

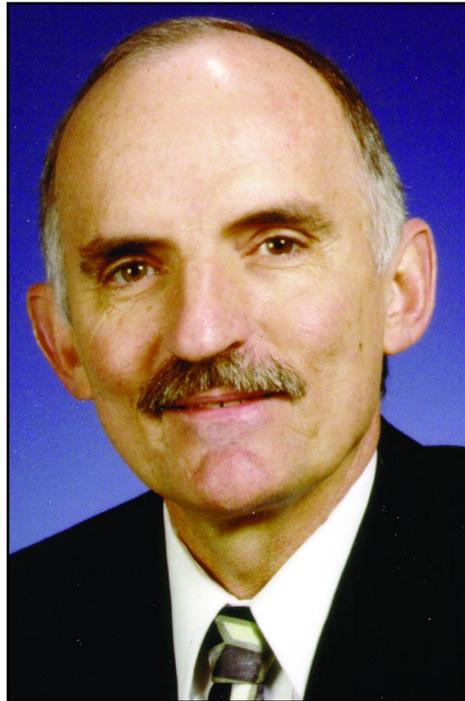


Rick Ducharme, P.Eng.: the transit man

by Anna Maria Greene

The next time you take the TTC, rest assured you're in good hands, because the man at the helm has your safety uppermost in his mind. After two years as chief general manager of the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) Rick Ducharme, P.Eng., is still fighting the good fight to make the "Better Way" better—and one way or another, he's bound to win.

“When I was interviewed for the job,” says Ducharme, “I told the commission that there were two things I wouldn't do: anything illegal and anything unsafe. ‘Well then,’ they joked, ‘you're not going to be hired.’” But obviously they appreciated his principles and as soon as he was hired, he made clear what his top priority would be: to continue with the



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“state-of-good-repair” program implemented in 1995, to rehabilitate the TTC's entire infrastructure.

“We have to make certain that the signals and tunnels that were built years ago are sound. These types of things are very solid in our budget,” he says. But the key to a healthy transit system is to ensure that it deals with future growth while not compromising on maintenance of the existing infrastructure, he says: “It's foolish to expect that an additional two million people can be added to the GTA in the next 20 years without additional infrastructure being built.”

In the 1990s, the TTC's funding was reduced and, as a consequence, so was service. Just a few months into his new job, Ducharme went to the powers that be and asked for a considerable amount of extra bus and subway service. At first, the commissioners were taken aback, but they

soon came around to see his logic. “It worked out better than we ever anticipated,” he says. Since he's been at the TTC, ridership has grown by 30-million riders a year, which is a good thing, but it does pose problems. As it stands now, there are some 200 to 300 fewer buses on the roads than there were 10 years ago. “In a city this size,” says Ducharme, “that's deplorable. And people wonder why we have gridlock!”

He says it's largely an issue of money. The TTC's budget for the next 10 years is \$3.8 billion. The bulk of spending will go to buying replacement vehicles, since many of the TTC's subway cars are 30 years old, and some buses over 20 years old. If you then figure in the expense of regular maintenance (\$150 million a year) and consider even modest growth, it's an enormous challenge—one that the city simply can't possibly cope with on its own, says

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Yet he's optimistic about the headway the TTC is making in the political arena. Although we didn't get the Olympics, "we've won big as far as I'm concerned by getting three governments talking—getting [Toronto mayor] Mel [Lastman] and [Ontario Premier] Mike Harris and [Prime Minister] Chretien speaking of a common element. The city said it very clearly [in a meeting in July]: Transit is where we have to put it [our resources]." What happens if the funding falls through? "If there's budget cuts, we're not going to skimp on maintenance," he says firmly. "No. We're going to decide which subway line to close."

And he isn't just whistling Dixie. In 1999, when garbage being transported caused a fire at Old Mill Station in Toronto's west end, Ducharme had an emergency meeting in his office. His decision, which he made without waiting for the commissioners' blessing, was: "No more garbage transport. We'll have it picked up from now on." Like he said, nothing unsafe, nothing illegal.

Wealth of experience

It's little wonder people pay attention to Ducharme when he talks transit. Few in the province know as much about Ontario's transportation system as he does — his knowledge in the field having been acquired over nearly three decades. Born and raised on a farm northwest of London, near Lake Huron, the 53-year-old civil engineer graduated from the Univer-

sity of Waterloo in 1972 and worked for the Ontario Ministry of Transportation for four years in capacities including construction, research, and transportation and planning. (He also had work terms at CP and CN Rail). In 1976, he joined GO Transit as transit coordinator, and held a number of positions until his 1993 appointment as managing director, where he stayed until moving to the TTC.

How does Ducharme like being in the driver's seat of Canada's largest transit system? "I love it!" he says without pause. "It was always a goal of mine." The politics is the most challenging, he admits, adding that much of his time is spent in meetings, often lobbying for funding. But he loves the interaction with people, and despite his hectic schedule, he always makes time for his staff's awards ceremonies. "We give out a lot of safety and recognition awards," Ducharme says, "because I'm trying to give them a signal: I don't run the TTC; 10,000 employees do."

Of this number, there are about 80 or so engineering staff under his general manager, dealing with much of the track work; some engineering staff in operations, handling tunnel and track work that requires particular expertise. Consulting engineers are brought in to work on the big projects, such as the building of stations. Ducharme says he prefers using consultants for large projects because he believes strongly "in protecting the people. Projects come and go. I don't want to be in a position where I have to lay off staff."

A project that's been around for a while is the Sheppard subway line, a 6.4 km, five-station route scheduled to open in spring 2002. "There was a lot of political wrangling over that," says Ducharme of

the \$930-million project. But he believes the new line is not only necessary to accommodate Toronto's growth and transit needs, but should also be extended to Scarborough. Presentation of this vision for expansion was planned this past August. "There are several projects on the list that we believe are needed over the next 10 years. Our position is: 'Don't build a subway at the expense of maintenance,' but if we do go ahead with the projects on the list, which of them is the priority?"

Ducharme wants to see a plan for the TTC laid out by this fall, so that it's clear TTC's vision is tied in with that of Paul Bedford (the city planner), in terms of how the city will develop.

Leads by example

You could say Ducharme lives and breathes the public transportation scene: As well as having served as the vice-president, North American, for the International Union of Public Transport, he sits on the board of directors of the Canadian Urban Transit Association and the American Public Transit Association, among other transportation-related bodies. But to truly walk the talk, he also commutes to work by public transportation, taking the GO bus from Aurora, north of Toronto, to connect to the Toronto subway, which he rides south to his midtown office. That way, he says, he gets to chat with colleagues and staff, and to see how the whole operation is running, through the eyes of a commuter who also happens to be the boss. No doubt his vigilance keeps his employees on their toes. "The word gets around," he laughs.

But Ducharme says he's not a slave to his job, and won't take his cellphone with him on vacation. As he sees it, it's important to have a life outside work, because a healthy worker means a more efficient worker, which in turn translates into a safer transit system.

Ducharme is also very proud to be a professional engineer. He credits his engineering education and experience period with providing skills that help him "assess situations, whether it's putting a building together or an organization." At the Iron Ring ceremony, he adds, engineering graduates pledge to act responsibly in society: "It's a quality that's instilled in you for life." ♦

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