Solving rush hour

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Canadians love cities – or else why would 7 in 10 of us live in them?

Nearly all Torontonians agree their town is "liveable" (84 per cent), "embraces newcomers" (86 per cent) and "enriched by diversity" (90 per cent). The data are from a 2012 Angus Reid Public Opinion poll.

Of course Torontonians have complaints about the city, especially about rush hour. According to a Nanos Research poll with city residents last summer, a 35 per cent plurality felt the most important issue facing Toronto is public transit. Another 14 per cent cited traffic, public transit's alter ego.

John Tory won last year's election for mayor repeating the mantra of more public transit wrapped in his policy called Smart Track. Tory hit the commuters' sweet spot. In a Nanos poll as the mayoral campaigns accelerated last August, 49 per cent named gridlock or transit as the city's most important issue. No other problem came close.

Zoning is the root cause of congestion. In theory the province's policy of intensification — literally stacking people in high-rises — should favour streetcars, subways and buses. In reality, buses and cars aren't interchangeable. If you need a car, a bike or a bus is no substitute.

The only way to reduce congestion is to make driving unnecessary.

How?

Move tens of thousands of workers out of office towers. It's inane to require them to commute to an office to manipulate data they can view on their laptops at their kitchen table. Have them work at home, at least part of the week.

No effort to reduce traffic is serious if it doesn't include Uber and other ride-sharing services such as Lyft and Sidecar that let anyone with a car make money as a part-time cabbie. Along with short-term rental agencies such as AutoShare and Zipcar, Uber reduces the appeal of possessing wheels of your own.

Uber delights its passengers, who book and pay for rides on their smartphones. In a Forum Research poll in November, one in 10 adults in Toronto (12 per cent) said they had ridden with an Uber driver. More than half (53 per cent) found their rides "much" better than a taxi and another 25 per cent "somewhat" better.

The Forum poll also told respondents, "Toronto's taxi industry claims Uber hurts their business," and asked whether Torontonians approve of banning it. Some 68 per cent were opposed.

Gridlock is inevitable. With more car owners hitting the road as Uber drivers, the result will be more congestion. As *The Economist* noted in January 2015, "most of Uber's cars would otherwise be parked in the garage." If the mayor's zero-tolerance policy for cars parked on major roads convinces people the streets are less congested, then more of us will drive.

Technological progress is another reason to expect more congestion. The advent of the non-polluting car will remove the guilt from driving and result in more gridlock.

One way to get people to drive less is to shuttle them more. For most trips people might wait a few minutes and share a ride if a door-to-door van were less expensive than a cab.

Writing in 2002, the director of the Institute of Transportation Studies at UCLA, Brian Taylor, said, "Automobiles will remain central to urban life for the foreseeable future.… Even the most ambitious efforts to increase the attractiveness of public transit, bicycling, and walking are unlikely to change this fact."

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