

Train comes full circle, back into vogue

Airport transit line, high-speed T.O. link suddenly feasible

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To understand why two long-mulled train megaprojects are suddenly in vogue again, visit Dorval at rush hour.

Streams of cars arrive and leave Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport, often in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Motorists speed to and from Toronto on Highway 20. Planes take off for the short hop to Toronto. Travellers wait in long lines for taxis at the airport stand.

After decades of debate, study and neglect, some experts say the time is right for the proposed trains: a high-speed Montreal-Toronto rail link, and a light-rail transit line connecting downtown, the airport and the West Island.

Why now?

Fuel costs are rising, there are growing demands to cut greenhouse gases spewed by aircraft and cars, and society is realizing vehicular traffic is a major drain on the economy.

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The two train lines were front-page news on Thursday.

That day, the Quebec, Ontario and federal governments announced they will spend a total of \$2 billion to update previous feasibility studies of a high-speed train in the Quebec City-Windsor, Ont., corridor.

Premier Jean Charest praised such a train's "social and economic benefits."

On the same day, it emerged that transit authorities and all three levels of government are studying plans for a "tram-train" light-rail project to provide the first direct public-transit link to Trudeau airport. Serving commuters and airport users, it would run from the West Island to downtown.

"It's a moment of repositioning," said rail expert David Hanna, director of graduate studies in urban studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

"In the 1950s, society repositioned itself, saw the automobile as the fact on the ground and basically scrapped public transit and trains, and shifted very radically toward cars."

Now, "I think we've turned full circle," realizing it's not economically or environmentally feasible to rely so much on road transport and air traffic, particularly highly polluting short-hop flights, Hanna said.

Trains would help reduce the production of greenhouse gases and alleviate the road traffic that Transport Canada estimates costs \$854 million a year in Montreal, he noted. The figure, calculated in 2006, includes the cost of time lost to travellers, wasted fuel and increased greenhouse-gas emissions.

In 1995, the last major study to consider a high-speed Quebec-Ontario train estimated the cost at \$18.3 billion for a super-fast, 300-kilometre-an-hour train on dedicated tracks between Quebec City and Windsor.

A more likely scenario would involve a smaller price tag, said David Jeanes, president of Transport 2000, a transit users' advocacy group. He envisages a cheaper high-speed train that would have dedicated tracks along part of the route but would also use some existing rails, sharing some of those with freight trains. It could initially link Montreal to Toronto, with Quebec City added later, he said.

The Montreal-Toronto route is Via Rail's busiest market, with about 400 trains now operating in the Quebec City-Windsor corridor every week.

Today, the fastest Via Rail Montreal-Toronto train is supposed to take 4 1/2 hours. That train attains a top speed of about 160 kilometres an hour, Jeanes noted. He foresees the new one reaching 240 kilometres an hour, cutting the trip to about three hours.

It would still cost billions, but the price is justifiable, he said.

"We're now spending billions of dollars trying to build our way out of highway congestion - widening highways, building new ones," Jeanes said.

"Yet it never actually gets rid of the congestion because the highways encourage additional automobile use and discourage the use of public transit. We end up digging ourselves deeper into a congestion hole."

The situation in Quebec and Ontario is similar to that of France in the early 1980s, before that country introduced high-speed trains, Jeanes said.

"The French were always jumping into their cars and heading off for the weekend," he said. "What the high-speed train did was give people an alternative to driving."

"They initially thought it could only be justified on France's busiest (short) routes," Jeanes added, but the extensive network now covers secondary and long routes.

Others say if high-speed trains are introduced, a completely dedicated line should be built for them. The \$18.3-billion proposal in 1995 said a Montreal-Toronto trip would take two hours and 18 minutes.

"I don't see what more we can do with existing track; we've milked the freight system for all it's worth," Hanna said.

"It would not make any significant gains other than 20 or 30 minutes to, say, Toronto. It's wasted money. It's not revolutionary; it doesn't do enough.

"We really have to move to dedicated track. We really have to move on with the technology that exists everywhere else."

Economist Mario Iacobacci, director of research at the Conference Board of Canada, said the new government initiative will help determine whether benefits to the public (like fewer carbon emissions and less traffic) would justify the big investment of taxpayer cash.

"These projects are not economically feasible on their own; they won't make money," said Iacobacci, who has worked as a consultant on European high-speed train projects.

In Canada, a high-speed train could lure away air travellers, he said. "If you can do the (Montreal-Toronto) trip in three hours or less, it becomes a trip you can do in a single day, back and forth," an attractive option to business travellers, he said.

A high-speed link would also encourage travel among people who would not have otherwise made the trip, similar to the way cheap short-haul flights caused air travel to mushroom in Europe, Iacobacci said. "People started travelling a lot more."

Multiple departures would be needed, he added. "It wouldn't be an attractive option if you only have one or two per day. You would have, say, three or four in the morning; three or four in the evening, with hundreds of passengers on each one."

The tramway-train envisaged for a possible new downtown-

airport-West Island line would aim to cut car traffic at the airport and improve West Island commuter train service, which is now limited because of the amount of freight traffic on the tracks it uses. No cost estimate is available for the project.

Returning from a trip to Egypt this month, public-transit expert Ahmed El-Geneidy saw first-hand the need for public transit at Trudeau airport. The McGill University urban-planning professor and his family waited 90 minutes for a taxi in a line that snaked around the airport.

"A light-rail system is obviously needed," he said. "They have been tested in many places in the U.S." He pointed to his last home cities - Minneapolis and Portland, Ore. - where airport trains have proven successful and have cut traffic.

Such a line in Montreal would prove popular, especially with people going on short trips with little luggage in tow, he said.

Even those taking longer trips would use it, Jeanes added. To avoid security delays, travellers these days take fewer bags. In Europe, some airlines let travellers arriving at the airport by rail check their luggage when they board the train, he noted.

Less pollution and traffic aren't the only benefits of airport rail links, he added. Fewer people drive to airports with train stations, allowing airports to shrink parking lots and tap the real estate for more productive uses, like business centres, hotels and malls, Jeanes said.

Montreal's lack of airport public transit makes it an oddity, Hanna said.

"I find it astounding that when the decision was made to shift all air traffic to Dorval (from Mirabel), no public-transit plan was put in place," he said.

"Why are we asking people to plan their departures for the airport hours in advance? The answer is because there is no efficient transportation."

Hanna says he is more optimistic than ever that an airport rail link and a high-speed train will finally materialize.

"The political will is beginning to finally jell," he said.

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Cities with airport links

London's Heathrow Airport is served by the Underground and the BAA Heathrow Express.

Chicago's O'Hare Airport has an airport-to-downtown link.

Tokyo's Narita Airport has two rail lines with express service.

Paris's Charles de Gaulle Airport has the TGV to Paris and other locations in France and Belgium.

Hong Kong Airport has a train every 12 minutes, with stops in Kowloon and Hong Kong.

Kuala Lumpur Airport has an express rail line to the city.

San Francisco International Airport has the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) into the city.

JFK Airport in New York City has the AirTrain, which links to the subway and bus system.

Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Airport has hourly service to Rome's central train station.

Brisbane, Australia, has the Airtrain between the airport and downtown and other local stations.

Amsterdam's Schiphol International Airport has Direct Rail Link to city's central station.

Bangkok International Airport has the Bangkok Airport Express to the city and local trains also service the airport.

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