projects by 2041, over and above the 32 projects already completed or in delivery.

It contains other laudatory items, such as removing the double fare requirement between Toronto and the 905, improving cycling

and walking facilities, making safety a priority and optimizing goods movement.

"There are big bumps in the road between (transit) plan and implementation," write Peter Miasek and Gideon Forman. "These have reduced the public's interest in plans and its confidence in achieving real transportation improvements." (VINCE TALOTTA / TORONTO STAR)

But public reaction — complimentary or critical — has been muted. We believe people in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area have transit-planning fatigue, mostly because they now know that a plan — good or bad — is no guarantee of anything.

There are big bumps in the road between plan and implementation. These have reduced the public's interest in plans and its confidence in achieving real transportation improvements. The latter face three major challenges.

1. Too much politics in transit planning. Cases like the Scarborough Subway Extension, where politicians at all levels overruled transit planners, still rankle many people. That one-stop subway extension, costing more than \$3 billion, is a monument to political interference and has greatly reduced the public's confidence that evidence-based planning is occurring.

Equally upsetting is the recent interference from Queen's Park and Toronto City Hall to force proposed new GO stations at Lawrence East and Kirby (Vaughan), despite Metrolinx analysis showing a negative business case.

The transit governance model needs to be reviewed to better balance local and regional interests. Vigorous business case analyses of all proposed major capital projects are needed.

2. Need for new revenue tools. Although much project construction is currently underway, in many cases projects have been discussed and planned, often with huge public engagement, excitement and expectations, only to languish for years.

The relief line subway has been discussed for decades. Numerous waterfront transit projects have been indicated as critical and a top priority, yet have never gone past the planning and environmental assessment stages. A waterfront transit reset project is now underway!

Extensions of the Eglinton LRT west to Pearson Airport and east beyond Kennedy Station have been on the books for 10 years, and are badly needed. And yet none of these projects has a shovel in the ground.

The biggest issue, presumably, is a chronic lack of money. Although all levels of government, particularly the province, have directed unprecedented amounts of money to rapid transit construction over the past 10 years, much more is needed.

MetroLinx estimates that \$45 billion is required over 25 years to construct the remaining frequent rapid transit projects in the draft Regional Transportation Plan. Billions of dollars more will be needed annually for operations, maintenance and rehabilitation of

the new network. Other billions are needed for the conventional transit network, including priority bus routes, to feed the rapid network.

Many expert reports have concluded that government needs new revenue tools to fill the gap. However, no major provincial or federal political party supports this. Toronto's courageous plan to toll the Gardiner and Don Valley Expressways was immediately shot down by all provincial parties.

The mayors and chairs of the suburban regions (the "905") have been calling for the province to give them similar taxing powers as Toronto (think land-transfer tax), again with no success. It has been said that new revenue tools are the third rail of politics and their absence is a huge barrier to moving from plan to implementation.

New tools such as road tolls, a commercial parking levy, increased gas tax or congestion charges need urgently to be considered.

3. Disconnected land-use decisions. The public intuitively understands that transit needs density and density needs transit. Anything else is a waste of taxpayer dollars and contributes to car-dependent urban sprawl, loss of farmland and higher greenhouse gas emissions.

Municipal official plans, if up to date, reflect this need by directing a large proportion of population growth to transit corridors and

hubs. But there are still too many cases of local community pushback, with sympathetic councillor agreement.

The recent amendment to the province's Growth Plan to focus intensification around "major transit station areas" is a good start to correct the problem. Metrolinx should only support projects that have transit-supportive densities in place or planned.

A good plan is a good start but is not enough. Fundamental implementation challenges — especially around new revenue tools — need to be addressed if we are to tackle traffic and air pollution, cut greenhouse gases, provide accessible mobility, improve public health and safety and reduce the economic cost of congestion.

***Peter Miasek** is past president of Transport Action Ontario. **Gideon Forman** is a transportation policy analyst at the David Suzuki Foundation*