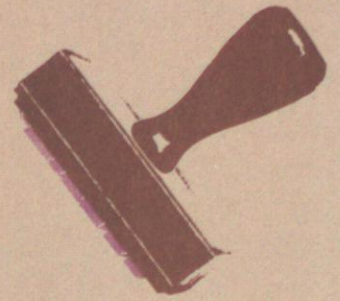




BUREAU OF MUNICIPAL RESEARCH

Suite 306, 2 Toronto Street, Toronto, Canada M5C 2B6 / Tel. (416) 363-9265



COMMENT

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IS METROPLAN A GAMBLE WORTH TAKING?

Introduction

The future shape of Metro Toronto, referred to by planners as its "urban structure", has been the subject of an elaborate planning effort known as Metroplan.¹ The purpose of the program which began over four years ago has been to prepare an Official Plan for Metro Toronto, as required by provincial law. As part of this process a comprehensive series of background studies has been produced, together with summaries designed to encourage public discussion and response. In 1976 the Metroplan document Concept and Objectives was published. Drawing on the conclusions of the previous background studies, Concept and Objectives sets forth a proposed set of goals and policy directions for the future development of Metropolitan Toronto.

Expressed in physical terms, the fundamental concept of the document is:

to encourage decentralization of job opportunities and to decrease dependency on the downtown within Metro. This would be realized by creating a multi-centred urban structure having a system of mixed-use centres linking jobs and housing by a public transit system. Future development would be concentrated to the greatest extent possible in designated centres and along transit routes while the character of existing residential neighbourhoods would be preserved and protected. (Concept and Objectives, Summary, p.2)

The Concept and Objectives report goes far beyond proposals for the future physical form of Metro Toronto. For example, one section of the report attempts to define what Metro's planning function should be, another discusses the regional planning context including provincial regional development policy,

1. Metroplan is also the name given to the public participation phase of the program. For an earlier BMR critique of this participation program, see Metroplan: Real or Rhetorical Participation (BMR Comment #147, 1974).

while still other chapters propose policy directions for housing, open space and human services. However, it is the concept of decentralization as the preferred pattern of growth which provides the document's central thrust.

In this Comment we use the word "Metroplan" interchangeably with the term "decentralization", as this is the primary concept put forward in the document. However, to be precise, they are not synonymous. The document is a statement of goals and it does not guarantee that Metro Council will interpret Metroplan in a manner which supports the decentralization objectives. For instance, the arterial roads policy in the document is vague and leaves room for Metro Council to make decisions which could actually reinforce the existing centralizing pattern in Metro Toronto. ¹ The key to the document is how it is implemented. Until we know Metro's specific transportation, housing and other planning policies, we should recognize that the connection between Metroplan and decentralization as of now consists of expressed hopes. One could argue further that certain housing statements in Metroplan which call for Metro's neighbouring Regions (York and Durham) to supply dormitory housing to help satisfy the larger Toronto market may conflict with the sub-centres objective. If the workers living in this housing were employed mostly in the core, this would encourage the trend toward centralization.

This Comment addresses itself to the primary concept that the new Plan should seek to create a multi-centred urban structure. Specifically, it asks a direct and simple question: *What are the prospects for making Metroplan work?*

The Role of "Centres"

The decentralization concept put forward in the report is an ambitious one. The kind of decentralization being proposed is not the ad hoc dispersion of offices and shopping which has already been taking place in Metro. Rather, the key to its achievement is the creation of alternative "centres" to the downtown; the downtown itself will still remain the central area of the Toronto region. Even the planners admit that decentralization is at best a gamble. But it is a gamble worth taking, they say, because of the potential benefits -- an enriched economic and social base for the suburbs, more opportunity for people to live closer to their jobs, less congestion downtown and a more balanced demand on the transit system, supported by two-way ridership.

The report proposes two "major centres" -- one on North Yonge at Sheppard and the other at the Scarborough Town Centre. According to Concept and Objectives,

these centres will [each] accommodate between 30,000 and 40,000 office/retail jobs. Both locations are intended to be more than just concentrations of commercial activity. For example, they will become stronger focal points for government services, culture and entertainment. They will offer many of the services now found only in the Downtown. (Summary, p. 10)

1. The document notes that a study of arterial roads is being done separately.

In addition to these two major centres, the proposal envisages a limited number of intermediate centres, such as St. Clair/Yonge and Islington/Bloor.

At first glance this plan for two major centres -- in Scarborough and on North Yonge -- seems commendable. The Metroplan document points out that the Scarborough site fits in well with Scarborough's Official Plan which aims to create a business, cultural, social, recreational and government centre for the Borough; hence the proposed policies are consistent with local aspirations. Development for the North Yonge centre would occur in a "linear form" along Yonge Street, north from Sheppard, thereby minimizing adverse impact on adjacent residential areas. Observers of the urban scene know that there is strong political pressure for development in both of these locations so that from a political vantage point the choices seem suitable. ¹ Newspaper reports and editorials have been supportive, referring enthusiastically to the proposed sub-centres as "new downtowns" which will both halt congestion in Toronto's downtown core and enhance urban lifestyle opportunities elsewhere in Metro.

Yet, a closer look reveals potential problems in realizing the proposed urban structure. Because the decentralization concept hinges directly upon the creation of the proposed major centres, it is essential that this feature of the Metroplan report be carefully scrutinized. We need to be assured that the Scarborough and North Yonge centres are in fact workable as envisaged.

Traditional Incentives for Development

The historical pattern of growth in Metro Toronto over the past few decades suggests that the formula for urban sub-centre development has been based on three essential components: land, transportation and demand. Land had to be available in the sense that it was zoned for development, or could be easily re-zoned, and it had to be available in sufficient quantity to make large-scale development economically feasible.

The transportation catalyst consisted typically of a subway station, offering access via direct rapid transit route to downtown as well as to convenient surface feeder routes. If the site were located at the intersection of two subways, the growth was dramatic, with Bloor/Yonge being the obvious example. The second aspect of the transportation component was a good road pattern to connect to the core and to service the emerging centre.

The demand component of development is more difficult to define. Location theorists tell us that private sector investment decisions are influenced by a variety of factors related to both the final cost of the project and its marketability. Traditionally, when developers have shown interest in suburban development, it has been because there were larger blocks of land, lower land costs and lower building costs (due partly to more open construction sites and partly to the acceptability of outdoor as opposed to indoor parking). Just as

1. North York and Scarborough have both located their municipal buildings in the proposed centres.

important, or perhaps more important than the cost advantages, however, has been the confidence that there was a market available. Developers have ordinarily not invested in an area if they expected their enterprise to end up as a lone pioneering effort.

Decentralization will depend largely on whether existing downtown firms, as they expand, can be enticed to the suburbs. It is necessary to recognize that, regardless of land availability or transportation access, decisions to relocate or not also reflect non-economic factors. For instance, chief executives may be concerned about the travelling time to the new site from their own residences, and from those of their employees. They may worry that the move will result in a loss of managerial and professional workers as well as a higher general employee turnover. They may be reluctant to lose the face to face contact and the immediate access to colleagues and professional advisors which they enjoy in the downtown core. And they may not want to give up the many social and cultural amenities which make the downtown a desirable place to work (e.g. shopping, restaurants, outdoor concerts).

These observations strike at the very heart of the decentralization concept. They are not intended, however, to support the contention of some developers that decentralization can't work. ¹ We are sympathetic to the goals of Metroplan to create a more balanced development pattern. Our remarks should be regarded as cautions that translating the Metroplan Concept into a reality will be a formidable challenge and that the advantages of the proposed locations will have to be very evident to attract private development.

Notwithstanding these qualifications, the pattern of growth in Metro Toronto since the 1950's makes it clear that available land and transit/road accessibility to both the central area and the adjacent communities combined with confidence as to market demand have been the major prerequisites for development outside the core. ²

In light of this traditional formula for growth outside of the downtown how credible are the proposed centres?

Are the Proposed Scarborough and North Yonge Centres Viable?

1) Turning first to North Yonge, we can note certain advantages. North Yonge is accessible by both modes of transportation. The Yonge subway connecting the proposed centre directly to the downtown would offer ample

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1. Some of these points will be raised by developer spokesmen in their challenge to the City of Toronto's new Official Plan, now being voiced at the Ontario Municipal Board Hearings.
 2. There are a few notable exceptions to this pattern. One is Don Mills/Eglinton which was not on a subway line, though it was well served by roadways. (These have since become badly congested.) Don Mills is unique, however, in that it is close to downtown, lies at the geographical centre of Metro and was surrounded by built-up areas.

capacity for people travelling from the south, against the flow. (Admittedly, our present system of planning cannot guarantee what the public transit demands will be, the nature of the jobs to be offered or where the prospective employees will live. Therefore we can't predict how much traffic will be south-to-north, or vice versa. But the theory is that the new jobs will draw employees from all over.) In addition, Highway 401, functioning as a twelve-lane crosstown expressway, intersects the subway line just south of the North Yonge location. From a transit/road perspective, then, the potential for growth seems good.

One vital qualification to this is the fact that North York like most suburbs is a car-oriented area. There is some question whether the linear nature of the proposed development might result in serious road congestion, in that the location lacks a full grid road pattern.¹ This absence of a complete grid might also limit the kind of centre that can be created, for it is a grid road pattern which permits the compact integrated development and higher densities needed for a genuine sub-centre. North York will have to be prepared to make some difficult political decisions if the Concept for that area is to materialize.

As for the land component of growth, the potential of North Yonge may be inadequate. There doesn't appear to be sufficient land currently available to create a major centre which will accommodate some 40,000 office/retail jobs.² There will need to be redevelopment. And redevelopment may provoke ratepayer opposition, leading to the kind of ratepayers vs. developers battles which dominated City politics in recent years. Bearing in mind that citizen resistance in the City did succeed in limiting the growth of so-called "intermediate centres"³, we should recognize that dependence on the redevelopment process to provide the land may ultimately thwart the Metroplan Concept. It is worth recalling that a planning study was done for the Borough of North York by Murray Jones and John Parkin in the 1960's which proposed a major development scheme for the North Yonge area based on the integration of land use and subway stations. (The extension of the Yonge subway to Sheppard and the anticipated pressures and opportunities for growth led to the study.) However, this scheme, as an overall 25-year plan, was rejected then due to ratepayer opposition.

With respect to demand, there is evidence of interest in development in the Yonge-Sheppard area. Existing development and activity at this location could provide the basis for at least a minor sub-centre.

2) Looking at the Scarborough Town Centre, we can see that it has excellent road connections to the western half of Metro as it is served by Highway 401; the downtown route via the Don Valley Parkway is congested, however. And the proposed rapid transit connection to/from downtown raises several difficulties.

1. On the west side, the spacing of the major north/south arterial roads is wider than elsewhere and the cross-street network is obstructed by a cemetery and parks.
2. Compare with the Yonge/St. Clair sub-centre which currently provides 11,000 jobs, and Eglinton/Yonge which provides 19,000 jobs.
3. Examples are Yonge/St. Clair and Yonge/Eglinton which are probably approaching their growth limits due to ratepayer opposition. Another example is the inability of developers to exploit the air rights over the subway tracks at Davisville.

Because the success of the Scarborough Centre is predicated upon the extension of Metro's rapid transit system to the north-east, it is worth looking at this component of the Metroplan proposal in some detail. The Metroplan document recommends the easterly extension of the subway from St. Clair/Warden to Eglinton/Kennedy and the Scarborough intermediate capacity transit (ICT) line from the subway to the Town Centre as the projects with the "highest priority". The first of these projects has in fact been passed by Metro Council, though its construction start has been delayed. The ICT line has not yet received final TTC approval; this is expected in 1977. The system being considered for this line is light rail transit (LRT) which would use streetcars operating on a separate right-of-way. Even if it is built -- and increasing doubts about the venture due to its high cost are being voiced -- the transit line may be inadequate as a stimulus for growth. For instance, some transportation authorities are convinced that the number of riders tends to drop sharply with any second transfer point. In this case passengers would need to make two changes when travelling between the proposed Scarborough centre and the downtown core (at Eglinton/Kennedy and at Bloor/Yonge). Thus this rapid transit line might not provide the efficient link to the major centre of activity which planners agree is needed for a sub-centre to develop.

Even more fundamental is the question whether the extension of rapid transit to the Scarborough Town Centre will have a decentralizing or a centralizing effect. Some planners insist that such a transit service will accelerate the rate at which private developers will invest in the Centre. Other individuals have questioned this, arguing that the line could equally serve a system focussed on the core.¹

It is also possible that the ICT line will never be built. When Metro Council cancelled the Scarborough Expressway in 1974, on the advice of Richard Soberman's report on the Expressway, a clear political obligation to provide a rapid transit service in Scarborough was created.² Yet certain politicians are now arguing that the fiscal consequences of such an investment will be disastrous. The cost of construction itself will be enormous -- a total of \$152 million for the subway extension (at \$80 million)³ and the ICT line (at \$72 million).

Moreover, once built, the line will have to be continually subsidized, above and beyond debt repayment. Alderman John Sewell has calculated that the total deficit per rider on the LRT line will be \$3.30 to cover operating costs alone.⁴ (The province would pay roughly 14% of that). This figure does not include debt servicing costs and is based on the TTC's own 1976 budget forecast and projected ridership figures. One could use a different formula which would produce a greatly reduced subsidy figure. Sewell's formula assigns all of the projected LRT operating costs to the 600,000 expected new riders, riders who would not otherwise use the transit line at all. In our view, this is valid.

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1. See Alderman John Sewell, "New Downtowns At No Cost to Taxpayers?" Globe and Mail (Dec. 21, 1976).
 2. MITPR #47. Scarborough Expressway -- A Planning Review.
 3. The need for this subway extension was questioned in a background report of the Metro Toronto Transportation Plan Review.
 4. Press release from Alderman John Sewell, November 25, 1976.

However, if one calculated the operating loss per passenger on the basis of the total ridership of the LRT line, this figure would obviously be much less. Furthermore, it is not clear whether the TTC's estimate of the LRT's annual operating deficit as \$2,000,000 takes account of savings which will result from reduction in peak period service on those bus lines which parallel the LRT route. Sewell argues that building the ICT line will not be enough of an incentive to private developers to make the Town Centre a reality, and further suggests that the demand can be met much more cheaply, by express buses operating from the Eglinton-Kennedy terminal for example. The ICT line would approach the centre from one direction only; an extensive network of surface routes would still be necessary to complement it. If Mayor David Crombie has correctly caught the political mood in Metro in labelling 1977 "the year of the pencil" ¹ to symbolize restraint, we can expect the Scarborough ICT line to face an uphill struggle for approval.

With respect to the site, Concept and Objectives observes that "the large amount of available land at Scarborough Town Centre presents an opportunity for innovative planning and development". In our view, this is questionable for two reasons. First, the site itself is on the perimeter of the built-up area of Scarborough as it stands now. From a developer's point of view this means that the market there is not great and while this may change in the future, at present this may deter development. Second, the present physical configuration of Scarborough Town Centre is that of a suburban shopping centre almost surrounded by huge parking lots, and with an attractive civic centre at one edge. Can this area really be turned into "a booming mini-downtown with office towers, theatres, shops, apartments and perhaps even a major hotel" as the Toronto Star optimistically predicts? ² The present arrangement appears to conflict with this vision and the picture that comes to mind instead is closer to the car-dominated Square One development (Mississauga) than a Yonge/Bloor sub-core. If the ICT line is built, it is difficult to conceive of how the stations will be located in the Town Centre in such a way as to stimulate the type of development with the character and amenities implied by the "mini-downtown" concept. ³ When we recall the non-economic factors which make developers reluctant to build in the suburbs, the negative features of the sprawling low-density Scarborough Town Centre environment seem all the more prominent. It appears to us that attracting sufficient investment in this area to transform it into a "major centre" as envisaged will be very difficult.

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1. Inaugural speech to City Council, January 1977.
 2. "A bid to make Scarborough bloom", Toronto Star (January 3, 1977).
 3. A report by Raymond Moriyama shows how the Scarborough Town Centre might be optimally developed into a real urban centre with a high degree of density and diversity. But Scarborough planners admit that implementing such a concept would be very costly and would take many, many years, if it could be done at all.

Downsview: A More Likely Alternative?

As the Metroplan document acknowledges, the Downsview Airport site has good potential for development into a major centre:

It is the only major land reserve left in Metropolitan Toronto, with the exception of tracts in Scarborough. It is already in public ownership. It is highly accessible and presents the potential for a multi-functional centre of great importance, (p.8) ¹.

On the face of it, Downsview seems to have much to recommend it as a better hope for decentralization than the centres which were selected. The northern end of the Spadina subway is at its southern boundary. If, as some predict, there are serious financial losses on the Spadina line, the pressures to develop the airport site will increase. The road pattern is better than North Yonge, due to the interchange built for the partially-completed Spadina Expressway; the expressway now terminates at the edge of the site.

More important perhaps than the transit/road connections is the land itself. The 1200 acre parcel of land, roughly 2 square miles, truly represents a unique opportunity for innovative planning and development. Except on the fringes there would be no ratepayers to oppose or resist, the land is already publicly owned and planners would have a clear slate upon which to draw an ideal plan -- which would include all of the ingredients for a viable compact sub-centre: a grid road pattern, a transit-oriented rather than a parking-oriented design, and *above all, sufficient densities to allow a full range of activities in an urban atmosphere.*

The major drawbacks of Downsview are two-fold: 1) it has no existing tradition upon which to build; therefore one danger of planning a new town there from scratch is that it may be sterile. There would necessarily be a long pioneering phase before anything approaching a real urban centre could even begin to emerge. 2) it could involve an enormous time lag of at least ten to fifteen years to begin. The federal government would need to phase out and relocate the existing uses on the site, namely Dehavilland Aircraft and the Armed Forces Base. Difficult decisions would have to be reached on whom the land should be given to, who should do the planning, how it should be developed (sale or land lease? private or public development?) and how the plans, once drawn, should be implemented.

Recently the Defence Minister proposed giving Metro several hundred acres right near the terminus of the Spadina subway. One suggestion which has been made for the use of this acreage is housing. Unfortunately, a piecemeal development of the site will waste the unprecedented opportunity to create a meaningful alternative growth centre to the core.

1. The Downsview site is to be the subject of a special study.

Decentralization: An Expensive Gamble

Toronto's downtown has taken over a hundred years to evolve. While this might seem too obvious a point to mention, we need to remember that any effort to create a new core faces the problem of time. Time may work against the goal. It may, for instance, prove that growth expectations of an additional 600,000 in population in Metro by 2001 are unrealistic. Since the Metroplan background studies were completed, there have been changes in the trends -- drops in immigration and family sizes, changes in the confidence and expectations of people and an upsurge of economic and population growth in western Canada -- which indicate that the Metroplan projections may already be out of date. Will there be enough growth to create two "major centres" as proposed? And to create major Regional centres in each of the adjacent Regions as well? Time may also work against the goal in that the City of Toronto is already overdeveloped, with several years over-supply of retail and office space on hand. 1.

Thus there is good reason to doubt the feasibility of decentralization. Nevertheless, we agree with those planners and politicians who believe we should try. This effort to decentralize growth seeks to change the present pattern of wasteful low-density sprawl and automobile-dependent suburban development.

Conclusion: The Challenge of Implementation

This brief look at the urban structure proposals of Concept and Objectives points to a number of major obstacles that must be overcome in order to make Metroplan work:

* There may not be enough new growth in the next twenty-five years to support two major centres, together with major Regional centres, as described.

* The transit scheme upon which the Concept is based will likely produce on-going deficits (i.e. the LRT); and it may not even be effective in stimulating development in Scarborough.

* The present physical arrangement of the Scarborough Town Centre is not conducive to the creation of a true "mini-downtown", which depends instead on much higher densities and compact, highly integrated development.

* The creation of a mini-downtown at North Yonge will depend upon the willingness of the people of North York to allow intensive and well-integrated redevelopment. North York Council will have to rezone the land

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1. As the City of Toronto Planning Board points out in its response to the Metroplan document (Sept. 1976, p.114), Metro planners may have over-estimated the pressure for growth outside the core by failing to adequately take account of the large amounts of office floor space already committed and under construction in the downtown of Toronto.

According to a survey, published in A.E. LePage's Annual Report (1976), there were almost 5 million square feet of vacant office space for Metro Toronto in 1975, which represented 9.5% of the total supply -- an all-time high. 1,300,000 square feet of this surplus were in the suburban area. Several million more square feet of office space are scheduled for completion by 1980.

for higher densities than the current zonings which range from 1 to 2.5 times coverage, and make the necessary modifications in the road system. 1.

The most glaring weakness of the Metroplan document is that it does not show how the Concept could be implemented. It does not set out the key steps which would have to be taken to overcome the disadvantages of the proposed centres nor does it provide clues of any strategy, other than building the new transit facilities and specifically the ICT line to Scarborough. Without a plan of action, it is unlikely that the proposed scheme will be realized. We suggest that before the political debate at Metro Council starts, Metro Planners should explain how they propose to make Metroplan work. There are certain obvious questions:

1. How will they ensure that intensive development occurs in such a way as to fulfill the planning principles and goals of Metroplan? What will it take to get employers to want to locate or relocate in the proposed locations? Have the planners in fact done enough research into the attitudes and preferences of employers and workers to know what concrete inducements will work?
2. What kind of densities will be required to create vibrant new downtowns in the selected areas, where current zoning for the most part is one or two times coverage?
3. Should Metro begin by concentrating on development of one of the two sub-centres, rather than trying to promote both at the same time?
4. Will we need to build an additional subway station on Yonge mid-way between Sheppard and Finch for example, to promote the growth of a major centre, employing 40,000 people? Should we build the new Metro City Hall there to demonstrate Metro's commitment?
5. Will we have to build the ICT line in order to convince private developers that the Scarborough Town Centre will work or will improved surface transit to service prospective employees be enough? What other land-use strategies will need to be used?
6. Should Metro prepare an overall plan for the Downsview site and lobby the federal government to make it available? If so, should Metro still try and implement the policy for North Yonge?
7. How much money will it cost to achieve decentralization?

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1. North York By-law #25802, currently before the OMB, will increase the zoning on the west side of Yonge from Sheppard to Park Holme Avenue to 2.5. North York is also currently in the process of establishing an incentive or bonus policy which could raise the density to 3.5 in return for certain amenities.

Without knowing the steps required to achieve the proposed decentralization, it is difficult to endorse the proposed urban structure, no matter how much we might agree with the goals. And it will be equally difficult for local politicians to make intelligent transportation and land use decisions in the year ahead. We need to know more about the monetary stakes and the odds of success before we can tell if Metroplan is a gamble worth taking.

Charles K. Bens, Executive Director
Anne Golden, Research Co-ordinator



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