

Bill Rea ? Getting around TO is doable

I was born and raised in Toronto, meaning that is a place that will always be special to me.

Further, many of my relations still live there, meaning there's still plenty there to attract.

That being said, I'm very glad I don't still live there, and that I seldom have to visit.

The current political turmoil there is of course part of the problem, with the on-going soap opera involving Mayor Rob Ford, which never seems to end. In the last week, we've heard that a woman was picked up for impaired driving while at the wheel of his vehicle. I'm enough of a nice guy to really hope that things work out all right for Ford, but it is a fact that the messes he has found himself in of late have really been of his own making, so the messes are his to clean up.

A big reason why I seldom travel to the big city is the difficulties in getting around, and those problems have been prominent in news reports over the last several days. Okay, so they had to do work on the Gardiner Expressway, meaning some lanes had to be close with associated traffic snarling. But they also had to pick this same time to do work on Lakeshore Boulevard? These are two of the major east-west routes mainly designed for cars (the Gardiner especially), yet the geniuses in the megacity decided to seriously add to the congestion at the same time.

Granted, if the work is necessary, then it has to be done. Granted also that the upcoming Pan American Games probably tightens the timelines.

But the fact is these issues should have been anticipated. Why do I say that? I know for a fact that there are a lot of employees with the City of Toronto who are paid to do such anticipating. So not only do people who live and drive in Toronto have to put up with the extreme inconvenience, they are also obliged to pay for the privilege.

It is a fact, as I have experienced the hard way over the years, that driving in Toronto is not a lot of fun. But that was not always the case. In my younger years, my father worked in an office building on University Avenue in the heart of downtown. We were living just west of High Park (specifically in Swansea) in those days, so Dad used to take the Gardiner to and from work. So did a lot of people, but barring the occasional accident or other bothersome problems which sometimes happen, he used to complete his commute with very little trouble. As a demonstration, I cite the fact that Dad used to drive home for lunch in those days. I can't imagine anyone even considering such action these days.

I had occasion, about two years ago, to drive down to the Harbour area of Toronto for a Friday morning event (it was actually to cover an announcement regarding the upcoming Pan Am Games). I knew enough about conditions in the area to anticipate some complications involved with getting into the city at that hour, so I left myself lots of time. As it turned out, I arrived at the destination with a couple of minutes to spare, then wasted some of those minutes trying to sort out the parking situation. There was a municipal lot there, with ample spots available. The problem was the automated ticket dispenser was out of order. From my time working in Toronto, I knew that in such cases, if you didn't have proof you had paid for parking prominently displayed, you could be in for another kind of ticket from the parking authorities ? and the fact the ticket dispenser wasn't working would not be a defence. There were several of us standing around, wondering if we should waste time finding other parking or take the chance that the authorities might leave us alone. I was among those who elected to take the chance, and it worked, somewhat to my surprise.

What didn't work was getting out of the city at the end of the event. Heading west out of the city of the Gardiner and QEW around noon should have been easy. Not! There were no accidents or major problems (apart from construction), but it still took me the better part an hour to get out of all the traffic, and I was very late for an appointment waiting for me back in these parts.

There have been many stories of motorists experiencing extreme frustration trying to get around Toronto these days, and I don't doubt it.

Fortunately for me, I spent my formative years in the west end, and most of the people, like relatives, who I would be inclined to visit are in that area. That means I seldom have to travel into the heart of town.

I spent about five years in the mid-90s working in Toronto, based mainly in the Leaside area (Bayview and Eglinton). Getting around was always a chore, but one quickly learns the road patterns and finds innovative ways to get where they want to go. Work required me to pay a call to the Yonge and Bloor area in the fall. It was a trip I frequently made in my days working there, and since it was a Saturday, I figured there should be few problems. I should have known better.

For one thing, it had been more than a decade since I had worked there, so the old routes didn't come back to me as quickly as I had hoped. And congestion was a lot worse than I had ever seen it. It took hours to get home when the work was done.

There have been a couple of other occasions over the last year or so, when I've had to drive into the heart of the city, not realizing or appreciating the colossal mess I was putting myself into. Last July, I put myself through a major ordeal one Sunday morning to get to a cemetery in Toronto so I could acknowledge the 50th anniversary of my grandmother's death.

Granted, it's taken a couple of times, but the lesson has been learned. Having been a kid in Toronto in the days before my parents entrusted me with car keys, I relied on the TTC to get around. I used a lot of that time getting the hang of the subway system, and despite what politicians, like Ford, might say, my experience is it still works rather well. There have been a couple of times of late when I've had to travel to the middle of the big metropolis. I still remember the easy ways to find a parking spot not far from a subway station (my brother frequently proves useful in finding such accommodations).

The fact is that while my experience over the last decade or so has been somewhat limited, I still believe that getting around Toronto is doable, despite dummies shutting down parallel arterial routes simultaneously and despite the silliness of Rob Ford.

I think about traffic issues occasionally when I drive about Caledon. As many of you know, the Citizen office is in the Bolton valley, on the east side of Queen Street, and I normally park in the municipal lot north of Sterne Street. There's been a lot of construction over the last couple of months, but all things considered, that's not a hard place to get out of, as long as one is planning to head south. Heading north or west can be another matter; be it trying to make a left turn to get on to Queen Street, or heading west along King, hoping a train is not going through (the trains that run through Bolton these days tend to be long).

Many of us have to go through such adventures every day. But the news tells us things are worse in Toronto.

Maybe we should all keep that in mind

