



If you live in the GTHA, the thought of *GO Transit* is likely as exciting as the 2016 *Brave's* home-opener. The word GO simply implies a commute to work, early mornings, errands or perhaps nothing at all. But if you find yourself outside the metropolis, somewhere in Southwestern Ontario, the thought of GO marvels as a luxury – if only because it works.

Seven years after being swallowed by Metrolinx, GO now hauls more than 270,000 passengers each weekday on more than 250 train and 2,500 bus trips. Ridership has grown to about 68 million annually and, given the region's growth projections, it's all up from here.

In the meantime, the rest of Southwestern Ontario has experienced crippling service cuts to intercity transportation, leaving many municipalities like St. Thomas, Goderich and Niagara Falls practically abandoned. It's hard to imagine the additional \$1.49 billion marked for Ontario's public transportation sector will help feed the starving peripheral networks. Besides, most folks have quit singing the sad songs of small-town Ontario after waiting 30 years for their train to arrive.

It begs the question, what does the future of inter-city mobility hold for the rest of us? I am convinced by now very few care about the colour of the train or which nameplate it bears, so long as it exists.

Will there ever be green trains rolling through your town? It's very unlikely, VIA Rail is as much a Canadian staple as maple syrup or Gord Downey. But while VIA sputters along, begrudgingly late and underfunded, the common response on Parliament Hill remains: *more assessment needed*. In the meantime, VIA CEO Yves Desjardin-Siciliano looks to secure funding by partnering with private investors and some of Canada's big pension funds. But as YDS acknowledges, there is no train service in the world that can run without real public investment and none of the private-sector sugar daddies has shown any real interest.

In the meantime, GO is stealing the show. Since 2003, its rail network has been extended nearly 90 kilometres, with 14 new stations and more than 31,000 new parking spots across the system. This year's provincial budget was much the same, ramping up GO service between Niagara and the Toronto area and extending plans in the KW-region, although on an excruciatingly long timetable reaching as far as 2023. According to Metrolinx spokeswoman Kim Johnson, it's all good news. The 2016 seasonal GO train to and from Niagara is once again well received and continues to gain ridership.

We are starting to see Metrolinx gobble up track outside the GTHA. The most notable example is the recent agreement-in-principle with CN in the KW-region. The agreement to move forward with plans for an express route will attract more GO train service in an area once dominated by VIA Rail. At the current rate, GO expects its Regional Express Rail Initiative to boost ridership from about 1,500 to nearly 6,000 over a 10-year period.

Lightyears from solving the regions' transportation void, the expansion of GO's

network and its growing popularity still beg the question, could GO be the future of inter-city rail in Southwestern Ontario? What are the alternatives? At this point we should be exploring every option.

Admittedly, the open dialogue between Metrolinx, CN, and the political powers that be is a refreshing change from the status quo, and helps build a strong case for GO. But for now, all we can do is write to our local MPs and MPPs and make as much noise as possible. We may as well continue to marvel at the gross expansion of the GO network and hope to heaven our train is on time. The question still remains if both upper levels of government will be able to deliver on their promises.