

SPINNING OUR WHEELS: TRANSPORTATION AT YORK

We all know that York is a commuter university. A subway would help things enormously, but even if it were approved we couldn't ride it until the late 90s.

What do we do in the meantime? Are we looking at a university campus with more and more parking lots? Are we actively working to avoid this by promoting alternatives such as transit, bicycles and on-campus housing?

by Ed Drass

Transportation has been a basic issue at York University ever since a few innocent farm fields were chosen to provide space for a new northern campus.

Perhaps as much as course selection or grades, the subject of parking and transit has occupied the collective mind of the York student community.

In the 70s, Toronto students spent hours on the Keele bus when the Spadina subway was just a plan on paper somewhere. Now some students come to York from as far away as St. Catharines and Barrie, and almost always by private car. In the meantime, transit-users sit (or stand) wishing their bus was free of the car traffic.

There is a real move to bring a subway to the Keele campus. The plan to loop the subway from Wilson station to Finch station could bring Toronto to the University's doorstep. Students could get downtown faster than a police car could.

However, what do we do in the meantime? Even if a rapid transit link was approved, it would take seven to 10 years for trains to rumble under campus. And if it doesn't come, will we be inundated with cars? Can we possibly build enough parking to accommodate thousands of future students? Do we want to?

Presently, parking lots are a way of life at York. Viewed as part of the main campus' ugliness, they are seen by some as visual pollution that only make York's infamous winds blow faster and seem more brutal.

To drivers, the lots are a frustrating necessity. People who think they create an inhuman environment are balanced by those who complain that there isn't enough space. Even scenic Glendon campus has a large parking lot in an otherwise treed valley.

It is inevitable that York will grow, and that more people will travel to the two campuses. Unfortunately, no matter how many lots are built or expanded, it seems that they are always full to overflowing.

The administration's *Green Paper on Enrolment* focuses on the limiting factors of "our shortage of built space" and "something of a parking crisis, which can only be resolved if demand is diverted (eg. by carpools or better mass transit) or satisfied in some other way than by surface parking (eg. by multi-level parking structures)."

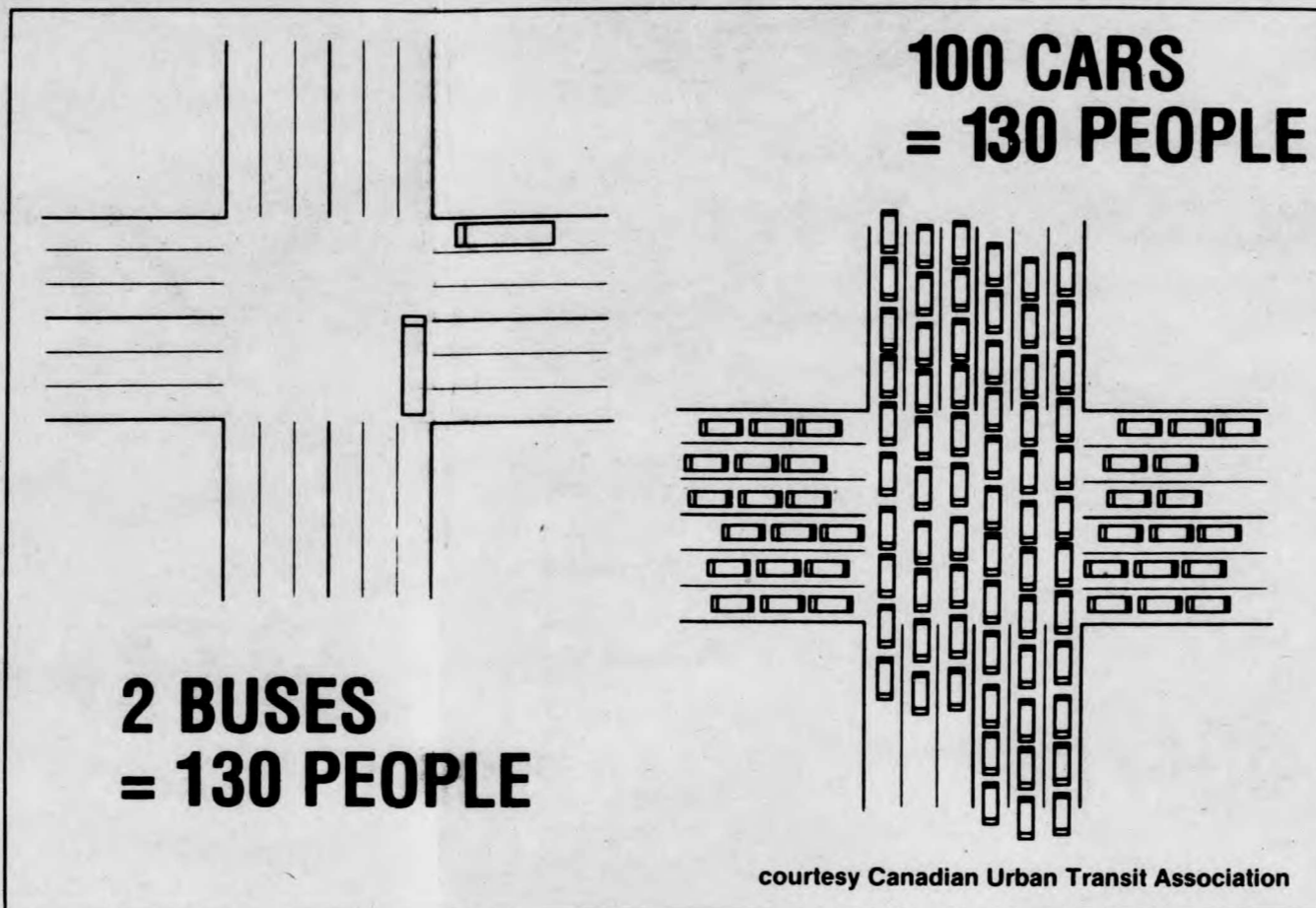
This transportation crunch is compounded by the fact that traffic on Toronto's streets is increasing by four per cent per year. This means longer bus travel times and more incentive to leave public transit. As more people use their cars, a vicious circle results. There are even plans to widen Keele and Finch to three lanes each way to deal with the existing congestion, but where does it stop?

Think of how much space is needed to allow 30 single-driver cars (the Toronto average is 1.3 occupants per vehicle) to travel and park compared to the space one 30-person bus takes. And buses don't need parking space on campus.

Transportation woes can be minimized by more intensive use of the land, although this means less open space. Housing is a crucial component of this plan. York University has a below average proportion of housing (less than five per cent of students actually live here), but new developments will help.

The planned Harry Sherman Crowe Housing Co-op will make 158 apartments available to staff and faculty, a group not previously provided for, except in the old farmhouses on campus. (Trees and green space may be lost, however, to make space for the Co-op. See *Excalibur* article of Mar. 6) These people won't need to drive to work, and will more likely be car-less.

York has a good share of transportation experts. Sociology professor Tony Turrittin is a member and former president of



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Transport 2000 Ontario, part of a national group of transport users.

Transport 2000 has lobbied in favor of VIA Rail, and various local transit initiatives. According to Turrittin, the campus could "really flower with rapid transit," but issues such as handicapped transit should also be addressed. He says that Metro and the Province have to act together for anything to be built.

Up until 1988, York and UofT used to run the Joint Program in Transportation. York has since dropped out, but according to UofT professor Jerry Stuart, because York's students come from such a wide area, and because the Keele campus' location is "not urban in flavor," it would be difficult to serve commuters with a few fixed transit facilities.

"You [York] really do have a serious problem," Stuart says. The York Federation of Students (YFS) is also involved in this issue as far as being a member of the Loop Group. It cooperates with various local municipalities (Vaughan, North York), developers and the York administration.

Asked about transportation issues in the immediate future, current YFS VP External Mitch Blass spoke of trying to better TTC services. After heavy lobbying, the YFS successfully got the TTC to extend late night 106 bus service. They are now interested in an express bus to Finch station, better service down to Finch Ave., and a Steeles bus that actually passes through campus both ways and serves people to the west.

Presented with the idea of a student car-pooling network or service, Blass was at first wary, citing safety and difficulty. He later admitted that it was perhaps something that Envision York (a campus-wide environmental committee of which YFS is a part) could address effectively.

Asked about the travelling habits of the (1990-91) YFS executive, Blass said two executives drive, two use the bus and that he himself uses transit now, but that he tries to share rides to campus. Car-pooling has since come up as an issue in the 1991 YFS/FEY presidential elections.

A subway loop could pass along Finch Ave., along the hydro corridor north of Finch, or along Steeles. If the Loop Group gets its way, a station would be located near Keele and Steeles, serving York's 50,000 person community.

Another possible location is Finch and Keele, running down to Wilson station through the Canadian Forces Base along Sheppard.

When you think of how much energy is used per person by each type of movement, and the amount of pollution emitted, the idea of environmental responsibility becomes relevant. Public transit can involve less comfort and cars can offer speed and solitude, but considering the side effects of auto use, using them is rather selfish as well.

So what do we do? Many York students and staff have become used (addicted) to their cars, even though costs are incredibly high now. Some live in places that make commuting by public transit a joke. Suburban buses are infrequent and don't mesh well with TTC routes. However,

there is government momentum toward a Greater Toronto Area transit network, linking more subways with better GO service and integrated bus routes. At the same time, TTC cuts are imminent.

The unfortunate truth is that if we do not want our campus to lose more of its open space to parking lots, we must concentrate on our other options: not only better transit, but better campus planning and design that promotes bicycle and pedestrian traffic.

Plans currently include the regrading of university lands which may adversely affect existing natural features on campus. "From the standpoint of energy consumption, pollution and land use, the more people who use transit to get here, the less of an impact there will be," Daigle says.

In addition, there is a GO Rail line in this area that could eventually affect York. There are plans to add a local station to this line that runs between Barrie and Union Station. Only a kilometre east of Keele, a station could be built at Steeles, Finch or Sheppard.

According to Bob Boyle of Go Transit, the Metro Rail Station Location Study will seek to link the TTC with GO Transit more effectively. Both he and Randy McLean of the Metro planning department said that the final location of a GO station would probably follow a decision on the Loop. Both personally felt that a common station on or near Finch at the rail line was the most likely.

doesn't have a subway station underneath it. But York administration has big plans. Aside from being a part of the Loop Group (committed to a subway connection), York's 1988 Master Plan calls for major construction. Prepared by the IBI group of planners and engineers, the Plan calls for a network of "local streets" lined with new buildings including commercial business developments, possible hotel/convention centres and new academic "greens" on campus. These local streets would parallel Keele and Steeles (which carry 85 per cent of traffic to York) and would "provide for bicycle movement" as well as cars. All new buildings would incorporate bus shelters and waiting areas into their structures.

When the Student Centre and York Lanes open, they will feature some kind of combined waiting area for the 106 buses. (Look for this before summer.) Anyone who has tried to line up at the current Ross stops will appreciate being better protected from the cold and rain.

Ron Hunt of the York University Development Corporation foresees a new University Common that will comprise a turnaround which services TTC buses, cars and the Glendon shuttle.

Parking garages are also a possibility, as new buildings replace parking lots. Jean-Marc Daigle, of the Green Campus Project, has concerns about the extent of the planned development. As far as parking structures, he likes the idea of using land more efficiently but is not sure about the "idea of safety."

More importantly, Daigle is concerned that a great deal of land will be used simply to provide the urban grid pattern of streets. He raises questions about how many people we want on campus and if we want every square inch of this campus to be used.

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These could be merely promises if in fact the Loop does not

go through, or if the line goes no further west than Dufferin as some proposals suggest. In any case York's transit connection would continue to be the bus, and unless some bus lanes or other systems are developed, students travelling from southern Metro can expect slower service.

THE FUTURE

So what should we expect? What can we work toward? Ideally, not much more land will be given over to parking lots. This will require a specific and farsighted effort by the York community to give people more alternatives to the private car.

The trend toward heavier car use will need to be met with detailed plans that either discourage auto use on campus or so favor transit use, cycling and walking that people choose to leave their cars behind.

We must realize that it is possible to be precedent-setting while still acknowledging external realities. Glendon's location is more central, but pressures to create more parking there mean that alternatives might not be considered until after the campus' unique beauty is irreversibly damaged.

If we don't try to avoid being forced into an inefficient single-mode transportation system, we will be stuck with a university that is a great place for cars, ugliness and high winds but a repugnant place for people.

At the inauguration of the Loop Group last September, Ian Lithgow, York's Vice President of External Relations, said "We need fewer students arriving by

private auto." More recently, he hoped that the YFS would take a more active stance in presenting the idea to the students.

So imagine this:

- *York University in the year 2000 is surrounded by comfortable, medium density (townhome etc.) housing that allows students, staff and faculty to walk or bike wherever they wish.
- *A critical mass is reached concerning stores, restaurants, supermarkets and services.
- *Subway stations link this university-city with the downtown and a shuttle or streetcar crosses the campus, joining the subway and a GO Rail station.
- *Suburban buses come together into a station making it easy for residents of York and Peel regions to get to the area.
- *Multi-use facilities attract people from throughout the Greater Toronto Area.
- *Bike routes through nearby valleys head downtown and elsewhere in Metro.
- *Safe, well travelled, pedestrian-friendly walkways cover the campus.
- *Strategically-placed vegetation provides shade in summer and wind protection in winter.

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Where do we go from here?

*increase lobbying efforts for rapid transit service (subway, GO rail)

*intensify housing on campus and push for more housing nearby (through zoning in Vaughan and North York) improve TTC surface routes, get 24-hour service (even Humber College has it), more frequent 106 night service, summer and evening express service

*improve Vaughan Transit service to campus
*promote transit on campus by providing heated and well lit bus shelters (similar to parking kiosks) at all stops; allowing buses to have right-of-way at all times on campus; TimeLine schedule phone numbers should be marked on all maps and in appropriate university publications (eg. Internal Directory)

*designate areas in new University Common for TTC buses, the Glendon shuttle, taxis, WheelTrans and car pickups

*promote bicycle use by introducing on and off-road bike paths all over campus, providing good bike racks around Central Square and other academic buildings (see Passy Gardens for inspiration); providing shower facilities to cyclists who would like to freshen up before work; start a cycling committee; provide good bike racks at Central Square, the Student Centre and York Lanes

*promote walking and wheelchair access by developing walking paths, linking Black Creek and neighboring shopping areas

*develop a commuter coordinating service; the administration and other bodies should attempt to link people for carpooling using ride boards (see Glendon or Waterloo) or in-class assistance. (Safety could be ensured by same-sex or same-course designations.)

*schedule more courses in off-peak hours

*offer option of staggered

work hours for staff

*expand carpool privileges and promotion with more lots, better enforcement and publicity of existing carpool passes

*put up an inter-city ride board and promote inter-city ride-sharing services like Allo-Stop

*improve shuttle service between the two campuses during the day and for night classes

*charge all parking-space users and provide free or subsidized Metropasses to all staff

*take interest in the Parking Study and plans for the campus, as well as provincial studies of Metro bicycle and transit routes

*plan a York equivalent to the UofT's "No Fuel to School" week

*start a "Dr. Gridlock" article in *Excalibur* discussing the community's beefs and concerns about transportation

*use your own car less