

Submission to Richmond Hill City Council re: comments on OPA 18.7 – Newkirk Local Centre (City File MOPA-23-0002)

Submitted by: Richmond Hill resident Michael Theodores – June 19, 2023

Introduction:

As a long-time resident of Richmond Hill – residing just a few blocks from the area classified as **Newkirk Local Centre** – I have prepared this submission for review and consideration by City Council and the Planning Department.

In doing this, I am aware I am late arriving to the party. I was unaware of the earlier consultation sessions except for the one widely promoted – including through ads in the Richmond Hill Liberal – on June 7, 2023 that unfortunately I couldn't attend.

However, I did note in the agenda for the June 20, 2023 council meeting that no final decision is being made and that input from residents are continuing to be considered. So, I have decided to prepare this submission and ask that Council and planning staff package this submission with all input received to date.

What follows is a discussion of why I think we need to **#Goslow** in considering the future level of intensification of development for businesses and residential properties being requested by the Region of York under the Official Plan that was revised last year.

Discussion about Richmond Hill GO station

In my review of material re: this proposal – and earlier documents related to a proposed high-density condo on Norfolk Ave. that I provided a submission on May 16, 2023 – the impetus for major business and residential development appears to be the nearby Richmond Hill GO station.

In the past – back to the days when the late David Barrow was a member of GO Transit's Board of Directors before he and other municipal representatives were replaced through the creation of Metrolinx – there were promises of **all-day, two-way** service on this line that would make intensification in this area understandable.

It was even a reason why a high-density condo at the corner of Major Mackenzie Drive East and Essex (now known as Mackenzie Green) which I opposed was eventually approved despite being well above the current by-law with respect to height and density.

As anyone who rides the Richmond Hill GO train or bus service regularly knows, **this has never occurred**. There have been incremental increases in frequency in the morning and evening hours but they are far below other corridors. **This includes no service on weekends or holidays**.

Service has actually become worse since – even after concerns have subsided about the pandemic. Metrolinx has drastically reduced the number of GO train runs in both the morning and evening and it is only hourly rather than every half hour – even as other corridors and the UP Express have now restored service levels that are as often as every 15 minutes (see screen cap of schedule in effect since January 2023 on the following page).

		Monday to Friday (except holidays)										Du lundi au vendredi (sauf les jours fériés)																	
SOUTHBOUND / EN DIRECTION SUD												NORTHBOUND / EN DIRECTION NORD																	
Route Number	Zone	Richmond Hill 98	Bloomington GO	Richmond Hill 78	Richmond Hill 50	Richmond Hill GO	Thornhill 60	Langstaff GO	North York 5	Old Cummer GO	North York 5	Oriole GO	Union Station	Route Number	Zone	Toronto 2	North York 5	Oriole GO	North York 5	Old Cummer GO	Thornhill 60	Langstaff GO	Richmond Hill 50	Richmond Hill GO	Richmond Hill 78	Gormley GO	Richmond Hill 98	Bloomington GO	
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61	61440	13 10	13 18	13 33	13 48	→	→	14 25						5329	18 45	19 13	19 18	19 26	19 32	19 42	19 50								
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During the late stage of my preparation for the submission for the May 16, 2023 council meeting, I came across a Metrolinx document titled: **GO Expansion Full Business Case – November 2018**. It can be accessed using [this link](#).

In reviewing the document, there were several troubling updates about the Richmond Hill line that I have never seen shared publicly. This included a summary on Page 60 of the document that read as follows:

The 2015 GO RER Initial Business Case found a relatively weak case for frequent all-day services on the corridor, and identified issues that should be addressed before deciding on a development strategy for the corridor.

I've provided a screen cap of this summary below and you'll see that the bullets that cite challenges on this corridor are largely related to infrastructure and competition from other GO lines. **Only the final bullet touches on density and in this reference, it notes a lack of density on the entire corridor – not just the station at Newkirk and Major Mackenzie Drive East.**

RIC Richmond Hill

The 2015 GO RER Initial Business Case found a relatively weak case for frequent all-day services on the corridor, and identified issues that should be addressed before deciding on a development strategy for the corridor.

Technical challenges include:

- Flooding in the lower Don River, which affects most of the corridor from Richmond Street to the Millwood Bridge
- Slow journey times due to indirect alignment and low track speeds
- CN Rail ownership of the corridor north of Old Cummer, and conflicts with intensive freight services at the Doncaster Diamond rail junction and on the corridor north to Bloomington

- Lack of practical opportunities on the alignment for interchange with TTC other transit. The corridor passes under Line 2 Subway, the Millwood Bridge with intensive bus services, and the Eglinton Crosstown LRT, but the vertical separation makes it difficult and expensive to provide interchanges. Note that Oriole station is being relocated, and an effective interchange will be provided with Line 4 Subway.

Challenges affecting demand and benefits include:

- Proposed parallel transit improvements including Line 1 Subway extension to Richmond Hill, and the Downtown Relief Line to York Mills Road
- Competition from frequent 8 tph all-day service now planned for the Stouffville corridor
- Low population density and limited development potential along most of the corridor



In giving the documents prepared for the June 20, 2023 council meeting a quick scan, I noticed on Page 11 of a [staff report](#) dated February 26, 2020 that the Region of York acknowledged this same expansion report in debating whether to include the Richmond Hill GO station in its Major Transit Station Area (MTSA) for these very reasons. Interestingly, staff directed to add it to the list anyways (see screen cap below).

Consideration of June 2019 Council motion for additional MTSAs

At their meeting on June 25, 2019, Council directed City staff to communicate to the Region the desire to include the Richmond Hill (Newkirk) and Gormley GO Stations as MTSAs in the Region's intensification framework. The Gormley GO Station will be discussed in the following section, which discusses the potential settlement boundary expansion around the GO station.

The GO station located on Newkirk Drive at Major Mackenzie Drive East was not identified by the Region as a MTSA due to the Richmond Hill GO Train line not being a priority transit corridor under the Growth Plan. The area surrounding the station is designated as Local Development Area and Employment Corridor, which would support higher density redevelopment than currently exists. Notwithstanding its exclusion from their initial list released in April 2019, Regional staff have indicated they may support a MTSA at this location. City staff recommend its inclusion based on the context of the area to support redevelopment.

If the Richmond Hill GO train and bus service is a major reason for guiding future intensification in the Newkirk Local Centre, then Richmond Hill Council should demand that government (municipal, provincial and federal) first team up to fund the infrastructure to make all-day, two-way service a reality.

As it stands, as noted on Page 76 of the business case, Metrolinx is forecasting reasonable growth on the line but no service 'off-peak, contra-peak or on weekends' – unlike all corridors except Milton.

And Page 144 – which listed Expansion Environmental Assessments for all of the corridors – **none** were in progress for Richmond Hill. It just noted that the new Bloomington Station was complete.

This is material because other GO stations within York Region (including in Vaughan and Markham) will benefit from a major increase in service yet have the same or in some cases lower number of residents or jobs per hectare noted in their MTSAs.

One of my key questions now is why the Region of York endorsed adding the Richmond Hill GO station to its list of MTSAs with such a high number of people or jobs per hectare when it reviewed the same expansion report I came across recently.

To warrant the level of intensification that the Region is calling for, GO train service should be **all day** and in **both directions**. This would provide companies interested in investing in new properties in the area with confidence that they could attract a diversified workforce – not just those residing in the city or who would commute from the two northern stops added in recent years (Gormley and Bloomington).

As it stands, service only goes in **one** direction in the morning (south) and **one** direction in the evening (north).

I did reach out to executives at Metrolinx in May to see if the business case has been updated and have been told a response is forthcoming soon. As it stands, the [website page](#) that covers Richmond Hill expansion updates last mentioned the expansion of the line to Bloomington.

If this business case remains current for Richmond Hill, I think Council and the planning department need to take a step back and pause any plans being considered for the severe

intensification being projected in the area or consider negotiating for lower standards or an extended timeline (post 2030 or when funding is in place for major infrastructure improvements).

Just to be clear, while the region has designated the Richmond Hill GO station as a MTSA, I think more accurately it should be classified as **Weekday, rush-hour transit hub**. Visit the station after 8:18 a.m. in the morning and you will see little activity other than an hourly bus that goes to Union Station.

The flurry of activity picks up at around 4:30 p.m. when local commuters return back home from Toronto.

This is unlike Union Station in Toronto – or even Richmond Hill Centre – where buses come and go regularly, taking passengers to various parts of the city, region and GTA. And in 2030, the Yonge North subway station is expected to be in operation, providing a new, all-day, two-way option for commuters to travel to and from Richmond Hill.

Re: that last point, it's my guess that all-day, two-way GO train service is no longer mentioned because of future TTC service expanding up to the Langstaff area. As a regular GO rider, I expect this service to cannibalize GO train riders due to its superior frequency and coverage area.

Similar to recent Metrolinx material I came across, I noticed with interest on Page 20 of the *YRT's Moving to 2025 – 2021-2025 Business Plan* that all-day, two way service is no longer mentioned for the Richmond Hill line and instead frequency “will be increased” (see excerpt below)

GO Expansion Program

Metrolinx is developing the GO Expansion Program on the Barrie, Stouffville and Richmond Hill GO rail lines serving York Region. The Barrie and Stouffville lines will be served with all-day, two-way service and train frequency on the Richmond Hill line will be increased. The 16 GO Stations within York Region are served by connecting bus and GO Shuttle routes. As the Regional Express Rail program is advanced, YRT will review the route network, service frequency and net cost per passenger of GO Station connecting services.

For these reasons, any increased intensification planned for the area being classified as Newkirk Local Centre should be based on added Richmond Hill GO train infrastructure that is fully funded and approved.

YRT

In my May 16, 2023 submission to the city opposing a proposed high-density condo on Norfolk Ave., I shared my applied knowledge and experience of transit.

Along with being a GO train rider for over 25 years, I have also taken other forms of transit (TTC, YRT and Richmond Hill Transit) for over 35 years.

I mentioned in my submission that what makes transit attractive to a large percentage of the population are the three C's – **Convenience, Coverage and Cost**.

The three C's are reasons why the GO train doesn't resonate with all Richmond Hill residents and why the intensification being proposed which links to this service should be handled very cautiously.

I would argue that the same factors – and reasons for the dismal operating performance of the YRT – also apply, particularly in the vicinity of the Newkirk Local Centre.

Unlike Yonge Street with superior north-south Viva rapid bus service using bus-only lanes, YRT east-west service on Major Mackenzie Drive East is poor and the only upgrade the YRT highlighted in its 2023 Transit Initiatives document was slightly improved service to the 25 Major Mackenzie Bus (from every 35 minutes to 26 minutes during rush hour – see screen cap below).

25 - MAJOR MACKENZIE

Route Implementation Date:

- > September 2005
- > Restructured and renamed in June 2013

Proposed Service Changes:

- > Improve rush-hour frequency

Route Type/Routing:

- > Base
- > Operates Monday to Friday along Major Mackenzie Drive East between Yonge Street and Markham Stouffville Hospital

Major Trip Generators:

- > Alexander Mackenzie High School
- > Mackenzie Richmond Hill Hospital
- > Richmond Hill Central Library

- > Richmond Hill GO Station
- > Bayview Secondary School
- > SmartCentres Richmond Hill
- > Cachet Village
- > Angus Glen Community Centre
- > Markham Stouffville Hospital
- > Cornell Community Centre
- > Cornell Bus Terminal

Passenger Benefits/Impacts:

- > Morning rush hour frequency improved from the current 35 minutes to approximately every 26 minutes
- > Afternoon rush hour frequency improved from the current 35 minutes to approximately every 27 minutes

OPERATING PERIOD AND FREQUENCY IN MINUTES (September 2019 and September 2022):

	Early a.m.	Rush Hour a.m.	Midday	Rush Hour p.m.	Early Evening	Late Evening	Saturday	Sunday / Holiday
2019	43	43	61	33	58	n/a	n/a	n/a
2022	35	35	66	35	67	n/a	n/a	n/a

ROUTE PERFORMANCE (September 2019 and September 2021):

Performance Indicator		2019	2021	Performance Indicator		2019	2021
Average ridership	Weekday daily	668	276	Net cost per passenger	Weekday rush hour	\$4.62	\$19.88
	Weekday rush hour	455	179		Weekday non-rush hour	\$11.92	\$27.85
	Weekday non-rush hour	213	107				
Average ridership per hour	Weekday rush hour	18	7	Revenue-to-cost ratio	Weekday rush hour	42%	15%
	Weekday non-rush hour	10	5		Weekday non-rush hour	22%	11%

Source: YRT 2023 Transit Initiatives – Page 27

While there are references in various planning documents about future Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service, no timelines are mentioned. So, I think it's fair to request more clarity re: the timeline and investment required – similar to GO service.

Traffic

The degree of density that is being proposed by the Region in its updated Official Plan and which is being considered by Council raises additional concerns about traffic.

Councillors who were present at the May 16, 2023 council meeting to discuss a proposed high-density condo on Norfolk Ave. (off from Major Mackenzie Drive East) heard loud and clear about concerns about *existing* traffic. The level of intensification being proposed for future business and residential projects only serves to raise these concerns.

Sure, you can push parking for GO riders underground to maximize the land in the area but any added business or residential projects will simply add to traffic in this core.

I'd like to see the city connect with the City of Vaughan re: its efforts to limit parking in the new Vaughan Metropolitan City Centre following the expansion of TTC service in that area. To simply approve parking spots using the same model as in the past is a recipe for disaster.

More details required from business

There was a wealth of information prepared for the June 20, 2023 council meeting to discuss the Norfolk Official Plan and apologies if I didn't catch discussion about the existing people per hectare for existing high-density residential developments in vicinity of the Richmond Hill GO station. That would help residents get a better understanding of just what the future holds compared to currently.

I also didn't see any discussion re: the number of workers per hectare for large businesses in Richmond Hill. I know Apotex is in the vicinity of this area (Elgin Mills and Newkirk). I think it would be very valuable to know and also how the city plans to attract businesses to this area – particularly if Richmond Hill GO only offers southbound trips in the morning and north in the evening.

Additional concerns:

In reviewing the Staff Report prepared for the June 20, 2023 Council meeting, I have additional concerns with some of the material I reviewed. Here they are:

- **Page 5:** Pillar 4 (Protect and Enhance) mentions 'protecting the existing affordable rental apartment buildings within the Local Centre.' I am fully supportive of this but advise Council and the Planning Dept. to put this in writing as already the long-time owner of an apartment at Major Mackenzie and Norfolk has hinted about redeveloping it after learning about a high-density condo proposal adjacent to its property on Norfolk Ave.
- **Page 7:** In a discussion about **Height and Density**, there are references to allowing buildings between 10 to 20 storeys in the 'Character Area.' In my view, this is far too high for the designated area, especially if GO service doesn't materially expand and the parking allotment remains a standard one spot for each unit (see earlier discussion about traffic concerns).
- **Page 14:** Next steps mentions analyzing all comments and feedback for a return to Council in the Fall for a final decision. I think this timing may be too tight for this particular centre considering the issues I have raised.

Food for thought

Since I didn't participate in any of the consultation sessions, I also thought it was important to pass on some of my own ideas on how to approach intensification in the Newkirk Local Centre.

This includes:

- Arranging a voluntary survey among residents of all **current** high-density buildings in the area to gauge usage of public transit (YRT and GO Transit)
- Make it mandatory – at the developer's expense – for all **new** residential or business buildings to complete such a survey three years after they open. This would be very valuable in seeing if they are truly 'transit supportive'
- Similar to an initiative I read about the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, institute a stricter allotment of parking spaces for new residential or businesses. This would help address concerns about traffic.
- Reach out to the 20 largest businesses in Richmond Hill to find out how many staff they currently have per hectare and how this compares to what is being expected in various centres, including the Newkirk Local Centre.

Final thoughts

In reviewing documents re: the proposed intensification of 'Newkirk Local Centre', I have many concerns, largely related to future service that will be provided by Richmond Hill GO train and buses.

If in fact the **GO Expansion Full Business Case – November 2018 document remains** current and that major infrastructure issues remain, I question the level of intensification that is being proposed.

As it stands, residents from all parts of Richmond Hill ride the GO train. This is demonstrated by the full parking lots, people who use YRT buses (including special shuttles) and also walk from nearby residences (present company included).

As I highlighted in a recent submission opposing a proposed high-density condo on Norfolk Ave., the GO train or bus is not for everybody. It is a commuter train for people travelling to downtown Toronto and back. Unlike Richmond Hill Centre near Langstaff, it provides no relief for local or regional traffic.

With these limitations – combined by poor operating hours and frequency – I recommend Council take a very, very cautious approach re: any approval of intensification in this area.

Afterall, while transit service is flexible (as GO riders have learned), projects are permanent. There is no turning back.

I also recommend Council connect with the Regional, Provincial and Federal governments to clarify their support for future funding to enhance service on the Richmond Hill GO train corridor. Pending any confirmed funding support, I think the existing Official Plan should remain in effect for this particular location.

Thanks for providing me with an opportunity share my input on this very important planning proposal.

**-Michael Theodores
Long-time Richmond Hill resident**