

Richmond Hill on line

\$2.4B subway extension gets 'cautious' OK from T.O.

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Toronto may be between a rock and a hard place because of council's unwavering support of public transit.

Yesterday, the city's executive committee, chaired by Mayor David Miller, reluctantly and "cautiously" supported a 6.8-km, \$2.4-billion Yonge subway line extension from Finch station to Richmond Hill Centre in York Region -- part of a transit plan that is not their top priority.

Half of the six new stations being proposed will be in York Region and it's a priority for that regional council as well as Metrolinx, the regional transit policy-maker, which last year identified the Yonge subway extension as one of its top 15 priorities to be started in the first phase of its transit plan.

In their report to the committee, city staff noted it is, "not viewed as a priority transit project" from a TTC and City of Toronto perspective.

At yesterday's meeting, some councillors questioned whether the longer Yonge line will benefit the city at all, and won't only mean people from York Region will take up all the seats on the southbound Yonge subway cars in the morning. The committee, as did the TTC last year, insisted on a number of "requirements" before the project can go ahead.

Not only will the TTC, which will operate the extended line, build the extension, but it will also manage its construction and ultimately own the extended line's assets including those in York Region, except for the bus terminals and passenger pick-up and drop-off areas.

Most importantly, as outlined in the city's list of requirements, Toronto will not pay one penny for the capital costs of the extension or its operation.

Councillor Michael Walker, in fact, thinks the city is imposing so many restrictions that the line will never be extended.

"With all these conditions, there is a big enough poison pill to ensure it won't happen if we are the deciding factor," he said. "My concern is we are arguing ourselves out of dealing with this issue."

If funding for the project becomes available, shovels could hit the ground as early as 2012, with trains running by 2017.

Walker, not a member of the committee, said he thinks councillors are reluctant to support the plan because of a "turf war" with York Region.

"Maybe it's not what we want to do first, but maybe it has an impact in terms of a regional transit system Metrolinx is attempting to establish," Walker said. "I think we're getting to the situation where we can't be allowed to stop the major changes that we have to make in the region to create a transit system."

Councillor Joe Mihevc, a TTC commissioner, said council should give the plan a "cautious" yes, because it's the right thing for the region but it has to be "done right."

Miller said supporting the extension, provided Toronto doesn't have to pay anything for it, is the right thing to do for the city and the region.

"We support it (the Yonge subway extension) because we have a regional vision, but they (York Region and the province) should pay for it," the mayor said.