

The Growing Pains of Transit Infrastructure Projects

For residents of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), or any of the other bustling Canadian cities, there is an unending supply of transit related construction projects underway. Residents may regularly find themselves commuting amid traffic delays, road closures, and pothole-filled streets for years, with seemingly little progress. Robert Bulson, Professional Engineer and independent transit consultant was recently interviewed to shed some light on the reasons behind the hefty timelines and ongoing delays for so many projects. Bulson has worked on many projects across the GTA including TTC signaling improvements, the Eglinton Crosstown Light Rail, and the deployment of a Metrolinx GO Transit dispatch system.

Residents living near ongoing transit and other infrastructure projects experience frustration for their commutes to work and as part of their daily errands. Bulson explained the process of implementing a new project, "For new systems, there is a long process of public consultation ... This process can take several years depending on where the systems are being built and what is being built. Everybody wants more transit, but often nobody wants the inconveniences that building new transit often presents (road closures, noise, construction mess)."

He further explains that in order to minimize the impact on the local neighborhoods, work is stopped at night, or only half the lanes on a road are closed at a time. While this takes the project longer to reach completion, it means that local stores and residents can continue to operate in a more normal fashion. In most cases, it is not feasible for example, to shut down an entire subway system for the purpose of re-signalling the lines.

When asked to simplify the process for readers, Bulson divided a generic large public project into the following milestones:

1. Getting approval and funding.
2. Establishing the parameters of the project and choosing a contractor.
3. Agreeing on the final design.
4. Breaking ground (or starting) on the construction and completing the work. This is the part that most inconveniences the public.
5. Inspections and testing.

The amount of work that takes place before a project can even begin often takes months or years. While the messy work seems lengthy, construction is not always the most time-consuming portion of the work.

When infrastructure projects experience delays, or seem to never start, there is often much blame placed on the politicians involved. Bulson explains, "the biggest thing that politicians can do to keep these projects on track is to stay out of things once the work has started. Many experts are involved in putting together the proposed route, station locations and many other elements to provide the best transit solution. Politicians will generally opt to change the costs or locations to gain votes, without fully understanding the other long-term impacts."

Bulson also explained that residents will often complain that a transit system appears to be complete but with no active service taking place. This is evident for the recently completed Light Rail Transit

System in Waterloo, where the delivery of trains has caused extensive delays in the testing schedules. Bulson further explains, “Often the bones of the system are finished but can’t be used until all the muscles and skin are finished. Power systems and communications need to be installed, and then tested for safety.” He described the lengthy processes involved in ensuring the public’s safety and further the reliability of the system once implemented.

While we are all looking for solutions to our traffic woes and pollution concerns, change takes time. Canadians pay high taxes and expect to see results from political promises. Sadly, these improvements mean that we will all experience some discomfort. For now, pack your patience on your daily commutes and revel in the future possibilities of a well-functioning transit system that aims to eventually make traffic headaches a thing of the past.