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TTC essential service debate stalled at gate

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ROYSON JAMES

Councillor Gloria Lindsay Luby asked the right question that no one was about to answer – not the sentinels on the city's executive committee, strategically placed by the mayor to repel any assault on the rights of his union brethren and sisteren.

If declaring the TTC an essential service inevitably leads to higher wages, as the mayor claims and presents as a major reason for rejecting the idea, why are the workers and the union opposed to it? Lindsay Luby asked.

A few muffled responses failed to dull the moment of lucidity from the Etobicoke councillor. But, never mind. The David Miller regime is not about to allow any intrusion into the rights of transit workers to strike at will and throw the city into chaos. So the upcoming debate at city council on whether or not to declare the TTC an essential service is merely an exercise in futility, much like the vote at executive committee Monday.

The vote was 8-1 against asking the province to declare the TTC an essential service. Apparently, a TTC strike costs the city as much as \$50 million a day. And the C.D. Howe Institute says government workers classed as essential labour invariably end up getting more pay, a premium that could cost the TTC \$25 million over a three-year contract. Who to believe?

City councillors who support the strike ban would be better positioned to take the cause to Metrolinx, the fledgling transit body that is planning the future of travel in Greater Toronto and Hamilton.

Metrolinx last month released a huge plan to spend \$50 billion over the next 25 years. Some have envisioned a future where Metrolinx amalgamates all the transit operators in the region into one body. That would be a mistake of disastrous proportions, on many levels.

Imagine a bargaining unit that could shut down travel from Clarington to Hamilton and all points up to Lake Simcoe. While Metrolinx is unlikely to create such a mega-body – Chair Rob MacIsaac said it's not part of his agenda – MacIssac and others have not even considered the opposite side of that coin.

How about breaking up the proposed new transit lines and projects so that no one union or bargaining unit can cripple the city region?

Allow the TTC and its union to keep the subway extensions to York Region. But is there value in creating a different model for the new streetcar lines planned as part of Toronto's Transit City?

And, if the streetcar lines remain status quo, maybe the bus rapid transit lines and other routes could be siphoned off with a different kind of operational management.

Some citizens cringe when they hear the word "privatization," but some transit services could be privatized, using a variety of models that allow competition and comparisons.

Take Viva, for example, the parallel transit service now on strike in York Region. York Region owns the service but the operation is privatized and farmed out to a corporation, under a contract. The employees are unionized, represented by the same Amalgamated Transit Union that governs the TTC, but their contract is different.

Such a setup reduces the bargaining power of the union – and explains the minor impact of the strike on York Region travel. Taxpayers get a break on what is, call it what you like, an essential service.

There are other public-private models that provide even greater protection to the commuter. They should all be part of the discussion.

Innovation, diversity, experimentation and a variety of approaches should mark the new era of transit building in the Toronto region.

Royson James usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Email: rjames@thestar.ca