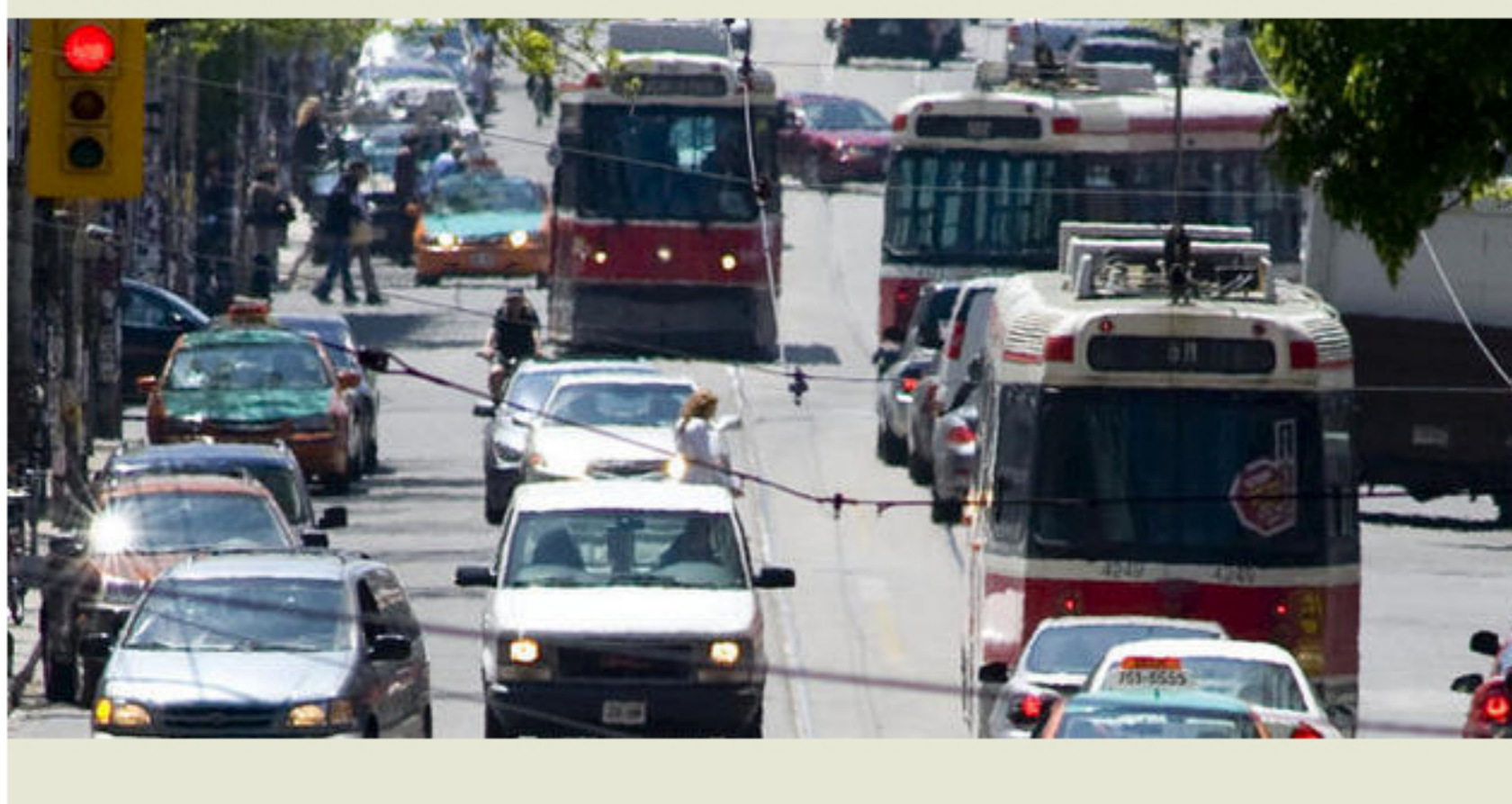


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**For whom the road tolls**

The mayoral candidates' transportation strategies have so far lacked anything like vision or pizzazz. Here's a grand idea — whose time has come — for the taking

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BY EDWARD KEENAN July 21, 2010 13:07

The \$100 million lawsuit over the St. Clair Streetcar right-of-way, filed this spring by local business owners angry over the outrageous length of time the project took to complete (decimating their businesses in the process), only hints at the troubling parts of that transit-building process.

Yes, the project cost a whopping \$106 million, more than twice its budgeted price. And yes, the project took five years to construct a measly 6.8-kilometre stretch of track, more than two years longer than originally planned. And yes, as documented in a TTC report in January, the entire undertaking was plagued by incompetent or non-existent planning, and calls into question the ability of the TTC to manage a sophisticated building project.

For supporters of the Transit City plan to construct streetcar rights-of-way across the entire city, those things are troubling. But for me, the really troubling thing, taking all of that into account, is that I live a five-minute walk from the western end of the St. Clair streetcar line, and I do not take it to get to work. It takes too long. In fact, the millions of dollars and years of construction shaved only two to six minutes off travel times along the route, according to official estimates. It is faster for me to take the bus down to Bloor Street to ride the subway.

So what was the point?

Of course, it's possible for a streetcar in a dedicated lane to do much better — it would be possible for the St. Clair line, as constructed, to do better. If you space the stops out a kilometre apart, as the subway stops on the Yonge line are, and you use technology to ensure that streetcars do not encounter red lights, and you also ensure that streetcars always have priority over left-turning vehicles, then a streetcar running in a right-of-way can actually get close to the speed and efficiency of a subway. If the reason we're building streetcar lines instead of subways is that digging is too expensive, then why don't we get the streetcars we build to at least behave more like subways?

These are questions on which I'd like to hear the opinions of the mayoral candidates. In fact, I'd welcome any real discussion of transit from the candidates.

Thus far, we've heard that Joe Pantalone plans to be the saviour of David Miller's Transit City plan. We've heard that Rob Ford would like to build subways, though he's has been vague so far about the whole thing. We know Rocco Rossi wants to get bike lanes off major streets and maybe, possibly would pause Transit City for a rethink, sort of. Sarah Thomson's proposal is interesting, in that it calls for expansion and — yes! — suggests tolls to pay for it, but her model needs fleshing out and, as it stands right now, her numbers are almost all sketchy to the point of being useless. And we know George Smitherman's proposals are modest to the point of not really being proposals at all.

So where's the vision?

More than just their opinions on St. Clair and what it means to our streetcar planning, what I'd like to hear from the candidates is a vision for how the city's transportation infrastructure should work. You want subways? Great! Show me the vision and show me how it will be paid for. You hate transit? Less great! But still, explain your plan to me. Anyone? Does anyone really have a plan?

Few issues in the building of this city that loom larger than transportation — from environmental concerns to commute times, almost nothing has a bigger impact on both the big picture and our daily lives.

What's really interesting is that I've already seen something like the bold proposal I'd love to hear from a candidate. It would take a made-in-Toronto innovation and the most advanced thinking about how to solve gridlock and entirely transform how we get around. I read about it, of course, in an American magazine.

In the June issue of *Wired*, journalist Felix Salmon profiled *New Yorker* Charles Komanoff, who has made thousands of calculations about the costs to commuters and to society of various ways of getting around to create a sophisticated model for pricing various forms of transportation: toll-style congestion charges on driving for various roads at various times of day, varying rates for subway use and cab use, charges for parking and so on. Interestingly, his plan calls for buses to be free because his math says the time it takes to collect fares isn't worth the charge.

This kind of congestion charging, which discards the myth that driving on city streets and highways has no cost to society and should be "free," would generate the revenue needed to both maintain the roads and to build an evermore ambitious transit and cycling network. It would look at all forms of getting around — transit, driving, cycling, walking — as part of a coordinated system and price each option accordingly, and pay for each option accordingly, too.

According to Komanoff and his supporters (who include not just lefty idealists, but US conservatives such as Reihan Salam of *American Spectator* magazine), this system would eliminate gridlock and make travel better for travellers in all types of vehicles. Traditionally, there has been real resistance to the idea of tolls, but people are coming around — even the Board of Trade in Toronto has endorsed the idea of charging for road use. Charging drivers to get into the city is an idea whose time has come.

But the proposal Komanoff puts forward is far more sophisticated, and effective, than simple tolling. And the company with a technology to do it, as Salmon points out, is right here in Toronto.

*Skymeter*, a company based at MaRS in the Discovery District, has invented a GPS-based meter that is used right now in Winnipeg for parking-meter-free parking charges. But as *Skymeter* CEO Kamal Hassan told me when I spoke to him this spring, the system could easily be adapted to run a congestion-charging scheme that could put a price on every road in the city. In fact, the technology has already been tested for congestion charging (on a commission from Cisco Korea) and has proved effective.

A bold candidate could achieve the holy grail of transportation planning by eliminating gridlock, and at the same time could fund a stunning expansion of the public transit system. By tweaking Komanoff's model to suit Toronto and exploiting a locally built technological innovation, we could lead the world.

Any candidate starved for a transit platform is welcome to steal this idea — after all, I took it from *Wired*. And if they have a better idea, I would love to hear it. Right about now, I'd welcome any idea at all.

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