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Can we fix Toronto's transit by 2030? With an expected population of 8 million, experts say it's already too late

Even if dozens of planned transit projects get the funding they need and go ahead, it will hardly make a dent in the percentage of people commuting by public transit, Metrolinx predicts.



By [Ben Spurr](#) Transportation Reporter
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For Gina Létourneau, just the thought of trying to get from A to B on Toronto's congested streets is a source of frustration.

"It's just feels that everything takes forever, that you just have to allow so much time to do anything," she said.

Létourneau lives in the west end's Junction Triangle with her husband, Michael Piechota, and their two boys, who are six and two. She doesn't have a driver's licence and gets to her job as a translator at Queen's Park by TTC. If traffic is bad she can wait up to 25 minutes for her bus to arrive, and it can take more than an hour to make the six-kilometre journey.

Meanwhile, Piechota, a pharmacist, has seen his commute to Mississauga by car increase in the past few years to more than an hour each way, up from about 40 minutes.

Létourneau says the daily struggle with gridlock and unreliable transit is eroding her family's quality of life. She and her husband often

decide not to take their kids to activities at Harbourfront or other parts of the city because it takes too long.

She fears it will only get harder to get around once all the condos being built along her route to work are finished and full of people.

“The time you spend going places, you don’t spend it either being productive or ... with your family,” she lamented. “I don’t know if there’s going to be solutions.”

Létourneau is right to be worried.

The GTA’s transportation problems will only grow over the coming decade, a period during which the region’s population is expected to increase by more than 100,000 a year. By 2030, eight million people are expected to live in the Toronto region, and enabling them to go about their daily lives efficiently will be among our most daunting challenges.

Failing to do so will not only reduce residents’ quality of life; the Toronto Region Board of Trade has projected that by about 2030 gridlock will cost the region \$15 billion annually in lost productivity.

The public discussion about how to tackle the problem is typically dominated by debates about major public transit projects like subways and LRTs, but those won’t be magic bullets for slaying the region’s worsening transportation woes.



Experts say that to confront the challenge, over the next 10 years the GTA will need to use a combination of different strategies, and contemplate fundamental changes to how we live and move.

Even then, it may be too late. The only realistic goal may be mitigating the worst potential impacts of explosive population growth on the region's transportation network.

“We won't ever reduce congestion in this region” because it's growing too fast, said André Sorensen, an associate professor with the human geography department at the University of Toronto Scarborough.

“If we can keep it from getting much worse, then we'll be doing really well.”

For a sense of the scale of the problem, the Regional Transportation Plan published in 2018 by Metrolinx, the provincial transit agency for the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, provides sobering reading.

The report assessed the impact of dramatically expanding the region's rapid transit network, taking into account dozens of planned projects including well-advanced initiatives like the introduction of 15-minute, all-day GO Transit service and the Eglinton Crosstown LRT, potential future projects like a Waterfront LRT and an extension of the Finch LRT to Pearson airport, and less expensive measures like priority bus and streetcar corridors.

It concluded that if such an enhanced rapid transit network was in place — far from a certainty given the region's tumultuous transit politics and the level of investment required — by 2041 just 14.7 per cent of residents would commute by public transit. That's an increase of only 0.5 per cent from 14.2 per cent in 2011.

The numbers spell trouble. If the portion of the region's residents who commute by public transit remains relatively static as the population swells, roadways will only become more congested.

Given the urgency, experts are drawing attention to projects that can be deployed quickly and cheaply in order to draw people out of space-hogging private vehicles as soon as possible.

Jennifer Keesmaat, Toronto's chief planner from 2012 to 2017, said the region needs "to embrace the quick wins, the easy stuff that can have a transformative impact on how people move."

While measures like the installation of a comprehensive network of bike lanes may seem less impactful than major new transit projects, Keesmaat said such initiatives have the potential to encourage shifts away from car dependency. She lamented that so far the city has made little progress on that front.

Last year the city effectively dropped the 10-year cycling plan council approved in 2016. It was supposed to create up to 560 kilometres of cycle tracks and bike lanes, but by 2018 the city had managed only 33 kilometres. Council has now adopted a new plan that sets short-term goals for bike infrastructure.

"We had an unambitious 10-year plan and now we are underperforming in delivering an unambitious plan," Keesmaat said.

“It’s like a double whammy in terms of how far behind we are in making cycling a real choice in the city.”

Claire Nelischer, project manager at the Ryerson City Building Institute, cites the King St. streetcar corridor as the kind of quick win that should be replicated across the region.

That project, which council voted to make permanent last year, increased ridership on the TTC’s busiest streetcar route by 16 per cent, through easy-to-install measures like turning restrictions for drivers and the removal of on-street parking spaces. It took weeks to install on the downtown section of the route and cost just roughly \$3 million.

The TTC is exploring similar changes on five busy bus routes. Plans have yet to be finalized, but could include designated lanes that would allow buses on Eglinton East, Dufferin, Jane and other crowded lines to not only travel faster, but operate more reliably.

“I wouldn’t discount the power of these projects to influence change and how we move around,” Nelischer said. The question that should be top of mind, she said, is: “What can we do to get people moving right now?”

Measures to make public transit more attractive represent the “carrot” required to coax people out of their cars, but the region also needs “sticks” to make driving private vehicles less attractive, said Shauna Brail, director of the urban studies program at the University of Toronto.

That means eliminating subsidies for car use, like the city-owned on-street parking spaces and Green P lots that charge prices well below private lots, she argued.

“We absolutely subsidize people driving private vehicles far more than we subsidize any other form of transportation,” Brail said.

She also advocated for road pricing like the congestion charges drivers face in cities like London and Singapore. Charging drivers to enter the crowded downtown core, with prices increasing at the busiest times of

day, would reduce congestion and encourage people to time their trips outside of peak hours, carpool, or not drive at all.

Emerging technologies can also be expected to help alleviate the worst impacts of growing congestion between now and 2030.

Studies suggests ride-hailing services like Uber and Lyft contribute to congestion, with [a 2019 report from Ryerson's Urban Analytics Institute](#) concluding that in Toronto the services had shifted more than 30 million annual trips from public transit to cars.

Brail said ride-hailing services could be beneficial if the technology were applied to vehicles that can carry more people than a private automobile.

In 2018, Belleville, a city of about 50,000 people 200 kilometres east of Toronto, launched a project that allowed residents to use an app to hail public transit buses on one of its routes during certain hours. Riders could request a pick-up and designate a drop-off point, and the app automatically adjusted the bus route according to their requests. Early indications are the program increased ridership and made bus service more efficient.

Brail said if instituted in low-density parts of the GTA, such a service could create “an opportunity to provide service where none was previously offered,” and help boost transit ridership and reduce reliance on cars.

Similarly, while it's expected to take decades for automated vehicles to arrive on the GTA's streets in large numbers, driverless technology could prove useful over the next decade if applied to transit vehicles.

This fall, Toronto plans to launch a pilot project of a driverless shuttle that would connect Scarborough's West Rouge neighbourhood with the Rouge Hill GO station along a less than five-kilometre route. The hope is that the service will provide a “last mile” connection that will encourage GO riders to leave their cars at home.



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For all the efforts to make GTA residents' daily trips more efficient, experts say ultimately what's needed is to eliminate the need for long trips entirely. That will require a fundamental change to how communities are built.

Brampton, the suburban community northwest of Toronto whose population of about 600,000 is expected to grow to one million over the next 20 years, is leading the way.

It has designs to create a “20-minute neighbourhood” along a two-kilometre stretch of Queen St. East between Highway 410 and Etobicoke Creek. The idea is that residents will be able to access their workplace, school, grocery store and other essentials within a 20-minute walk or transit trip.

The concept isn't new, and many downtown Toronto neighbourhoods are effectively already 20-minute communities. But pursuing the idea represents a significant change for historically car-dependent parts of the region.

“It really is essentially about taking a city that grew up around the automobile and saying, as we grow ... we want to direct as much of that growth as we possibly can away from car dependency,” said Ken Greenberg, an urban designer who's advising Brampton.

As it exists today, Queen St. is a six-lane thoroughfare dominated by



strip malls, fast food joints, car dealerships and seas of parking lots.

Brampton wants to convert it into a master-planned neighbourhood lined with dense mixed-use developments that would include businesses, housing, schools, medical facilities and arts venues. When fully built, the 220-acre precinct is expected to accommodate 60,000 new residents and 83,000 new employees.

Increased density would support new transit on Queen. Metrolinx is advancing plans for a bus rapid transit line for the street, and the city also has plans for bidirectional cycle tracks and wide sidewalks for pedestrians.

“The key thing is to make sure that the majority of the travel is done by walking, biking, ride-share,” said Yvonne Yeung, Brampton’s manager of urban design.

In addition to redesigning the street, Brampton plans to rethink how buildings and public spaces are used. In a future 20-minute

neighbourhood, a school playground could be used as a public park or sports field outside of class hours, while a space that's a gym during the daytime could be converted into a nightclub in the evening.



Yeung envisions a future in which a series of 20-minute communities dot the GTA, each hub connected by rapid transit lines.

Experts like Brail say such ideas have the potential to address the worst of the looming crisis, but they won't be easy to execute.

“To get to this better future it requires hard decisions, it requires a lot of co-operation between different levels of government, community, civil society and private sector. We need this collaboration,” she said.



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