

REGARDING: Other business, 8b

SECOND EXIT PLANNING AND CONSULTATION PROCESS EXPERT PANEL

Stephen Wickens

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98 Hanson Street, Toronto, M4C 1A1  
416-691-2962 –[stephen.j.wickens@gmail.com](mailto:stephen.j.wickens@gmail.com)  
[worldwidewickens.com](http://worldwidewickens.com)

Dear commissioners and second exit panel folks:

While apologizing after the Ombudsman's report on the Donlands second-exit brouhaha, CEO Andy Byford stated in the commission's defence: "The TTC developed the Second Exits program premised on technical information and engineering principles."

But that's a significant part of the problem. Technical information and engineering principles obviously have a huge role to play in such a process, but they are a dreadful place to start for any urban problem in organized complexity. A well-conceived strategy for stations, especially those with only one access point, would have begun by examining much more than fire-safety-related technical information, engineering principles and the minimization of up-front costs.

All 20 stations on the high- and medium-priority lists are at least 45 years old, and we should look at this as a chance to address other long-standing inadequacies. (And to say there are only eight stations left to address is a serious flaw in the report before the commission today.) Some stations can't handle crowds well. Others are under-used in part because they don't connect well on a pedestrian basis with the surrounding neighbourhoods (hence the counter-intuitive decline of some Bloor and Danforth commercial strips after the 1966 subway opening eliminated so many street-based surface transit stops). One key point about station best practices, is that the exit-entrance points for any given station be as far apart as possible to maximize the size and convenience of the pedestrian catchment area, a point that appears to have been entirely lost on those who wrote the justification literature for the plan being implemented at Woodbine station. When you consider that few people will walk longer than five minutes to a station, especially in climates where winter weather is a factor in shaping habits, shaving two or three minutes off a potential transit customer's walk to and from the station can be a significant attraction.

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I first became seriously concerned about station safety issues in the spring of 1983, when I was among the trapped on a crowded platform at Dundas (by far the busiest of the single-access-point stations). I later spoke with the then TTC chair, Julian Porter, and was assured a north entrance-exit for Dundas would be made a major priority. Amazingly, that station still hasn't been tackled more than 30 years later, possibly because of a flaw in the 2002 LMDG report that has apparently been given gospel status for the second-exits process. That report did not take into account the fact that some stations are much busier than others, hence Castle Frank was somehow given higher priority for actual construction than Dundas. Coxwell, meanwhile, only made the medium priority list even though any reasonable observer who has considered the relevant data would have deemed it as much, if not more, of a priority than Donlands, which has been so controversial.

The strategy so far, has also looked at station improvements only as costs, rather than as real estate-related investments with potential returns that can defray costs, at least in certain cases. The TTC is not set up to handle real estate assets in way that is responsible to the public's fiduciary and planning priorities, and there are some ethical good points to that. But some GTA-relevant adaptation of the Rail + Property funding model needs to be applied to all TTC real estate at all times, even the properties haven't been declared surplus. To maximize the reasonable returns on the public's investments, stations need to be fully integrated into mixed-primary-use environments. These factors need to be considered at the start of the planning process for all new stations or station upgrades, and I dare say that if that had been the case, the program would have proceeded much more smoothly, with broader public support, from the start.

It's more than 50 years since Jane Jacobs wrote about the mistake "expert" planners make tackling issues and urban components in isolation: "Objects in cities, whether they are buildings, streets, parks, districts, landmarks or anything else have radically different effects depending on circumstances and contexts in which they exist."

What she said applies to these stations and their surroundings, and she said so specifically about some of the Danforth stations in a 2005 discussion. As she points out, there were 1960s-style mistakes in our approaches to the design of Bloor-Danforth, and little seems to have changed over the decades.

Sincerely, Stephen Wickens