

The State of Waterfront East Transit

Steve Munro for YQNA

July 12, 2023



Steve Munro, Toronto's expert voice on transit, was YQNA's guest speaker in the spring of 2023. He focused on Waterfront East Transit that we all hope to see completed in support of rapid developments along the lake.

Better transit has been promised to Toronto's Eastern Waterfront for years, but beyond preliminary plans, we have little to show. Developers, residents and businesses expecting fast, frequent transit might be forgiven for wondering just how they should make do with infrequent, unreliable service on the Bay, Sherbourne, Parliament and Pape buses.

Recent consultation sessions by the City, TTC and Waterfront Toronto left the feeling that this project will not see the light of day for many years, if ever. That is a product of the fascination with new rapid transit in the suburbs, ballooning cost estimates and the fiscal limitations all transit spending faces.

A quick review of the proposal: In the full build-out, the Waterfront East line mirrors the existing Harbourfront route running west from Bay Street with a new, east-facing portal, and a redesigned Queens Quay running to the realigned Cherry Street. The line would run south and east via Cherry and Commissioners to loop just west of the realigned Don River, and a branch would connect north to existing tracks on Cherry at the Distillery.



Although this looks impressive, the project would not be finished until sometime in the early 2030s, and that assumes funding will materialize. A few key elements have disappeared from the plan, or been “deferred” pending future developments and, of course, more money. These include:

- Expansion of Queens Quay Station to handle two streetcars in each direction at once
- Addition of east side entrance capacity through a planned building at 11 Bay (NE corner)
- Improved connection to the Ferry Docks
- Decorative covers of the existing west and new east portals

Moreover, the Cherry Street connection north to the Distillery is likely the last part to be built because reconstruction of the Gardiner/DVP ramps and Ontario Line work will preclude other major works in the area in coming years.

The map shows a connection from the Ontario Line’s Corktown Station (King & Parliament) to the waterfront, but it is very likely that this station will open some years before the streetcar link is finished.

Thanks to the emphasis on a “business case” comparison, there must be an “A” and “B” plan which either includes or omits the Cherry north leg even though it is routinely cited as a direct route from King southward. A basic problem with any scheme that includes a “phase two” is that we will be lucky to even see “phase one” completed.

A major challenge will be construction staging. From a planning point of view, the project is divided into three segments:

1. The Bay Street tunnel and new portal including major expansion of the loop at Union Station.
2. Queens Quay from Bay to Cherry.

3. Cherry from Distillery Loop to Commissioners, and then east to loop near the new river course.

Segment 1 is the TTC's responsibility, while the other segments rest with Waterfront Toronto. Note that future extensions are shown on the map (dark blue) connecting east via Commissioners to Leslie Bards, and north via the proposed Broadview Extension to Queen. With the basic line falling so far into the future, I doubt that we will ever see these extensions beyond lines on the map.

Design work and approvals will extend out to early 2024, but construction will easily extend beyond 2030.

Rebuilding the tunnel and station is a major piece of work, and streetcar access to Union Station will be lost while this is underway. Feedback at consultations has strongly pushed for the service suspension to be as short as possible, but it is far from clear if the Queens Quay East segment will be started early and be in place for a temporary east-west service from Cherry westward. Even that requires a shutdown to rebuild and extend the underpass at Bay Street with a new east portal.



The redesign of Queens Quay east will likely be the first work undertaken because it does not depend on other major transit changes including Union Station and a new Cherry Street connection to the Distillery. That will bring a new streetscape, but not much transit.

One key question in the plan is whether the new line will be served initially with buses or streetcars with a temporary loop near Queens Quay and New Cherry Street. This has implications not just for Queens Quay East but for the existing western leg. The ominous term

“BRT” (Bus Rapid Transit) appears on some drawings where we once saw “LRT” (a streetcar on its own right-of-way). Without access to a loop at Union, any through east-west service must use a common vehicle.

This project shows just how bankrupt the City’s claimed support of Transit Oriented Development really is. The waterfront has grown, and plans for many more buildings are in the pipeline, but the transit service is nowhere to be seen. A transit line on a map is an excuse for high density development, but the actual transit service is only a dream.

An update on the Waterfront East projects was expected at Toronto’s Executive Committee on June 6 but was deferred to the fall. It will make its way through both the TTC and Council afterwards. This exercise will only drive home how badly delayed planning and the City’s financial position have strangled growth in a so-called “transit first” area.