The *FastTrackTO* 10-Point Plan to Fix Toronto's Streetcars and LRT

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Decades ago, Toronto's streetcars moved hundreds of thousands more people every day than they do today, but they have seen steady ridership decline largely as a result of steadily worsening speed and reliability. A recent report showed they're the slowest in the world. The opening of the Finch West LRT has further highlighted the need to fully realize the value of our surface transit investments by giving them consistent priority and allowing them to operate at the highest speeds that can be achieved safely. We are thrilled to see that the City and TTC are already starting to take action on some of these kinds of measures. The Red Rockets represent enormous assets to the city that, with targeted operational improvements, can once again become a source of civic pride. This is a plan that, when completed as a whole, could cut travel time by 40% while greatly reducing bunching and short turns. That means 20,000 hours saved for Torontonians every single day. At prevailing wages, that's a half-million dollars a day, or $2 billion over the first ten years. And that's only time saved to individuals. The benefits compound through increased economic activity, reduced congestion, and better quality of life. This is a critical investment in the city's future.

fast-track.to

This document outlines a comprehensive program to unlock the full potential of both the new LRT lines and the legacy streetcar network, while some elements are useful for the bus network too. The focus is on proven, cost-effective changes that can deliver substantial travel time and reliability improvements without the need for major new infrastructure. This isn't a multibillion-dollar plan. While each of these changes improves service on its own, the real gains come when they are implemented together. Signals that give transit real priority, fewer slow zones, and better operations add up to more than the sum of their parts. A partial approach will deliver modest improvements. A comprehensive program like this could make the streetcars vastly more attractive.

Munich's streetcars are about 85% faster on average than Toronto's. If Toronto approached that level, the time savings would be dramatic. A trip across the 501 Queen route could be nearly an hour faster. An end-to-end trip on St. Clair could drop from 35 minutes to under 20. Even matching Melbourne, which is among the slowest systems in the world, would mean streetcars that are roughly 40–50% faster than today. We may not reach those levels immediately, but the scale of the opportunity is clear. Toronto has inherited an amazing rail transit infrastructure. The following ten measures show exactly how to unlock it.

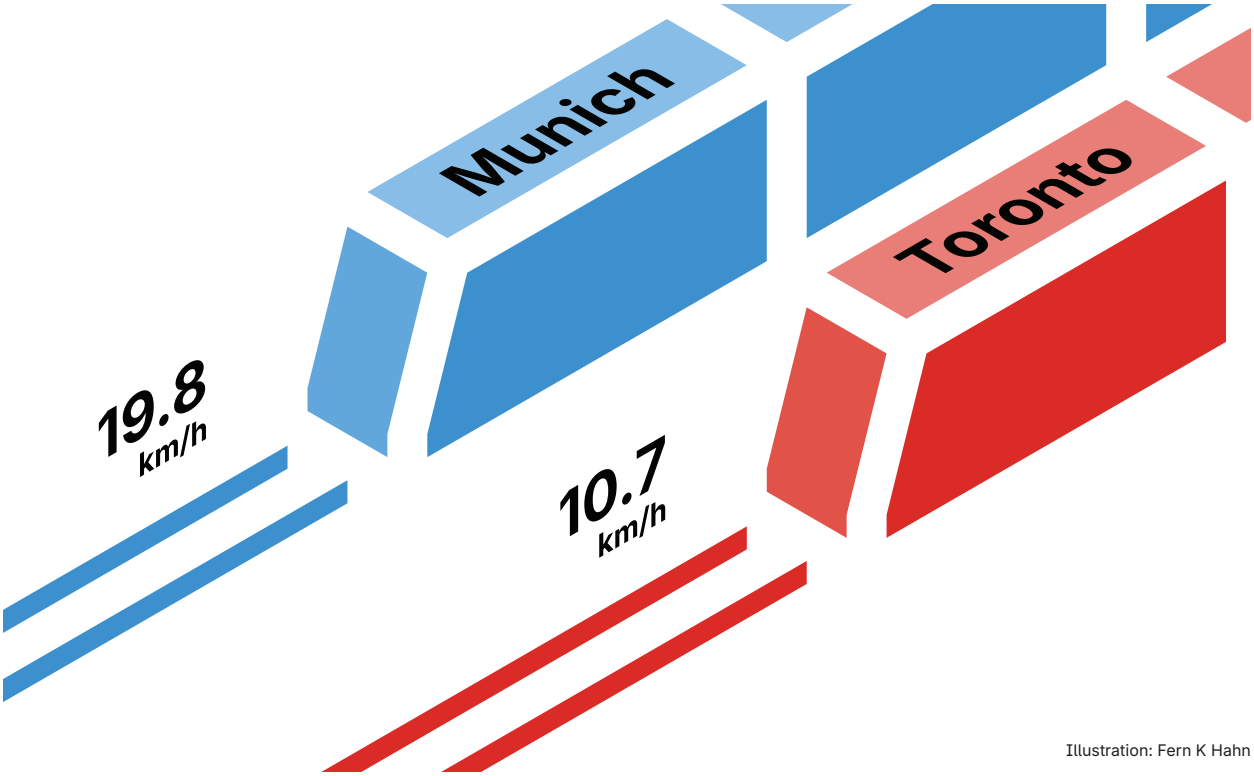

Illustration: Fern K Hahn

Photo: Jedwin Mok

The 10-Point Plan

1. Make Transit Signal Priority Work Better

Toronto already has transit signal priority but its implementation is far more limited than it could be. Today, it is focused mostly on extending green lights if a transit vehicle is approaching. Transit should also get priority over left-turning cars, not the other way around. Signals can achieve this in two ways: phase rotation changes the order of existing signal phases in real time so a streetcar gets its green before the left turn rather than after, while phase insertion adds a dedicated transit green on demand, outside the normal cycle entirely. The City has already begun implementation, but it must be rolled out throughout the network to get the full benefit. Signal priority should also help vehicles stay on schedule by actively adjusting signals so that any vehicle more than 60 seconds behind schedule, or with an unusually large gap to the vehicle ahead, should automatically receive maximum priority.

Toronto's transit signal priority reacts to streetcars when they're nearly at the intersection, which is often too late to catch a green. Waterloo Region's LRT has a system that predicts arrivals further in advance, giving signals more time to adjust. But the real aspiration is a system like Zurich's, which tracks every vehicle across the entire network and coordinates multiple signals at once to clear a path ahead. Rather than signals reacting to streetcars one at a time, the whole network works together to keep them moving.

2. Split the Crossing, Speed Up Signals

On wide roads, traffic lights are long because they have to give pedestrians enough time to cross all those lanes at once. That eats up the signal cycle and leaves almost no room to give streetcars and LRTs a priority green. Splitting wide crossings with a small waiting area in the middle of the road (standard practice in Europe) cuts the crossing time in half, making it possible to shorten the red light for transit. Whenever there isn't transit approaching, the signals can provide generous pedestrian crossing times suitable for people of all ages and abilities to cross the entire street in one go. Many intersections on Eglinton and Finch already have the physical median islands needed for two-stage pedestrian crossings. Using them would free up significant time for transit priority right now, without any construction.

3. Stop Slowing Down Streetcars That Could Safely Go Faster

Streetcars and LRTs run on fixed tracks and are driven by trained operators, which means they can often move safely at the same speed as surrounding traffic or faster. But restrictions imposed over the years mean they routinely crawl well below what the road allows. They slow to 10 km/h through switches, 25 km/h entering intersections, and as little as 15 km/h passing under bridges, which a fast cyclist could match. The Queensway is the most glaring example: the right-of-way was designed for 80 km/h, has long stretches without sidewalks, yet streetcars are restricted to 40 km/h. A comprehensive review of speed limits across the network, with a goal of eliminating slow zones and a presumption in favour of matching or exceeding car speeds where it's safe to do so, could deliver major time savings.

Photo: Jedwin Mok

4. Prevent Unnecessary Emergency Stops

On Toronto's LRT lines, going a few kilometres per hour over the speed limit triggers the emergency brakes, a jarring stop that can knock standing passengers off their feet. To avoid this, operators have to constantly focus on the speedometer. A software adjustment, similar to how cruise control works in a car, would automatically stop acceleration as the train approaches the speed limit rather than waiting for it to be breached. Operators could focus on the road, riders would have a smoother trip, and the vehicles would suffer less wear.

Photo: Jedwin Mok

5. Eliminate Left Turns Where They Don't Belong

On dedicated rights-of-way like Finch and Spadina, left turns at major intersections should simply be eliminated where drivers can use a nearby side street instead. While a handful of cars turn left, every lane of through traffic, along with transit, sits waiting. The signal time freed up goes to moving far more people both on transit and in cars. On mixed-traffic routes, a single driver waiting to turn left can hold up a streetcar and everyone on it for an entire signal cycle. Banning left turns where there's no left turn lane keeps roads moving more smoothly while dramatically improving reliability for hundreds of transit riders at a time.

6. Stop Stopping at Every Switch

Every time a Toronto streetcar reaches a track switch, the operator has to stop, request the switch position, and visually confirm it's set correctly before proceeding. It's a ritual that happens dozens of times a day on every route but it's entirely unnecessary and less safe. Off-the-shelf systems used in Waterloo, Seattle, Melbourne, and across Europe let vehicles confirm switch positions automatically, in advance, without slowing. Toronto has studied this for years. It's time to buy the system and install it.

Photo: Jedwin Mok

7. Stop Installing Obsolete Switches

Double-blade switches have been the global standard for decades and are already used on Toronto's LRT lines and at the Leslie Barns. They allow streetcars to pass through at full speed while legacy single-blade switches force them to slow to 10 km/h. Yet the TTC still installs the old design when it rebuilds track. Changing the standard now won't fix existing switches overnight, but it ensures we stop making the problem worse with every reconstruction project.

8. Optimize Stop Spacing Across Entire Routes, Not One Stop at a Time

TTC stop spacing standards are much closer than world leading transit systems and many stops are even closer than the standard. That’s a big part of what makes trips so slow. Stop consolidation only works when it’s done at the scale of a full route. Making isolated changes one or two stops at a time creates local opposition while delivering little visible benefit. Instead, routes should be reviewed and adjusted as a whole to meet carefully chosen standards while maintaining accessibility. When implemented this way, the result is a clear, system-wide improvement in travel time and reliability. If a route becomes five minutes faster end-to-end, that benefits every rider, even if they may need to walk slightly farther to their stop.

9. Make Replacement Buses History with Modular Track Diversions

Even a few metres of construction today shuts down a streetcar route and replaces it with buses or forces long detours. In much of the world, they use modular track segments (known as Kletterweiche) that can be used to temporarily divert streetcar tracks around small construction sites. Once a set of these segments is acquired, they can be used over and over again for years.

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10. Plan for Double-Ended Streetcars in the Next Procurement

Toronto's current streetcars have a cab at only one end, which means they need a loop to turn around. This locks up valuable real estate and makes routing choices very limited. The LRTs already use double-ended vehicles with cabs at both ends, giving them far more operational flexibility. When the time comes to expand the current fleet, procuring double-ended vehicles for the streetcar network would free up loop sites for other uses and allow vehicles to turn around almost anywhere on the network. They could be used on certain routes to begin with as new vehicles become available, such as the new Waterfront East LRT. Doors on both sides open up the possibility of island platforms, which allow faster and safer boarding than curbside stops. New cars could also be designed to accommodate level boarding, improving accessibility and reducing time-consuming use of the ramp. This is a longer-term measure, but the decisions made in the next procurement will shape the network for decades.

A Call to Action

These improvements pay for themselves in more ways than one. Faster travel times mean the same number of vehicles can run more frequently, meaning more service at no additional operating cost. Choosing off-the-shelf switches over custom ones reduces capital costs. Modular track diversions are cheaper than months of replacement bus service. This is a plan that saves money while delivering better transit.

But the most important thing is that it be pursued as a unified programme, not a checklist to be quietly whittled down. The individual measures reinforce each other. Signal priority becomes more effective as vehicles become more predictable. The more consistently a streetcar runs on time, the more precisely the signals can anticipate it. Stop consolidation only delivers its full benefit when done across an entire route. Riders notice a five-minute end-to-end improvement, not the elimination of one stop. Eliminating slow zones and unnecessary stops reduces bunching, which itself improves reliability. Implemented piecemeal, the results will be modest. Implemented together, they add up to a transformation of Toronto's transit.

That's why this plan should be launched as a unified public programme, with a name and a clear commitment attached to it. When improvements are fragmented among many separate measures, the public can't easily understand how big an improvement can be achieved. When the public sees the full program and all its benefits, there can be a true movement to fix our surface transit once and for all. The streetcars have been getting slower for over half a century. With the political will to act and a clear, public commitment from decision-makers, that trend can be reversed within years, not decades.