

TO4

York wrestles to put rapid into transit



PETER KUITENBROUWER
Eyewitness

At 1:15 p.m., wet snow falls. I'm standing, freezing, in a lonely bus shelter on Highway 7 in Markham as traffic whizzes by on the wet pavement. My boots are soaked through because no one shovels what pass for sidewalks around here. ("They have sidewalks in Markham?" you gasp. Yes, but I have yet to see another pedestrian). I look around. Someone has left a copy of *Renters News* in the shelter. According to my soggy York Region Transit schedule, the Route 1 bus comes every half hour, so it should come along in 20 minutes. What brings me to this lonely spot? Research. I decided to take public transit from downtown to my meeting with the York Rapid Transit planners, just to see how brutal their current (non-rapid) transit really is.

It's brutal.

For me, a two-hour meeting became a full-day affair. That's because, of the 30 people who toil in an office building at Leslie Street and Highway 7 to put together the rapid transit plan, not one of them commutes to work by York transit. They all drive.

"The former communications guy used to commute by transit every day from Etobicoke," says Alina Kelly, who took over the job. No wonder he left.

ticket machine. In this way, the driver no longer has to check tickets, you can enter from any of the bus's three doors, and the bus idles less at each stop.

That's phase one, a \$150-million plan (\$50-million each from the region, province and feds), which York hopes to have up and running by 2005. Ottawa and Queen's Park have yet to cough up any cash.

In phase two, by 2012 the system would build dedicated busways down the centre of Yonge Street, connecting Finch station to Newmarket, and along Highway 7.

In phase three, those busways would become streetcar lines or, eventually, subways.

I have to say, I started out skeptical. I never believe suburban politicians when they talk transit. All they care about is keeping taxes low, right? That means sprawl and cars. The bus driver on Route 1 who brought me here fed my cynicism.

"All these little subdivisions that are going in, they can't service them," he says. Enter AECOM's Sam Zimmerman. A smiling, natty guy in suspenders and suit, Zimmerman hails from Albany, N.Y., and spent 23 years in Washington, D.C., at the Department of Transportation, which funds public transit to the tune of US\$7-billion per year, most of it from the gas tax.

Zimmerman gets transit. More important, he gets that good transit works only when you design cities in which it can work. He points to the building we are in, surrounded by parking lots, and beyond that, houses. "I want to buy a copy of *Maclean's* magazine," he says in his New York drawl. "Where can I get one? I have to get in my car and drive two kilometres." (In Toronto, by contrast, one can walk to a newsstand.) Transit-oriented design, he says, "is about reconnecting the town planning

At 8:45 a.m., I caught a streetcar at Dovercourt and College streets, paying \$2.25. I got to Finch subway at 9:45 a.m. and trudged through snow to join a long line waiting in slush for the Route 1 bus. Once you cross Steeles Avenue, into York region, it's like going back in transit history. The bus pulls up: It's an antique, an Orion, built in Ontario 19 years ago. I pay another \$2.25. Next shock: the driver tells me he's non-union and works, not for YRT, but for Miller Transit, a supplier of drivers and maintenance. This bus is 45 minutes late.

"Bayview Avenue and Highway 7 are not moving," the driver says.

This transit system needs help. Luckily, help appears to be on its way. At 10:20 I arrive at YRT to meet the self-described "power point rangers" from AECOM Enterprises, the largest transportation engineering company in the world, based in Los Angeles.

AECOM leads a consortium of eight companies, including Ellisdon, Siemens and Norddeutsche Landesbank, who have an \$8.5-million contract from the region to set up a "bus rapid transit" system in York. Bus rapid transit? In all this traffic?

Well, here's the idea: Get about 80 big new buses and rig them with computers that, when the bus arrives at a traffic light, will trigger the light to turn green to let the bus through. Then build 130 new high-tech bus shelters with electronic readouts that tell commuters when the next bus will arrive.

Each shelter will also feature a

models that have been lost. That lost art of place-making."

Spending lots of money on transit won't work if you keep building sprawl, he says.

"A lot of people talk about land use in the States and do nothing about it. Go to a place like San José, where they have empty light rail and peach orchards being turned into parking lots."

That sounds a lot, of course, like sprawling greater Toronto. Since Paul May started as a planner in York 16 years ago, the region has more than doubled, and counts 850,000 people today. Now, with their roads clogged, people are rethinking the design.

They want major provincial and federal cash to build transit in hopes developers will want to cluster around the transit, and hence reduce sprawl.

We have our own cash problems with the TTC, which is a real transit system. (The TTC carried 415 million passengers in 2002, compared with fewer than 10 million in York). So should the feds and province really fund the York guys?

"York region for the past 50 years has been paying [through income tax] to fund the construction of the TTC," says May, "and we got very little out of it, just a few buses. Now we need help."

Well, OK. Give them the cash. But with this caveat: The province should draw up some lines around here, forbid sprawl and legislate sensible land use. Only then will transit work.

National Post
pkuitenbrouwer@nationalpost.com



ZORAN BOZICEVIC / NATIONAL POST

Commuters leave a YRT bus at the terminal at Yonge and Finch.