

Bill Rea ? Closed highways ruin plans

I have learned over the last couple of years that driving in Toronto is not much fun.

On the other hand, part of the problem might be I'm out of practice.

I spent five and a half years in the late 1990s working in the city. I spent most of my time in East York, but the demands of the job had me travelling all over, including the High Park and Swansea area, where I pretended to grow up. The point is if you hang around a certain area long enough, you get a feel for the local road pattern. That helps a lot when you have to get around. You learn the shortcuts. It helped me get from place to place lots of times.

But it's been more than 15 years since I worked there. And in that time, one forgets.

I had to drive through some of my old stomping grounds a couple of years ago, and quickly found myself lost. I was able to get where I was going without too much trouble, but trying to get out again became a major ordeal.

There have been other cases like that over the years. My wife and I were trying to get to a function in the middle of town in late October 2012. It was a show put on by an artist I have known since my youth, and the reason I remember the time so well is the artist had political leanings and was anxious for the opinion of a media person like Your Humble that Barack Obama was going to be re-elected president. I had left about an extra half hour to account for delays getting there, and ended up being about an hour late. And then it took a similar amount of time to get out of the city and back home again. Part of the problem was with construction, as several of the major east-west routes were torn up. The main route I had planned to use was a mess, and so were the secondary routes I knew of and had planned to use. I well remember the frustration of that day. I also remember assuring the artist that Obama had nothing to worry about, after expressing profuse apologies for being late, and blaming it all on my inexperience in driving in Toronto.

It seems Toronto Mayor John Tory has resolved to do something about it. I'll wait and see.

Things have reached the point that if I have to go into the city, I'll find a place to park and get on the TTC. My old neighbourhood is close to a couple of subway stations, and I make a point of carrying Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) tokens on my person. And having been raised in the big city, I have always known that the subway can get you reasonably close to where you want to be.

I used TTC to get to the CNE last fall, and was glad I did.

Granted, I miss the inherent independence of being close to my own wheels, but negotiating traffic jams is no fun, and very stressful, not to mention frustrating. Besides, parking is a hell of a lot cheaper in the places I know than most locations downtown.

Interestingly, I learned during my years working there that one relatively inexpensive place to park was in the large underground lot at City Hall. Thus, I got into the habit of parking there, and walking to my destination.

Like I stated above, if you hang around an area long enough, you learn the short cuts.

The reason I drag up all these frustrating memories is I have had to drive to that big megacity twice in the last fortnight.

Beth and I were to attend a function with some friends last Saturday at a location on Dufferin Street, near Dundas West. A bit of Google mapping helped me figure out where I needed to be and the best route to get there, and we actually arrived with about half an hour to spare (there's not a whole lot of construction in Toronto in early February). Actually, getting in didn't worry me that much. My big concern was getting out again.

I had work-related issues to deal with that evening, meaning we were obliged to stand up our friends when it came to supper after the event (frustrating, but I'm a big enough boy to know that the timelines are not always going to work out the way I want them to).

Not to mention the fact it was snowing. And I ran into the inconvenience that if one is heading west in Dundas, there are very few intersections where left turns are permitted (and I could really do without the fine if there was a cop who caught me cheating).

Fortunately, my familiarity with the city in which I was born and raised told me there was a way out, and I found it.

In fact, despite my fears to the contrary, getting out of the city proved a lot easier than I had thought. Indeed, there was time enough to spare for me to drop Beth off at home before I went back to work. Thus, she was able to watch the Leafs win for a change while I worked. It worked out well for both of us.

Then there was last Thursday, when I had a commitment in the Megacity. I was at Peel Regional council that day, but the meeting broke up early enough that it seemed there would be no problem meeting my 4 p.m. appointment. I even had time to spare. Things were going so well that I should have known better.

Okay, I had to get gas, but time was still working fine.

There was a fender-bender along Queen Street in Brampton, which resulted in Peel Regional Police blocking eastbound traffic for about five minutes. It was a little annoying, but these things happen. They are relatively easy to deal with if one has put some planning in place.

What I wasn't counting on was the major accident on Highway 427. I knew I was in trouble when I saw the ramp to the 427 south was blocked by a cop car.

So much for the timelines that I was so confident would work.

I knew the road pattern well enough to know that Highway 27 would get me to where I wanted to be, but I also knew that everyone who had wanted to take the 427 would have had similar thoughts. The result was I was about 20 minutes late for my appointment.

It wasn't the first time in my life I've been tardy, and I guarantee you it won't be the last.

But one will excuse me if I'm reluctant to drive to Toronto.

Granted, such trips are unavoidable. I still have relatives, including my brother, living there, and they occasionally invite us down.

Like I said, they're relatives, so they're stuck with me, even if I am late

