

Marilyn Toft - Letter re Transit from the Sustainable Urban Development Association

From: "John Stillich" <mail@suda.ca>
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Date: 2/7/2012 1:07 PM
Subject: Letter re Transit from the Sustainable Urban Development Association
Attachments: Bus vs LRT Feb 2012.doc

Hello. Would you please distribute the attached letter to members of Toronto City Council as soon as possible. Thank you; I appreciate the assistance. Council members should note that this letter is also being sent to the Toronto Star.

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February 7, 2012

To: Toronto City Council Members

Re: A Last-Minute Look at an Alternative to Subways and LRTs

It's unfortunate that the transit expansion debate in Toronto has been narrowed to light rail transit (LRT) and subway options, both very expensive propositions at a time when economic and public sector financial pressures are at a peak. The dismissal of a superior level of bus-based services is premature.

The LRT or subway plans will take 15 to 20 years to fully implement, and that's not soon enough. The need for much more and better transit services is urgent *now*, and we all know why: The rising price of gasoline is an economic burden on the economy and households *now*. Traffic congestion and environmental damage from too many cars are costly and getting worse.

In general, LRTs have several serious disadvantages that affect service to people:

- To increase overall speed, LRTs require eliminating many local stops that are convenient or necessary for elderly, frail and burdened people; access to transit for those affected would be more difficult.
- Only a single level of service is possible – semi-local. LRT vehicles cannot pass each other, and therefore express services - so critical for attracting people away from their cars – are not possible.
- The overall speed of LRTs on roads such as Finch Avenue West is limited by the number of local stops between arterial road intersections.
- If one LRT vehicle breaks down, others cannot pass it. Everyone is delayed.
- Placing LRT tracks in the middle of roadways requires all passengers to traverse what may be very busy and dangerous roadways.
- Left turns by cars and trucks become more limited as access between major intersections is cut off.

In contrast, a bus system with smoothly-paved curb-lane bus-only lanes and bus bays for all transit stops has none of these disadvantages.

- Nearby stops for elderly, frail and burdened people are kept operational.
- Both local and express services can operate using the same lane, providing a travel option not possible with LRTs.
- Express buses can achieve greater speeds than possible with LRT vehicles (for example, some buses can be non-stop past many arterial intersections).
- Buses can easily divert onto and off of bus lanes as needed; disabled vehicles cause much less disruption than a disabled LRT vehicle.
- With a curb-lane service, fewer road crossings are required of passengers to access transit vehicles. (Note also that better shelters may be possible off-road rather than in the middle of the road).
- Left turns by cars and trucks are not made more difficult. (However, right turns for cars and trucks with a curb-lane bus system are somewhat problematic unless right turn lanes are added; yet, buses can pass using adjacent mixed traffic lanes.)

We can dub this blend of bus services as **MBLS**, for **Mixed Bus Lane Service**. With regard to the ability of bus services to handle high volumes of demand, it has been argued that (for example) on Finch West a bus rapid transit (BRT) service can only handle 2,700 riders an hour. However, it is possible to add more buses and to increase the proportion of articulated buses to increase the capacity of service even beyond the 4,700 projected. I note also that the projected peak ridership is 4,700 along Finch Avenue West per direction, yet an LRT service with 8,400 to 25,000 capacity is proposed.

Lifecycle capital costs of a bus-based system would be significantly less than half the cost of implementing an LRT service. Many more kilometres of MBLS services can be implemented for the same dollars as would be spent on LRTs. Net operating costs for either LRT or MBLS may not be very dissimilar, and depend largely on ridership. High quality superior-comfort buses can be as effective an attractor of riders as an LRT. (Note that the overall gross operating cost per bus in Mississauga is \$311,000; overall cost per LRT vehicle in Calgary is roughly \$325,000 (sorry, Toronto \$\$ not found)).

Arguments that bus services do not foster land use intensification as well as rail-based systems are not universally valid - every urban land use situation is different, as is the quality of bus services. Location, land use policies, and financial carrots and sticks all affect the potential for city-building.

A high-frequency Mixed Bus Lane service has not been tried in the Toronto context. It is reasonable to consider ways to make a MBLS Service work, or at least to test it on a single route, such as the Finch West route, for a two-year period. In light of the billions of dollars involved, it is premature to commit to LRTs – or subways – until all alternatives are tested.

John Stillich
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