

Tremblay's rail plan off track, critics say 'Some stuff is vague - and some is lunacy'

LINDA GYULAI, The Gazette Published: Monday, July 9, 2007

Where some see only barren tracts of knee-high weeds and rusted steel, Avrom Shtern and Andrew Dawson see potential.

The two friends are railway buffs. And they can sketch commuter train routes along much of the 883 kilometres of railway tracks that cover the island of Montreal like a system of veins.

Dawson and Shtern, who met at an event celebrating Montreal West's railway signal tower 11 years ago, say they'll be critical of Mayor Gerald Tremblay's 20-year, \$8.1-billion transportation plan when they get to present briefs at hearings next month.

It's not that Shtern or Dawson oppose the plan's bounty of projects for other transportation modes, like a new billion-dollar tramway network, bicycle paths, metro extensions and new buses.

But for a development proposal that claims to peer 20 years into the future, the Tremblay plan paints a fuzzy picture for the train, they say.

"I found some stuff is vague," Dawson, a St. Laurent resident who grew up near the Deux Montagnes commuter rail line, said of the plan's train component. "And some stuff is lunacy."

The folly is largely in what the plan doesn't say, said Dawson, 28.

It offers no commitment to conserve rail lines for future use, no train ridership projections, no objective to electrify the island's mostly diesel tracks, no new rail stations for the city's underserved west end.

And in a heart-breaking omission for Shtern and Dawson, the plan ignores a long-standing proposal by the Green Coalition environmental group to create fast, frequent light-rail passenger service on the West Island using an industrial rail line called the Doney Spur.

"They've put it on the back burner," said Shtern, 46, a Green Coalition member.

Shtern, an English-as-a-second-language teacher and literacy volunteer, became fascinated with trains growing up in Cote St. Luc next to the tracks on the Canadian Pacific Railway's Adirondack subdivision.

Dawson and Shtern consume railway news from journals and magazines, like Railfan & Railroad out of the United States, and Internet discussion groups. They can recount the history of any rail line in the region.

The Doney Spur, owned by Canadian National, branches off the Montreal-Deux Montagnes commuter train line just after its Bois Franc station in St. Laurent. It runs between the Trans-Canada Highway and Hymus Blvd. The tracks end almost at St. Jean Blvd. in Pointe Claire. CN sold the land beyond that point some years ago, but the old right-of-way continues to Stillview Ave., near the Lakeshore General Hospital.

The Green Coalition first proposed the Doney Spur "surface metro" in 1989 and recently garnered major support: Tremblay's 2005 election campaign platform promised to build a West Island rail service along the Doney Spur, and the city's 2004 Urban Plan includes it.

But now, Tremblay's transportation plan doesn't call for commuter rail service on the Doney Spur. Instead, it raises the possibility of a dedicated bus route in that corridor. Someday.

The bus route won't happen, Shtern predicted. CN has told municipal officials it has no plans to sell the spur or to stop operating freight service on it.

And since May, Green Coalition members have sounded the alarm that a Home Depot store is being built on the old Doney Spur right-of-way west of St. Jean Blvd.

The Tremblay administration says it is looking into it.

Glen Fisher, a transportation consultant and former CPR engineer with 40 years in the rail business, says the Doney Spur could easily accommodate a proposal in the Tremblay plan to build a rail shuttle between downtown and Pierre Elliott Trudeau airport. A rail line branches off from the Doney Spur north of the airport and stops at the airport fence.

The Tremblay plan calls for the airport shuttle to be built on either the CN or CPR lines near Highway 20 for \$550 million.

Fisher says an airport shuttle on the Doney Spur would make the trip from downtown in 20 minutes like the other route, but would cost about \$60 million. It includes the cost to dig a trench for an electrified track around the airport's west-end runways and to build a terminal platform.

Fisher, who has a client who wants to sell electric trains in the region, says train cars would add another \$70 million.

On the other hand, the trains on the Deux Montagnes commuter line, which will soon be replaced by double-decker train cars, "are perfect" to reuse on the airport link, he said.

The Doney Spur offers benefits, said Florence Junca-Adenot, former president and executive director of the Metropolitan Transit Agency, the provincial body that operates commuter trains and co-ordinates planning for the Montreal region.

The spur would connect the West Island to the metro system in St. Laurent, because the Tremblay plan calls for extending the metro Orange Line to the Bois Franc train station, she said.

And it would provide commuter train access to St. Laurent's Technoparc, a major employment hub, she said.

"It should at least be discussed," Junca-Adenot said.

Current MTA president and executive director Joel Gauthier said he has an open mind, but the CN and CPR lines near Highway 20, currently being studied by a steering committee he co-chairs with Aeroports de Montreal, make more sense for an airport rail.

The CN line, which goes to Central Station, carries freight trains and VIA Rail passenger trains. The CPR line, which heads to Lucien L'Allier (Windsor) station, carries freight and commuter trains on the MTA's Dorion-Rigaud line.

"What we're looking for is to put the freight on one set of tracks and put passengers on the other set of tracks," Gauthier said, so the two would no longer impede each other.

He added he has "no idea where the \$550 million comes from" in the Tremblay plan.

The Tremblay plan also blows the chance to reuse other rail lines, the critics contend.

Take the \$300-million Montreal-Repentigny-Mascouche commuter train line, known as the Train de l'est, which the Tremblay plan supports exactly as announced by the Quebec government more than a year ago.

When completed in 2011, the 51-kilometre route will run on existing tracks from Central Station through east-end Montreal to Repentigny.

However, a track has to be built to link Repentigny, Terrebonne and Mascouche.

Yet a track on CPR's old Trois Rivieres subdivision already exists between Laval, Terrebonne and Mascouche, Dawson said.

In fact, the MTA's 2002 strategic plan called for two separate commuter lines: Laval-Terrebonne-Mascouche, which would allow transfers onto the de la Concorde metro station, and Montreal-Repentigny.

Now owned by Quebec Gatineau Railway Inc., the Laval-Terrebonne-Mascouche track carries freight. But it carried passengers between Montreal and Trois Rivieres until 1990, Dawson said.

"The Train de l'est makes sense all the way to Repentigny, but to build a new line doesn't make sense," Shtern said.

"Yes, I am a rail fan. But I try to see things where they truly fit, where a train will truly serve its purpose."

Montreal supports the Train de l'est because of its benefits to east-end Montreal, said city councillor Andre Lavallee, the executive committee member responsible for transportation.

About 70 per cent of the line's projected 5,500 passengers will be east-end residents from places like St. Leonard, Riviere des Prairies and Pointe aux Trembles, where there is neither metro nor train service, he said.

As for the new track between Repentigny and Mascouche, Lavallee said he has no comment. "It's a provincial project."

Gauthier said a recent MTA study shows the Laval-Terrebonne-Mascouche line would require \$100 million to refurbish.

He said the tracks and signalling system need to be upgraded for passenger trains and the tracks doubled on the Montreal-Blainville commuter line to accommodate trains from Mascouche transferring onto it near the metro.

If the Laval-Terrebonne-Mascouche line was in service, the MTA couldn't put more trains on the popular Montreal-Blainville line, Gauthier added.

Fisher said it's hogwash. "You could start a commuter train service on the line again tomorrow morning," he said. In fact, the trip would be faster by train from Mascouche to de la Concorde metro station and then by metro to downtown than taking the Train de l'est from Mascouche to downtown, he said.

And while the MTA has launched a call for proposals to get dual-mode - electric and diesel - trains built for the Train de l'est, Fisher predicts the new trains will cost more than if it just electrified diesel lines.

Commuter trains have been a fixture in Montreal since the Montreal-Lachine railway began shuttling passengers in 1863 and the Grand Trunk Railway started moving passengers across the Victoria Bridge in the 1870s.

However, rail expert David Hanna, director of graduate studies in urban studies at the Universite du Quebec a Montreal, warns the commuter train is a double-edged sword.

"Unfortunately, as efficient as they are in terms of environmental issues and solving traffic problems, they have one danger," he said. "It's that they do tend to promote urban sprawl."

Chicago has the problem in spades, Hanna said.

"They have the best commuter train service on the continent, along with New York City. And Chicago is also one of the most sprawled cities in North America because of it."

Workers commute from as far as Wisconsin, Indiana and Michigan, boarding the train to Chicago at its commuter terminal 160 kilometres from downtown.

"It's the highways that promote urban sprawl," Shtern countered. "Trains certainly encourage development, but you can steer that development so that it's oriented around stations instead of highways."

Hanna added the double-edged sword means only that rail lines must be carefully planned. That means conserving any existing lines even if they're not needed right now, he said.

"There have been some enormous stupidities committed in the very recent past," he said, pointing out the Montreal-Blainville train line.

CPR discontinued commuter service on it in 1982 and, with the province's blessing, dismantled some of its double track, he said.

In 1997, the MTA inaugurated service on it again as Blainville's population began to boom.

"In the next 50 years, we need to be planning around all of these lines, every single one of them, and every doggone right of way," Hanna said.

And that's Shtern and Dawson's point.

The Urban Plan talks about conserving train lines like the Doney Spur and another called the LaSalle Loop for future use.

"But they haven't acted on it," Shtern said of the city.

The tracks of the LaSalle Loop, owned by CPR, were lifted between Newman Blvd. and the Lachine Canal, but much of the corridor still exists. The Green Coalition proposes a light-rail train, branching off from the LaSalle commuter train station on the Montreal-Delton-Candiac line near the Mercier Bridge and connecting to Angrignon station on the metro Green Line.

Shtern and Dawson contend the real battle is against a bias that favours the car.

"When railways are abandoned, it's not for economic reasons, it's for political reasons," Dawson said.

"If there's a downturn in the economy, you're not going to rip out the road from in front of your house."

Ridership expected to hit 16.2 million trips this year

The Metropolitan Transportation Agency runs 5 commuter train lines, two metropolitan express bus lines, 13 terminuses, 57 park-and-ride parking lots with 24,582 parking spaces and 83.4 kilometres of reserved bus lanes in the metropolitan area.

Ridership hit 12.9 million trips in 2002, 86 per cent more than its 6.9 million trips in 1996. It's expected to hit 16.2 million trips this year.

The MTA's objective is 20 million trips in 2012.

The Montreal area recently climbed to No. 6 in North America for commuter train ridership, carrying 62,500 passengers a day in the region.

The Montreal-Deux Montagnes line had 7.7 million riders in 2005, representing 52.5 per cent of the ridership on the five commuter lines.

The MTA's annual revenues in 2005: \$238.1 million, with \$3.6 million in profit, of which \$3.1 million was redistributed to the 14 transit bodies in the metropolitan area.'

