

Editorial ? A ?SmarterTrack? proposal

The centrepiece in John Tory's campaign to become Toronto's next mayor is his ?SmartTrack? idea, which he describes as a ?London-style surface rail subway that moves the most people in the shortest time, across the entire city.?

We don't know how a ?surface rail? line can also be a ?subway,? but that's the least of the problems the concept faces as currently drafted.

For one thing, we doubt there's any way the projected \$2.7-billion cost can or should be paid for without some increase in Torontonians' relatively low property taxes, rather than just from revenue from new assessment gained through increased density near the SmartTrack's 22 stations; nor should federal and provincial taxpayers be on the hook for a project that benefits only residents of the immediate Toronto area.

As currently proposed, the project would use existing rail corridors between Eglinton Avenue West and Unionville, connecting with Toronto's subway system at Bloor Street, Union Station and Danforth Avenue. It would be outside the current Toronto city limits only between Steeles Ave. and Unionville at one end and a short distance into Pearson Airport at the other end.

But the most serious problem, as we see it, is the proposed airport linkage, which would require the trains to leave the existing CNR tracks at some point south of Eglinton Ave. and swing west to the right-of-way of the Richview Expressway, the freeway that was never built, with its right-of-way in Etobicoke located immediately south of Eglinton.

As we see it, a far smarter idea would be to extend the light rail transit (LRT) line now being built along Eglinton west to the airport and provide a two-level station allowing quick and easy transfers between the LRT and SmartTrack.

As for SmartTrack itself, the line should continue west and north, with alternating trains going via the CN line to Brampton and the CP Rail line to Bolton.

The main cost of this vastly preferable alternative would lie in doing something that ought to have been done years ago ? double-track the CP line between Weston and Bolton and build grade separations at all the busy level crossings as far north as King Street, south of the proposed GO Transit station on Humber Station Road.

Expensive as this work might be, it would surely be less costly than the kilometre or so of tunneling in Tory's current SmartTrack scheme, and the cost would presumably be shared by CP Rail, as a major beneficiary of the double-tracking past its huge intermodal facility.

Another potential problem Tory's concept faces is the projected target of completion within seven years. For that to be possible, as well as financially feasible, the scheme would have to win quick approval from both Toronto City council and the senior levels of government, and survive the inevitable environmental assessments and Municipal Board challenges.

Another challenge SmartTrack faces involves Tory's commitment to having the entire line electrified. Despite the obvious environmental benefits (as well as faster train acceleration) that, too, will be costly. We think serious consideration should be given to the alternative of hybrid propulsion, with electricity being used once available, but natural gas (rather than diesel fuel) powering the electric motors.

Of course, a ?SmartestTrack? concept would go a step further, by including at least limited commuter rail service through all of Dufferin-Caledon, with trains going as far north as Orangeville and Alliston.

But whatever else might be said, the SmartTrack concept makes more sense than the alternative of building subways in suburban areas where potential ridership doesn't warrant them.