

Streetcars for Toronto Committee

A Case Study of Citizen Advocacy in Transit Planning and Operations

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Determined to save Toronto's streetcars, a citizen advocacy group, the Streetcars for Toronto Committee, formed in 1972. By issuing an authoritative paper challenging the Toronto Transit Commission staff's plan to abandon streetcar operations and by dealing effectively with the media, the committee persuaded the transit commissioners to retain the metropolitan area's streetcars.

Since then, the committee has gone on to fight other transit battles, representing transit users who favor more efficient and cost-effective transit alternatives. The committee has become a model for citizen action elsewhere and currently is promoting "realistic" light rail transit as a component of Toronto's long-range "Network 2011" plan, which calls for a conventional heavy rail subway.

ALTHOUGH THE AUTHOR WAS a founding member of the Streetcars for Toronto Committee and is still active in its pursuits, an attempt has been made to describe the committee's formation and development from as objective a viewpoint as possible. The paper should not be construed as a textbook primer on public participation; rather, it is an examination of the evolution of a group of concerned citizens that was created on reaction to political decisions that were being made on the basis of technical and professional analyses of a specific issue, in this case whether to commence abandonment of the streetcar network in Toronto in the early 1970s.

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By relating the steps that were undertaken by the committee in challenging that initial proposal for streetcar abandonment, the development of a citizen advocacy group specifically concerned with transit planning and operations can be described. Furthermore, it will be shown how this group became an effective and widely recognized political lobbying and pressure group.

Public involvement in the transit field has become an accepted concept reinforced by legislation in almost all jurisdictions across North America. Citizen reaction and involvement have had particular impact in the development of light rail operations in the U.S. and Canadian cities where this mode has been implemented over the past dozen years or so.

FORMULATION AND INITIAL AIMS

By autumn 1971 the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) had decided in principle to begin phasing out its vast streetcar system (1). By 1980 there were to be no more streetcars operating on the streets of Toronto, the last city in Canada to have a streetcar network. As early as 1952, a report had been prepared by the TTC (2) that indicated a policy to eventually eliminate the streetcars although, by that time, the TTC had the largest operating President's Conference Committee (PCC) fleet in North America. In 1966 (3) an agenda had been developed for gradual elimination of the system. The first line to go was St. Clair. It was replaced by trolley buses made surplus by the conversion of the intensive Yonge Trolley Coach to diesel buses in conjunction with the extension of the Yonge Street subway. It was ironic that St. Clair was chosen as the first route to go, as the line was originally constructed on its own central right-of-way along one of the widest thoroughfares within the City of Toronto proper. This conversion was, interestingly, being planned at the same time that the light rail concept was beginning to gel and gain support on this side of the Atlantic (4).

In late summer 1972, two City of Toronto aldermen from the north wards, Paul Pickett and William Kilbourn, called a public meeting at City Hall. Over 100 citizens from all over the metropolitan area jammed a committee room, all expressing commitment for retaining the streetcar as an important aspect of Toronto's transit system. A call was made for those interested in working on a committee to meet the following week, at which time the Streetcars for Toronto Committee was formally initiated.

In all, about a dozen individuals came together to devise strategies to oppose the streetcar abandonment program. The chairman was a professor of child psychology from the University of Toronto, Andrew Biemiller. The vice-chairman was Steve Munro, a computer programmer. Other members included Mike Filey, a historian; Ross Bobak and Chris Prentice, then university students; Robert Wightman, a secondary school teacher with a

background in electrical engineering; and the author of this report, an urban planner. Instead of devoting energy to organizing mass demonstrations, it was decided at the outset that all efforts would be pooled to produce a documented argument for retention. This argument was to be thoroughly researched, technically correct, and as emphatic as possible in putting forward sound and logical evidence in support of the streetcar.

In preparing the paper, a meeting was held to organize the content and to assign various sections to those with a particular interest or background in that subject. To begin, it was decided that a history of the TTC would preface the positions that were to be developed. This would be followed by a section dealing with the current status and operations of the TTC in general as they relate to metropolitan Toronto, the TTC's service area. Next would come a more technical section that would address the operational aspects of the proposed streetcar conversion program. Immediately thereafter, a critically important section would attempt to detail the financial aspects of the streetcar conversion program. Finally, a summary would repeat the most important points that the committee wanted to highlight.

It was agreed that the paper would be documented as much as possible, preferably by the TTC's own reports. Additionally, the format used by the TTC in relating details and operating statistics in its own reports would be copied. At all times the paper would be positive in its approach and would scrupulously avoid innuendo and any aspect of personal attack.

Thus, the format and the content were determined prior to the actual writing. Moreover, each writer agreed to compose that part of the paper that related to his own particular interest or expertise. It would truly be a committee effort, but would be honed, tailored, and rewritten at least twice by all those involved at a general meeting where all would be encouraged to criticize each other's contributions. The term "devil's advocate" took on real meaning at these sessions.

The critical importance of educating the public, the politicians, and, most important, the media, was recognized from the very beginning. Accordingly, it was agreed that as soon as the report, "A Brief for the Retention of Streetcar Service in Toronto," was completed, a one-page news release with two fact sheets would be produced to summarize it for widespread distribution throughout metropolitan Toronto.

The brief was a comprehensive 18-page document that put forward a succinct argument in favor of streetcar retention, based on widely accepted economic, engineering, and land use planning principles. In addition, an attempt was made to elucidate the subjective values of the streetcar system as an integral component of the city's history contributing to Toronto's unique character among the major urban centers of North America. Finally, the brief focused on the streetcar as an important social component of Toronto that

greatly contributed to the city's claim as one of North America's most livable cities of its size.

The committee recognized the role that the media would have to play in presenting to the public the issues that were involved in either retaining or abandoning the streetcar system. It was agreed that there would have to be at least a 3-week period prior to the TTC meeting at which that decision would be made. Fortunately, one of the committee's members had had first-hand experience for some time in dealing with the press and with the television and radio stations in Toronto. As a popular historian, Mike Filey had written several books about Toronto and had dealt with the media in publicizing his works.

A formal press conference was held at City Hall on October 17, 1972, to unveil the brief. Six days later, the committee chairman presented the brief to the City of Toronto Council's public works committee so that the paper could be officially received and commented upon by the local politicians prior to its presentation to the TTC. All facets of the media picked up the story, and the airwaves and newspapers were filled with interviews, commentary, and editorials. In retrospect it was indeed a wise decision to allow a 3-week lead period for disseminating the brief. The issue was allowed to develop into one of high visibility and interest.

By the time of the November 7, 1972, TTC meeting, it seemed that everyone had become aware of the issue and had reached his or her conclusion. The committee had succeeded in making the issue one of significant public concern. The preparation of easy-to-read fact sheets and a one-page press release to summarize the salient points was a lesson in dealing with the media that the committee has retained to this day. Lengthy, convoluted arguments do not reach the public or the politicians, because the media generally refuse to even read such documents, let alone boil them down on their own. The committee foresaw this and devoted considerable energy to making readily digestible documents available.

Underlying all formulation of strategy and position was the concept of committee, each member contributing his expertise and everyone criticizing everyone else in a forum setting. The desire to second guess the decision-makers was a constant throughout all the steps leading to the release of the brief, be it preliminary discussion, individual preparation, or committee review. This process has also remained with the committee.

At its November 7, 1972, meeting the TTC, whose members are appointed by the Metropolitan Toronto Council as a mix of politicians and citizens, unanimously decided to retain the streetcar system although TTC staff had recommended that the St. Clair street line be abandoned as the first phase of total street railway elimination (5, 6). In retrospect, that decision has proven to be one of the most significant in the recent history of public transit in

Toronto, not only from the standpoint of the physical system, but from the effect that citizen advocacy and public pressure had on the TTC in a manner never before experienced.

MODIFIED GOALS

With a major victory in its favor (reconfirmed by the TTC in May 1973) (7), the Streetcars for Toronto Committee immediately reexamined its role and realized that an effective transit lobby group could have a beneficial impact on metropolitan Toronto in terms of better user-oriented public transit. Therefore, it was decided that the committee would, above all, represent those who actually used public transit and would attempt to focus political and media attention on more cost-effective transit development and operations than were being proposed.

At the same time that important transit decisions were being concluded at the local and regional levels in Toronto, even more significant events were occurring at the provincial level as the Province of Ontario began to assume an ever-increasing role in public transportation. The provincial Ministry of Transportation and Communications was commencing a major initiative in terms of financial assistance for both capital and operating costs of municipal transit throughout Ontario. The implications of vastly increased provincial involvement through extensive funding were quickly materializing. They were explicitly emphasized by the establishment of the Ontario Transportation Development Corporation, which would shortly transform itself into the Urban Transportation Development Corporation. The Streetcars for Toronto Committee soon had an entirely new area of concern as the province began to exert its influence in metropolitan Toronto.

CHANGING INTERESTS

Following the retention of the streetcar system in late 1972, the committee began work on a number of projects, all directed at initiating new concepts and improving current aspects of the transit system in Toronto. Among these was the proposal in 1973 to restore a 1920s Peter Witt car for a tourist sightseeing service. Now franchised to a private operator, the Witt tour has become an integral part of the downtown Toronto tourist scene. Another project was the proposal to convert the Bay Street diesel bus service to trolleybus for environmental and better fleet utilization purposes. In June 1973, the committee presented a "Brief for the Establishment of Light Rapid Transit on Spadina Avenue," the first instance in which any agency or group had proposed such a scheme. As an aside, it's interesting to note that when

the Spadina LRT proposal was reintroduced by the TTC in this decade, no mention was made of the committee's early initiative, which, in retrospect, was far simpler and much more sympathetic to the complex urban framework than the current TTC scheme, which is still mired in community and political controversy.

In November 1973, a little over a year after its initial victory, the committee came face-to-face with provincial might, as the Ontario government's ill-fated GO-Urban project was thwarted by the committee's document that successfully challenged the unproven assumptions of that magnetically levitated automatic system. The committee's contention that GO-Urban's claims were "naive, inaccurate and misleading" was completely vindicated as the province pulled the plug on its grandiose visions of science-fiction transit encircling Toronto on 90 mi of guideway. As part of its efforts in this struggle, the committee prepared an overview of light rail as "A Viable Form of Intermediate Capacity Transit," which was presented before various committees and bodies in metropolitan Toronto. Accompanying this paper was a series of slides and a commentary that are still pertinent today, almost 15 years later.

THE COMMITTEE IN THE 1980s

Provincial influence in municipal transit became a fact of life as Ontario increased its financial contribution in the late 1970s. Obviously, while paying for more and more, the Ontario government wanted a bigger say in the planning and operations of public transit. The provincially owned Urban Transportation Development Corporation (UTDC) was a strong manifestation of the provincial interest in transit, but the UTDC itself was being used by the province as a means to implement transit developments. Even more significantly, transit developments themselves were being proposed as a means to generate business for the UTDC. It was this latter situation that stimulated the resuscitation of the Streetcars for Toronto Committee in the early 1980s.

The City of Toronto Council decided in early 1984 to challenge the agreement concluded by the TTC and by the Metropolitan Toronto Council to purchase 52 articulated light rail vehicles (ALRVs) from the UTDC. The city argued its case at the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), a quasi-judicial body that oversees major municipal decisions and purchases. The city believed that the cost was too high and that the use of these high-capacity vehicles would be detrimental to the service levels on the streetcar routes in operation on city streets. The committee was asked to prepare a commentary and position paper by the two aldermen who presented the motion. In addition, the committee was asked to work with the city solicitor and to participate on the

city's behalf at the OMB. Unfortunately, the OMB refused a full hearing and the UTDC was allowed to conclude the deal without a tendering of any kind. (It is interesting to note that almost 4 years later, in January 1988, the TTC accepted one of the ALRVs for revenue service on the Long Branch route, a route that would not normally see articulated operation.)

Provincial influence was also very much in evidence when the TTC decided to replace conventional light rail technology as the operating mode on the Scarborough extension to the Bloor-Danforth east-west subway line. Instead of conventional light rail, the line would now use the UTDC's automated intermediate-capacity system, which was developed after GO-Urban had been scrapped. The Province of Ontario agreed to pay for all additional costs that this new system would require over conventional light rail. Following this decision, the Streetcars for Toronto Committee utilized the media, not only to express its strong reservations about the change in technology, but also to expound on the virtues of conventional light rail.

On other matters, the committee has continued its activities in the struggle to retain the trolleybus system in Toronto. For almost 5 years, the committee has responded on at least three occasions to efforts by the TTC staff to convince the commissioners to eliminate the trolleybus completely from TTC operations. At this writing, management has been promoting TTC natural gas-powered buses as replacements for the trolleybus fleet.

Additional areas of concern for the committee have been the committee's own initiatives: daily passes, "short turning" of streetcar service, and rebuilding of PCC streetcars (besides the Spadina streetcar and the Bay trolleybus previously mentioned). In responding to issues such as night owl service and the long-range "Network 2011" transit plan for metropolitan Toronto, the committee followed a set pattern of participation, namely a response to the specific official document and the position(s) therein on the basis of step-by-step analysis utilizing the TTC data as much as possible. The committee's reports are written mostly as a group effort with participation from the members in critical self-examination prior to its final draft. Second guessing the decision-makers is still a strong practice and summaries are carefully prepared for the media.

CONCLUSIONS

In responding to what appeared to be a crisis situation, namely the imminent elimination of Toronto's streetcars, the Streetcars for Toronto Committee was formed as a means for citizens and transit users to express their opinions directly to the decision-makers. Circumstances brought together a group of articulate and dedicated individuals determined to have an influence on those who had been chosen to make critical decisions that would have immediate

and, more important, long-range ramifications, not only on the transit system *per se*, but also on the character and direction of Toronto itself.

Examples in which the public has ignored similar situations regarding their transit systems and, particularly, regarding their streetcars were plentiful in North America. Viewpoints at odds with those being put forward by officials in positions that have the attention and trust of policy-makers more often than not fail to gain adequate exposure. It is all too common for those actually responsible for running a system, any system, both to ignore day-to-day problems and to view the overall operation with tunnel vision. The reaction to outside criticism, to suggestions, or to innovation often becomes an automatically negative one, initially defensive but often evolving into an offensive one in order to preclude anyone from commenting. This is hardly the way to be responsive to public input.

The Streetcars for Toronto Committee, after 15 years, remains a small group of concerned transit advocates who have had significant impact on public transit in metropolitan Toronto. Although adversarial in essence, often opposing positions being taken by technical staff, the committee has always avoided personal confrontation, although a recent statement by the TTC chief general manager at a public meeting called to hear citizen input accused the committee of attempting "to con the Commission and the public." Needless to say, the committee members were shocked and dismayed and vowed to continue their efforts as a citizen advocacy group in such a way that this accusation, although totally unwarranted, would continue to be without substance.

As discussed, the committee's methodology has been followed meticulously since the group's inception. By a rigid insistence on being as accurate and as responsible as possible, facts and figures that have been presented in the committee's documents have always been substantiated. The TTC commissioners have consistently respected the viewpoints of the committee and have always listened attentively to the committee's presentations. Moreover, planning and technical staff have, on numerous occasions, requested input and feedback from the committee, albeit on an informal basis.

Thus, responsible and informed public participation can have a positive contribution to both the planning and operating of public transit. Such input should be encouraged and ultimately made a mandatory component of a transit undertaking. Although experience in Toronto has been much more positive than negative, there are still many who view the committee strictly as an adversarial group. This is indeed unfortunate, to say the least, for a more receptive approach to public input can channel creative energy into positive solutions in the vast majority of situations.

Over the years, the committee's efforts have become known outside of Toronto. For example, citizen groups concerned with public transit projects in

Hamilton, Ottawa, Vancouver, and Victoria have contacted the committee for insight into how to operate as well as for technical information. Although efforts in those cities by these groups have been mixed in terms of affecting decisions relating to the various transit schemes, the experience of the Streetcars for Toronto Committee has proven to be useful. This is especially the case in terms of the methods of publicizing positions and getting the most out of the media. In all instances the need to be responsible and accurate has always been stressed for those on the citizen side, just as much as it is expected for those in an official capacity. Surely this advice is universally applicable.

REFERENCES

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