

## Still a subway to nowhere?

### Construction booms, but opinions remain sharply divided as the often-derided Sheppard line turns 5

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The futuristic chrome plating in Sheppard-Yonge station already looks a little scuffed. But it was only five years ago – Nov. 22, 2002 – that then-mayor Mel Lastman cut the ribbon to open Toronto's northern east-west subway line, accompanied by a phalanx of dignitaries, reporters, children and musicians. Even the U of T's infamously discordant engineering department band came out to crash the event in the former North York, piling onto the subway cars with tubas and drums in tow.

The new line was always central to Lastman's long-held dream, going back before amalgamation, to when he was mayor of North York and wanted it to have a downtown – an urban focal point that could compete with the big one in the old city of Toronto. The Sheppard line would not only spur development along its path, but speed commuters into North York City Centre.

There were tall buildings in the area before this subway opened, but five years of operation has transformed the landscape. Both Yonge St. and Sheppard Ave. E. are dotted with construction sites and billboards announcing new projects. Tens of thousands of residents have moved into the corridor, with tens of thousands more to come.

But old questions still dog the billion-dollar line. Why is it still so easy to get a seat on the trains? Why are the sidewalks on Sheppard so empty? Are we creating urbanity or merely plunking a lot of tall buildings into a suburban landscape where residents are more likely to drive than walk or use transit?

It depends who you ask.

"A very definite urban design theme has emerged," says Niall Haggart, vice-president of the Daniels Corp., which has brought more than 2,500 condo units to the corridor. "I think that someone will be able to walk out of their building and have eyes on the street."

He adds that when the NY Towers project was introduced, "it was marketed with the Sheppard subway clearly front and centre."

Dianne Braun, who lives in a condo near Bayview Ave. and Sheppard, says the subway is a pleasant amenity – but she doesn't use it. She drives to her job as an executive assistant even though her office is right on the subway, too, at Yonge and Eglinton.

"I get free parking at the office, and it's underground parking, so I prefer it," she says, though she thinks the Sheppard subway has made her neighbourhood more desirable.

#### Towers in the works



	Developer	Storeys	Units
1. Pearl	Conservatory Grp.	24	351
2. Platinum	Conservatory Grp.	36	341
3. Savvy	Menkes	20	275
4. Avonshire	Tridel	21 and 21	435
5. Arc	Daniels	15	447
6. Bayview	Daniels	9	100
7. St. Gabriel	Shane Baghai	7 and 19	421
8. Concord Park Place	Concord	various heights	5,000
9. Aria	Fernbrook, Cityzen, Menkes	18 and 16	600
10. Legacy	Monarch	25	330

Jane Renwick, editor of *Urbanation*, a quarterly that tracks Toronto's condo market, is among those impressed by downtown North York's transformation.

"There's a lot of highrise residential," she says. "You look at it, and you think, 'This could be any small city in the U.S.' ... it's becoming a bigger centre, and I think that's ultimately because it's a transportation hub."

Then there's Brian Harvey, a librarian who lives in a condo near Yonge and rides the Sheppard line to work every day.

"There's absolutely nothing along Sheppard that's worth going to, except for IKEA, if you're an IKEA person, and I'm really not," he says. "Other than that, there's about 25 blocks between anything of note."

Harvey might be exaggerating a bit, but Sheppard today still has the feel of a high-speed suburban arterial – an adolescent road in the midst of a sudden and painful maturation. New towers loom behind single-family bungalows. Parkettes front onto six uncrossable lanes of speeding traffic. And nearly everywhere you look, there's construction.

Near Sheppard and Leslie St., giant piles of earth mark the site of the biggest project of all: Concord Park Place, a 17-hectare master-planned community that is expected to eventually hold 10,000 residents. It's so big it will have its own shuttle bus to ferry people to and from the nearest TTC stations – Bessarion and Leslie, the two least-used subway stops in Toronto.

Change hasn't been easy. The scale and speed of the developments that followed the subway took both residents and elected officials by surprise. The city found its land-use plans being overturned by the Ontario Municipal Board, the provincial panel that has the last word on what gets built in Toronto. Meanwhile, neighbourhood associations waged trench warfare against developers who wanted to build towers – almost literally – in their backyards.

"We didn't really care for the subway along Sheppard," says Poonam Jain, president of the Bayview Village Association. "It didn't seem to make sense. Even now, people are talking about how Mel Lastman managed to wrangle it, even though there were other places in Toronto that needed subways."

Jain says residents knew there would be some development along the way, but not this much. With development comes noise, disruption and traffic – traffic that overflows from Sheppard and infiltrates the winding, residential streets nearby.

"We had a lovely peaceful place here – an island of serenity – and it's being destroyed," she says.

In response, groups such as the Bayview Village Association and the Sheppard-Leslie Homeowners Association – a group formed specifically to fight another new development – dug in their heels, insisting that the condo towers be scaled back, if not cancelled.

But the subway is also the reason some condo-dwelling, transit-riding newcomers have chosen to make the area home.

"When we moved to Toronto, we basically lived here for the subway," says Nori Bradley, a former Vancouverite and now a University of Toronto medical student who lives at Bayview and Sheppard. Like her husband, she commutes to the old downtown every day. Bradley says that living on the subway lets her leave her car in the garage 80 per cent of the time, except for trips to Costco and her husband's hockey games.

This summer, during the budget crisis at city hall when Mayor David Miller mulled mothballing the Sheppard line as a cost-saving measure, the story hit home.

"Closing it down would totally change our lives," Bradley says. "To shut it down would be like shutting us off from everything."

In the end, the line was spared, but the so-called "subway to nowhere" remains a subject of debate and an object of derision, even if daily ridership has risen steadily over the past five years to 43,260 from 34,700 (Projections had called for 48,000 in Year 1).

The line was originally meant to run out to Scarborough, but was truncated to its current five stations. Construction started in parallel with another line along Eglinton West – a project that many continue to argue was a much bigger priority. But after the provincial Conservatives came to power in 1995, work was halted and the Eglinton pit filled in. Lastman and others, however, won a reprieve for Sheppard.

The fact that Sheppard was never built to its full length still rankles city councillor David Shiner. A committed supporter of the line, Shiner pins the neighbourhood's growing pains on

the line's curtailment, and the OMB, which let development run beyond what the city had planned for.

"We've ended up in a situation where there's almost double the development that was proposed, the traffic impacts have been horrendous and the subway line does not carry people anywhere but to Yonge St. and downtown," he says.

"I think the No. 1 priority of the city right now should be to complete the Sheppard line out to Scarborough. The residents of Scarborough and the residents of North York deserve to have a better trans link into the centre of the city."

To the dismay of Shiner and other subway boosters, finishing the line doesn't seem to be in the cards any time soon. The TTC's latest plan for the corridor calls for a streetcar right-of-way, or LRT, to complete the route along Sheppard.

"Instead of spending a billion dollars to finish the line, we can do (about) 10 times as much LRT for that same amount of money," TTC chair Adam Giambone says.

Giambone adds that he'd like to see the subway finished, but it could be decades before enough ridership and money are in place.

Meanwhile, many still ask whether Sheppard – with its asphalt-surrounded malls, long blocks and suburban cul-de-sacs dotted with occasional highrises – was ever a good candidate for a subway.

Among those is veteran transportation consultant Ed Levy.

"A few highrise towers on the skyline does not indicate subway-type density," he says.

"There's hardly a building more than 20 or 25 storeys high in all of Brooklyn," he says, "but it's lined with neighbourhoods that have townhousing and four- to six-storey apartments solidly, mile after mile after mile. They're able to fill up subway lines running about a mile apart." But here, he says, single-family neighbourhoods are sacrosanct.



"Any time someone dares breathe something over three, four, five storeys, there's general hysteria."

Ken Greenberg, a local planning consultant, points out that Sheppard is "relying on bus feeder lines, as opposed to a large walking population around it."

To truly be successful, he says, the city needs to allow intensification away from the major intersections where towers are currently sprouting, and into the entire catchment area for the subways – including the quiet neighbourhoods, whose residents want none of it.

But for the people, like Bradley, who bought a home to be on the subway, the subway means one thing: a way to get downtown – the real downtown.

"The state of transit in Toronto is a joke. I mean, it's the biggest city in Canada; if you don't live on the subway line, you can't get anywhere."

TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

Many residents of Daniels Corp.'s NY Towers prefer their cars to transit and walking, but buyers at Arc, under construction in the background, will be right next to Bayview station and shopping.