

## **POLITICS AND TRANSPORTATION PLANNING COLLIDE**

Gord Hume...October, 2013

Municipal officials across Canada have watched in slack-jawed amazement at the political machinations and the roller-coaster events of funding a proposed new Toronto subway line to Scarborough.

Every week seems to bring a surprising new element. Most recently, the Toronto Transit Commission, after two close votes on the same issue, approved a city-sanctioned route. You would think that would be the end of the story. You would be wrong.

The provincial government has proposed its own route. The federal government has another one in mind. Various Toronto council members have their own favorites. Some of the proposed routes are above-ground, some below ground. Subway. LRT. Every plan is different. It is astonishing to independent observers.

Money is flying around--billions. \$1.4 billion from the province. Nearly a billion from the city. \$660 million from the feds. And yet, there is no final plan, no final route, no financing strategy and nobody seems very sure if this is the best use of public money on Toronto's transit woes--certainly not the TTC's smart GM who says the greatest priority is a second 'relief line' in the downtown core. The provincial government has now appointed another committee to look at the situation, even though provincial body Metrolinx, appointed years ago to do regional transportation planning in the Toronto-GTA-Hamilton corridors, brought out a thoughtful strategy just months ago.

Astute Globe and Mail columnist Marcus Gee recently wrote about the situation. "While other cities have been digging subways, subways, subways, Toronto has been talking, talking, talking. It is a tragedy indeed, and now it has descended into farce."

He is right. It is a mess. And that word describes much of the funding and transportation woes facing cities across this country. We are the only G8 nation not to have a national transportation plan. Funding for transit varies wildly from province to province, and from city to city.

Long-range planning for subway and LRT routes is often way behind development. Municipalities routinely under-fund their local needs. While Gas Tax money has provided a welcome new funding source for municipalities, it is becoming obvious that it just isn't enough to meet local demands for improved service.

It is also obvious that much of the decision-making on funding is purely political. Vote-buying has a long tradition in this country; it is apparent that poor decisions on funding and transportation planning are being compounded by political gamesmanship. It is sad.

At the same time, the federal and most provincial and territorial governments are falling behind on their own responsibilities for key elements of our national transportation infrastructure. Harbours. Border crossings. Bridges. Ferry service in various parts of the country.

Several chunks of the Trans-Canada highway are in lousy shape. It is often the main transportation system for communities that are built along this important route, and mayors of a number of cities that abut the Trans-Canada tell me that the highway is in bad shape and badly overdue for significant repairs and upgrades.

Our passenger train system continues to decline. A number of smaller centres that used to get at least some train service now get nothing, or it is greatly reduced. Mayors are angry over the loss of this important transportation link. Petitions for renewed passenger service get ignored.

People have struggled for years to understand why Canada has failed to invest in hi-speed rail at a time when AMTRAK in the US is having its best year ever, and competitive cities in Asian and European cities depend on the efficiency of high quality rail service.

The lack of a national transportation plan plunks right down onto the streets and subways of our towns and cities.

This is a critical part of our national infrastructure deficit.

As a nation we are falling behind.