

Don Cayo: Vancouver has been spending more, but still trails other cities in rapid transit service

Metro Vancouver has been spending like mad for a couple of decades, but we still can't match Toronto or Montreal when it comes to providing commuters with rapid transit

BY DON CAYO, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST SEPTEMBER 5, 2014



Metro Vancouver has just 68 kilometres of rapid transit lines.

Photograph by: Ian Lindsay, PNG

VANCOUVER — Metro Vancouver has been spending like mad for a couple of decades, but we still can't match Toronto or Montreal when it comes to providing commuters with rapid transit.

And, despite construction work going full steam on the \$1.4-billion Evergreen Line, we're not likely to catch up any time soon.

A new study by the Pembina Institute notes that Vancouver has built 44 kilometres of new rapid transit lines in the past 20 years, almost half of it — the Canada Line — in the last 10, while Toronto and Montreal have added very little. This brings the total here to 68 kilometres, soon to be bolstered to 79 when the Evergreen Line to Coquitlam opens in 2016.

But Toronto's aging system of subways and streetcars already covers 83 kilometres, with 59.2 additional kilometres of rapid transit either being built or is planned and funded. Montreal has 69 kilometres, just one more than Vancouver, plus 14 more in the works, although this will be "BRT" (bus

rapid transit), which is a system of dedicated lanes, separated by curbs, and is much cheaper than rail to build and maintain.

Calgary, with just 59 kilometres of rapid transit now, will surpass Vancouver when its 25-kilometre expansion, also BRT, is complete. And Ottawa, the last city in the study, will narrow the distance it trails Vancouver when it completes 12.5 kilometres of surface and below-ground rail to add to the 43 kilometres of mostly low-cost BRT it has now.

These numbers are more meaningful — and Vancouver looks worse by comparison — when ridership and access is factored in.

Metro Vancouver residents take an average of 52 rapid transit trips per year — just one a week. This is considerably behind all four of the other cities — Toronto with 133, Ottawa with 104, Montreal with 93 and Calgary with 74.

As well, only 19 per cent of Metro Vancouver residents live within walking distance of rapid transit. This percentage doubles if you look just at the City of Vancouver, but the figures for the other cities are also dragged down by their sprawl, yet they range from 21 per cent in Calgary, to 28 per cent in Ottawa, to 34 per cent in Toronto, to 37 per cent in Montreal.

The report acknowledges TransLink's 38 kilometres of express bus lines helps fill Vancouver's gap.

"While not operating in a separated lane, these B-Line buses run frequently at all times of day and stop only at major arterials, making them fast and efficient," it says. "Large articulated buses are also used on certain routes to increase capacity. During peak hours, the curb lanes on the flagship 99 B-Line, which connects the University of British Columbia to the SkyTrain system, are reserved for exclusive bus use.

"Express bus service has been particularly effective as a competitive service, building demand until full rapid transit can be deployed. The 98 B-Line, connecting Richmond to downtown Vancouver, operated from 2001 to 2009, when the Canada Line opened. Similarly, a portion of the 99 B-Line between Lougheed Mall and Commercial-Broadway station operated until 2002, when the Millennium Line opened."

Still, these express buses fall well short of the BRT systems that have their own lanes, or even their own roads, as well as off-board fare collection to speed up loading. Of course, the infrastructure for this costs money — but far less than any form of rail.

The report notes that Montreal and Ottawa are spending, respectively, \$30 million and \$32 million per kilometre for their BRT expansions. This compares with \$141.3 million per kilometre that Vancouver has budgeted for its Evergreen Line, \$176.4 million per kilometre for Ottawa's new above- and below-ground rail, and an average of \$236 million per kilometre in Toronto for a planned mix of subway and light rail.

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