

Preferred access to select concerts,
shows and special events.



See Mo

MORE THAN JUST A CARD

 **thestar.com**

St. Clair safety must be tackled

June 26, 2008

ROYSON JAMES

You'd think public safety – getting emergency vehicles quickly to an address without further incident – would be among the top priorities when the city and the TTC build transit lines.

Not so, it seems, on the St. Clair streetcar right-of-way, now under construction.

The fire department is unequivocal in its claim the new dedicated streetcar line is unsafe, dangerous, and perilous to emergency vehicles. And a lame damage-control appearance from a back-peddling fire chief can't repair the damage.

The picture of fire Chief Bill Stewart and TTC chief general manager Gary Webster doing a walkabout and emerging with a thumbs-up for the line did nothing to improve confidence. In fact, it rankles. And the result is increased cynicism among residents who've fought elements of the transit line.

"Political pressure, no question about it," was the reason resident Margaret Smith saw for the about-face. She and other dissidents yesterday demanded the city at least give what it promised – modifications to the curb to allow emergency vehicles to mount it safely.

"This could have been avoided if they listened to their front-line emergency people," Smith said. "Instead, they double-crossed us. It's extraordinary."

An internal fire department report, dated April 2008, sent to Councillor Cesar Palacio, bluntly recites a litany of safety concerns about the new line. The city would not have allowed a private entity to proceed with a project that so fundamentally impairs firefighting ability. The fact that these problems were ignored suggests a less than honest and rigorous process.

The report from the fire department says the line is "without doubt unsafe" and "as constructed on St. Clair Avenue West is not useable by Toronto Fire Services for emergency response."

Narrow access routes, constant lowering and raising of the roadbed to accommodate intersections, curbs in areas to keep cars off the lines and centre poles along the route that are almost unavoidable by fire trucks racing to a fire, all add up to bad news: Potential head-on collisions with streetcars, crashes into poles, fire vehicles rolling off the raised curbs in extreme circumstances and, routinely, on some parts of the line that would bring response delays that amount to "minutes, not seconds."

That's what city council should have addressed this week. Instead we heard speeches about the number of cities around the globe that have dedicated streetcar lines.

Yes, Toronto is about to do the same with its Transit City plan. But St. Clair is not laying a positive precedent for what's to follow: more than 130 kilometres of light rail, separated from traffic, in the middle of the road. Eglinton, Finch West and Sheppard East are among the routes being considered. St. Clair Ave. should have been a slam-dunk for such a street makeover. It's wide, already has a piazza feel in places and is home to street parties after World Cup and Euro Cup soccer matches. But it's been compromised to death. Early returns are not beautiful, not satisfying, and now, not safe.

There is much riding on the St. Clair right-of-way. Its success is critical to Transit City's future.

Bungle implementation on the stretch here, less than 7 kilometres, as the city seems bent on doing, and installation elsewhere becomes troublesome. Learn from mistakes and you avoid similar problems elsewhere. Be honest with the stakeholders – businesses and residents – and future neighbourhoods along new routes will be more inclined to cooperate rather than oppose.

Email: rjames@thestar.ca