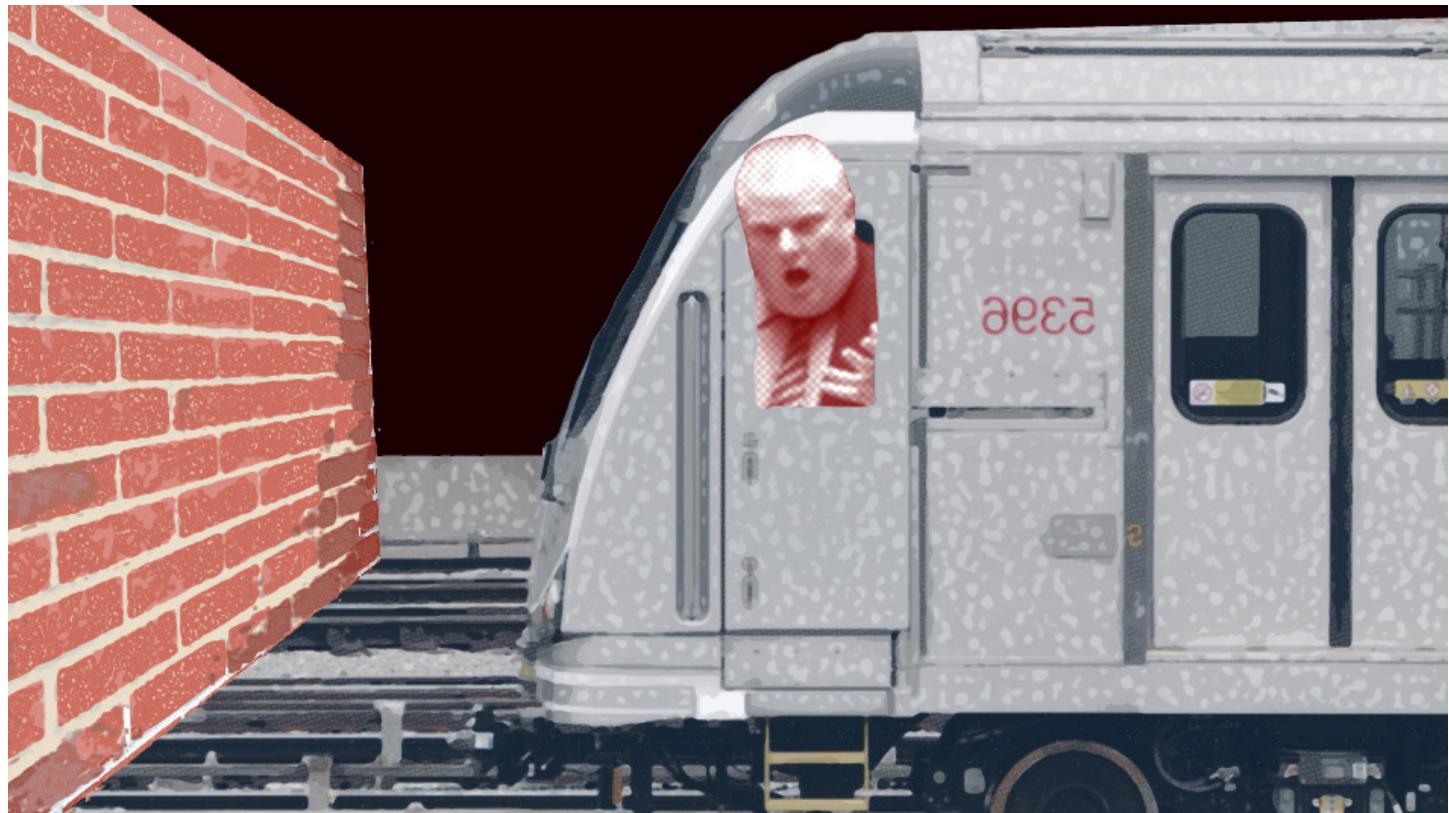


ISSUE  
074

FOREFRONT

# CANADA'S STRANGEST STRAPHANGER

The Modern Politics Behind Rob Ford's Subway Obsession



Story by Jake Blumgart  
Illustrator by Lauren Adolfsen



Volume 1 / Issue 74  
© 2013 NEXT CITY

*Forefront* is published weekly by  
Next City, a 501c3 non-profit  
that connects cities and informs the  
people working to improve them.

Next City  
1315 Walnut St.  
Suite 926  
Philadelphia, PA 19107

For subscriptions, please visit  
[www.nextcity.org/subscribe](http://www.nextcity.org/subscribe).

While Next City welcomes the submission of  
unsolicited work, we may not be able to  
respond to each submission individually.

Please send work to [ariella@nextcity.org](mailto:ariella@nextcity.org).

For additional information, please  
visit [www.nextcity.org](http://www.nextcity.org).

It was a mild day in early July when Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, elected in 2010 on a hardline anti-tax platform, led a crowd of thousands in a rousing chant that may sound a little bizarre coming from a conservative politician: “Subways, subways, subways!” The embattled mayor now facing down allegations of crack use was speaking to his most ardent supporters — attendees of Ford Fest, an annual barbecue typically held at his mother’s home in the city’s sprawling southwestern edge. This year the family broke with tradition and brought the free booze to Thomson Memorial Park, located in Scarborough, a struggling ex-suburb that, like Ford’s native Etobicoke, was forced to amalgamate with Toronto in 1998.

It makes sense that the infamously anti-urbanist Rob Ford, who ran his mayoral campaign against a supposed “War On Cars,” chose Scarborough to host his family’s political rally-slash-BBQ. Its population is far larger than that of Etobicoke, but

of historic rowhomes and newer, shiny high-rise condos clustered along the waterfront of Lake Ontario. In this urban core, where the population is disproportionately white and upwardly mobile, lies one of the best transit systems in North America. It was this Toronto to which Jane Jacobs moved in 1968, where she worked with local activists to inspire conservative premier Bill Davis to put the kibosh on a destructive highway project with the proclamation that “cities were built for people and not cars.”

Scarborough and its counterparts, on the other hand, are Phoenix. Until the years following World War II, Toronto didn’t have much in the way of suburbs. The surrounding areas were predominantly farmland until after 1945, when Toronto, like U.S. cities, experienced a significant suburban boom. Etobicoke, York, East York, North York and Scarborough (the latter two combined are home to 49 percent of the current city’s population) were built to the tastes of the

## Since his early years as a city councilor in Etobicoke’s Ward 2, Ford has played foil to the progressive, urbanist leaders who tend to do well downtown.

the neighborhoods share many issues: Lower-income populations, many non-white and first-generation immigrant families, who struggle to access public services in socially isolated and diffusely populated areas built for middle-income, two-car families.

It is also, by most accounts, one of the mayor’s firmest bases of support. In the months since allegations that Ford was caught on camera smoking crack cocaine surfaced throughout a [metastasizing](#) scandal that has been tied to at least one murder and numerous resignations at City Hall, a majority of Scarborough residents have retained a [good opinion](#) of Ford. This is due, in part, to Ford’s stubborn insistence that Scarborough, which is poorly served by transit, get a subway.

An oft-quoted aphorism describes postwar Toronto as “Vienna surrounded by Phoenix.” The “Vienna” is the city’s center, a walkable place reminiscent of New York or Boston with its collection

postwar era, when it was assumed every family would have multiple cars. Today the density of Scarborough is 3,300 people per square kilometer, while in old Toronto and the former suburb of York (unhelpfully lumped together in the data) it’s 7,300 per kilometer. Across the ex-suburbs you’ll find bungalow tract housing squirreled away in cul-de-sacs, trafficky six-to-eight lane thoroughfares, and high-rise apartment buildings of the kind briefly celebrated after the war and consistently derided thereafter. Besides housing, strip malls and parking lots dominate the landscape.

“Partly because of transit isolation, over the last 20 years [Scarborough] is a place where many of the poorest people in the city live, because it’s one of the only affordable parts of the city left,” says Edward Keenan, senior editor of The Grid magazine and author of *Some Great Idea: Good Neighborhoods, Crazy Politics and the Invention of Toronto*. “That breeds a certain type of resentment. There is a sense

that Scarborough has been left out of transit because it is where the poor people live, so it isn't respected." Keenan lived in Scarborough for 15 years.

Ford made a name for himself amid the strip malls and traffic, giving serious and often personal attention to the problems of working-class constituents who felt ignored by the city's wealthier downtown establishment. Since his early years as a city councilor in Etobicoke's Ward 2, Ford has played foil to the progressive, urbanist leaders who tend to do well downtown. When former mayor David Miller, a New Urbanist's dream, introduced his light rail-heavy Transit City plan in 2007, Ford said the people of Toronto didn't want surface rails that would compete with traffic. The ex-suburbs wanted subways, the same kind of transit enjoyed by ascendant downtown neighborhoods.

On his first day in office Ford announced a

described as a bunch of untied loose ends. Transit is mostly confined to slow-moving buses with a handful of scattered regional rail stations, a few streetcar lines and the tail ends of subway lines. Lengthy bus trips on crowded streets must be taken to get from most parts of the former municipalities to the closest rail station. Studies from GPS manufacturer [TomTom](#) and the [Board of Trade](#) found that the Toronto area's congestion and commuting times are among the worst on the continent. The average commuting time for Scarborough residents clocked in at a whopping 49 minutes, according to a [recent poll](#) from Forum Research Inc. Average commuting time for those who live outside the city is 39 minutes. It took 36 percent of Scarborough residents who commute more than an hour to get to school or work, in contrast to 17 percent of total commuters.

"They are kind of in the worst of both worlds,

**"We will not build any more rail tracks down the middle of our streets," Ford told reporters. "The war on the car is over, and all new subway expansion is going underground."**

plan to cancel all light rail lines, which he argues will compete with cars, in favor of spending the more than \$8 billion available for transit on one subway line, serving far fewer residents. "We will not build any more rail tracks down the middle of our streets," [Ford told reporters](#). "The war on the car is over, and all new subway expansion is going underground."

With that, Ford made the unassuming inner-ring suburbs ground zero for what, aside from the fracas of the crack cocaine video, is shaping up to be the signature fight of his administration: The battle over how to best modernize a transportation system struggling to keep up with the demands of unprecedented growth, all without alienating a political base that isn't so convinced the benefits of growth will flow back to its side of town.

## AN INCOMPLETE SUCCESS STORY

Suburban subways are a tantalizing idea. Rail service in Scarborough and the other ex-'burbs is best

tantalizingly close in terms of their access to transit service, but still far enough out that if you don't have a car it can be a pain... to get around," says Steve Munro, a blogger and longtime Toronto transit advocate. (Munro was a member of Streetcars for Toronto, which saved the city's trolley network from destruction in the 1970s).

The congestion will only get worse. Toronto is, after all, the Canadian megalopolis. By population it is the fourth largest city on the continent, with a forest of cranes dotting the skyline and a metropolitan growth rate of 100,000 people per year that shows no signs of slowing. Between 1996 and 2011 the city's population grew from 2.3 million to 2.6 million, achieving a density of more than 4,100 people per kilometer. Economically, the city is a powerhouse. The Toronto Transportation Commission [estimates](#) that the number of jobs in Toronto's downtown core will increase from 315,000 today to 404,000 in 2031. At last count, there were 15 skyscrapers, 45 stories



or higher; under construction — more than any other city in the hemisphere.

Armando Carbonell, an urban planner and chairman of the Department of Planning and Urban Form at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, calls Toronto an “incomplete success story.”

“There’s no question it’s enviable in a lot of ways from a U.S. [perspective] for sure,” Carbonell says. “The theme I would use to talk about Toronto is good density... What’s happening in Toronto, most cities in North America would love to have happening. Good news: Lots of growth, lots of young people, a city that is known to be very livable. What’s needed is as serious investment in transportation to make it work.”

For that reason it was perplexing when Ford cancelled his predecessor’s Transit City plan in 2010. It took about a year and a half and a **counterattack** led by conservative councilmember Karen Stintz to reverse the decision and put transit expansion back on the city’s agenda via a new, broader framework called The Big Move. Priced at \$50 billion by the regional transit planning organization Metrolinx, The Big Move will be the region’s first major transit expansion since the 1980s and one of the Western

Hemisphere’s more ambitious of the decade. If fully funded, it includes measures to address crushing subway crowds citywide as well as extending transit to the ex-suburbs. Its first phase includes an extension of the Yonge-University-Spadina Line’s northwestern end and a new 25-kilometer rail line connecting the Lester B. Pearson International airport with Union Station, a central rail hub undergoing renovation. Other investments would include bus rapid transit in its own dedicated lane between Scarborough and the city of Oshawa, a northeastern extension of the Yonge line, and a dramatic enhancement of the GO Transit regional rail network.

Notably, about half of the \$16 billion in funding already secure for the first phase of The Big Move has been earmarked for four rail lines to Scarborough and other underserved areas of Toronto. These include a 19-kilometer dedicated light rail transit line connecting western Scarborough, underground through the center city, to the boundary of old Toronto and York, an 11-kilometer dedicated lane in northwestern Toronto, and a 13-kilometer line that would run along one of Scarborough’s arterial avenues.

The fourth line was meant to replace the

Scarborough RT, an ill-conceived monorail-like system from the 1980s. Under the initial Big Move proposal, which Stintz and other councilors put back into action over Ford's objections, the line would be replaced by light rail transit (LRT) above ground. The light rail would run 9.9 kilometers, with an estimated annual ridership of 31 million, its seven stops in walking distance of 47,000 residents and employees. It is also already fully funded.

"[T]he LRT option provides greater overall geographic coverage, more stations providing greater local access, larger population served, and reliable high quality service at a lower cost," reads a [July report](#) from the Toronto city manager.

None of that is convincing to Ford. Polls show that residents of Scarborough prefer subways to LRT,

Scarborough, and they're not saying three stops, seven stops, five stops," Ford told an obviously frustrated Josh Matlow, a councilor representing the heart of old city. "I'll tell you what they're saying. They're saying, 'Rob we want a subway.' You put LRTs on any main street in this city and those roads are going to be torn up, that's what LRTs are."

Actually, that's a characterization of what an old-school trolley line would do, if anyone were suggesting building a new one. But no one is.

"It is true that most people in Scarborough don't want a light rail. They want a subway, and the reason they want it is that there is no light rail in Toronto," says Jay Young, SSHRC postdoctoral fellow in the Department of History at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. "We just have streetcars and

**"What's happening in Toronto, most cities in North America would love to have happening...Lots of growth, lots of young people, a city that is known to be very livable. What's needed is as serious investment in transportation to make it work."**

with good reason — subways are typically faster than aboveground transit and, hey, downtown has them. The numbers, too, show promise: Analysis done by the city has predicted that a subway replacement for the Scarborough Rapid Transit line could run 7.6 kilometers, with an estimated annual ridership of 36 million. The problem, however, is that the ridership, though impressive, is not enough to support it. The subway would need a hefty cash infusion, well beyond the \$1.8 billion in funding offered for LRT by the province, and no one knows where the money would come from.

There are other unknowns, at least for Ford. During a contentious debate in July, the mayor sparred with rivals who goaded him into admitting he was [unfamiliar with the specifics of the LRT proposal](#). Ford repeatedly and wrongly asserted light rail would disrupt traffic and "rip out traffic lanes," ignoring the fact that the light rail would have dedicated lanes.

"I've listened loud and clear to the people of

subways and they think light rail is a streetcar, when actually it's very close to a subway in terms of having its own right of way."

On July 17, the city council voted 28-16 to go with the subway plan Ford supports. Fault, however, cannot be laid entirely on Rob Ford. Plenty of other politicians of all political stripes have echoed support for subways in an attempt to win the voters of Scarborough. Other supporters include Stintz and the provincial Liberal party, which is tenuously in power in Ontario and threw its influence behind the subway proposal in a successful attempt to win an August by-election in Scarborough.

"It's blatant political pandering to say Scarborough deserves a subway," Munro says. Cheaper LRT would cover more surface area in the less dense former suburbs, and for less money. The subway costs at least \$8.2 million more than the \$1.48 billion the province offered to pay for LRT, and the city estimates the price of the newly approved line will rise to

more than \$1.72 billion above the province's current offering by the time construction begins in 2018. (Ford has expressed hope that the federal government will provide funding for the Scarborough subway, but it has shown no willingness to do so.) "The premise that only a subway is good enough for all the suburbs means you'll have to redraw everything because you've just doubled or tripled the cost," Munro says. "And that makes transit unaffordable."

Ford ran on a promise of cutting taxes while preserving services. His right-wing populist appeal played well in a city where many residents are acutely aware of the need for public assistance while living in suburban enclaves that make it difficult to access. It's easy to see where residents of Etobicoke or Scarborough might feel they aren't getting much value for their tax dollars. University of Toronto professor David Hulchanski found, in his 2010 study "[The Three Cities Within Toronto](#)," that the number of predominantly middle-income neighborhoods in Toronto is shrinking, as lower- and higher-income neighborhoods are growing. He also found that higher-income residents are flocking to old city Toronto, near public transit and other services that were easily accessible to the mixed-income populations that once lived downtown. Ford's appeal has always been to those who have, for good reason, felt left out of Toronto's urban renaissance.

Seriously addressing these disparities requires more revenue, but Ford continues to insist that he will cut taxes. Although he signaled a willingness to accept a small tax increase to partially pay for the Scarborough subway, in June he still talked about forging ahead with a 10 percent cut to the land transfer tax, even as more municipal revenue is needed to counter [declining provincial assistance](#) for affordable housing. That choice gives a sense of his priorities: A small tax increase to pay for a politically expedient subway, while an actual need — affordable housing — is in danger.

All this political squabbling over one rail line obscures more important transit issues. Both the proposed subway and the first-wave LRT lines now funded with the initial \$16 billion cash infusion from Ontario would simply feed people into the two existing arterial subway lines. But rush hour crowding is already crushing on both the east-west Bloor-Danforth line,

which Ford hopes to extend into Scarborough, and the north-south Yonge-University-Spadina line, which is so congested it [requires "savior" trains](#) at its busiest stations — empty cars that arrive to clear dangerously full platforms. At peak times, riders on both lines often have to wait for two or three trains to go by before they can squeeze on.

"I'm at Broadview Station, which is three stops east of Yonge and Bloor, the main transfer point between the north-south and east-west subway lines, and come September I wouldn't even bother trying to get on a train at 8:30 in the morning," says Munro, who lives in the old city of Toronto and doesn't drive. "It's just not worth the effort. They are full coming in from further out, long before they reach downtown, from people making longer haul commuting trips into the city. There is a serious problem with congestion."

It's the second phase of the expansion — the "Next Wave" — that's slated to bring Toronto the new line connecting to the airport and a few other critical relief valves for the overflowing system.

The council's decision to vote for the Scarborough subway extension is a taste of a bigger struggles to come: Where will the funding for The Big Move's other \$34 billion come from? That amount would be a heavy political lift at any time, but it's especially tough now given the instability of city and provincial politics. (The Canadian federal government has traditionally contributed very little to transit funding. Stephen Harper's Conservative Party seems eager to continue the tradition.) The next mayoral race will take place in 2014, and most observers expect a provincial election within the next year. Both races are likely to be highly competitive.

## CONSERVATIVE IN CANADA?

Since 2003 the Liberal Party has lead the Ontario government. Premier Kathleen Wynne comes from the party's left wing and seems intent on seeing The Big Move through. But she also heads a fragile minority government, basically ensuring a provincial election in the next year. Wynne will square off against the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) and, more ominously for the future of transit in the Toronto metro region, the Progressive Conservative party.

Like American Republicans, the Tories have



changed dramatically since the 1970s, when Bill Davis provided generous capital investment for the Toronto Transportation Commission and halted the spread of expressways. Today the Progressive Conservatives have become much more extreme in their opposition to taxation and government spending on pretty much anything. The provincial party's leader, Tim Hudak, claims to support subways over LRT because, "I certainly believe in my heart and in my gut that in world class cities they build subways underground. You don't rip up existing streets and make traffic even worse."

But Hudak also believes subways can be paid for without raising taxes, which could only be true if fewer lines are built than are currently planned as LRT.

"If the province goes Tory, we are dead," says Munro, predicting that such an outcome would mean current LRT lines getting cancelled again, except for one line that runs from the old York-Toronto border to Scarborough's west end, which is largely already underground and could be fully sunk into a subway project. "Even if you replace Ford as mayor, any chance of funding on the provincial level will disappear. The single big fight now is the fight over taxation, and it

is part of the more general fight against the whole right-wing, tax-cutting [agenda] that has haunted every public service for the last two decades."

Even if the Liberals or NDP do win, it's unclear how the expansion will be paid for. In April Metrolinx released a list of four possible "revenue tool" recommendations, including a 1 percent harmonized sales tax across the metro region, which would require provincial and federal government approval and raise \$1.3 billion annually. The feds denied the measure, and Wynne has promised that citizens outside the Greater Toronto area won't have to pay for the region's transit expansion. This leaves a province-wide sales tax, where revenue raised outside the Toronto metro could be spent on other projects, like roads or transit, closer to the source. Other possibilities include a dedicated gas tax (also requiring provincial action), a non-residential parking levy requiring municipal cooperation and a charge for developers, which would also require the support of both provincial and municipal governments.

John Howe, Metrolinx's vice president of investment strategy and project evaluation, says that the agency discounted income and property taxes, because much transit funding already comes from general revenues derived from the provincial income

tax and the municipal property tax. A corporate tax was ruled out due to fears that big businesses would expend time and energy avoiding it, reducing economic productivity and lowering anticipated yields. Howe dismisses the notion that existing revenue sources can be relied upon for more funds.

"We can't count on the government of Ontario, or any level of government for that matter, to fund our need because they all face these universal fiscal challenges," says Howe, whose last day with Metrolinx was August 2. "How [does Ontario] manage \$300 billion in debt and press forward on the other priorities we cherish, like health care and education? In that context transit has been squeezed out. The solution we are proposing is to align transit investment with dedicated revenue sources that are raised within this greater Toronto and Hamilton metro area and reinvested back into projects in the greater Toronto and Hamilton area."

In this atmosphere of political uncertainty, non-governmental actors have stepped in to promote new taxes to pay for transit investment. Howe describes the Toronto Board of Trade as one of Metrolinx's "chief champions." Its grim studies on the high cost of lengthy commuting is a clear argument for transit expansion, although it remains adamant in its opposition to higher corporate taxation. The Greater Toronto CivicAction Alliance is a civil society group with ties to the business community and various political parties (the organization's chair, John Tory, used to lead the Progressive Conservatives' Ontario party). But CivicAction has recruited allies outside its usual base, banding together with organized labor, non-profits, and environmental and transit advocacy groups to push for new revenue sources. In late 2012, it initiated an awareness-raising campaign to ask commuters what they would do with the 32 extra minutes Metrolinx estimates The Big Move would, if implemented, shave off commuting times.

CivicAction orchestrated a major media campaign to press home the message, running "What Would You Do With 32" radio ads and plastering thousands of posters on buses, streetcars, regional rail and subways beginning in 2013, hanging a huge banner in Union Station, and advertised on a donated highway-facing billboard. Newspaper and online advertisements have been prominently placed, while

CivicAction has held or participated in a variety of panels, roundtables and forums on the need for greater transit access.

"We needed a much greater breadth of participation... to get more people involved who were actually affected by the current lack of investments," says Linda Weichel, Civic Action Alliance's vice president for partnerships. "We've been talking about better transportation networks for years, but it's mostly just governments or politicians or the media. We've had positive responses from politicians and governments because I think [they] really appreciate that we are making it easier to have that conversation."

At the Civic Action Alliance's April forum on transportation, the organization's [polling](#) showed "that appreciation for the need for new funding sources has grown by 13 percent over the last two years to 43 percent overall," according to an email from Weichel. About 32,500 people visited the [Your 32 website](#) during the autumn 2012 phase of the campaign and 4,400 answered the "What would you..." question. The second phase presented the question "What Would You Do For 32?" which tried to get respondents to "pledge to support new ways to raise funds for a better transportation network..." Some 10,000 people visited during the second phase of the campaign. Only 2,500 signed the pledge.

As provincial and Toronto municipal elections loom, politicians are acting cautiously around questions of taxation and conservatives are hoping to use the issue as a cudgel. Despite his recent troubles, Ford will run again in 2014. With allegations of crack use still in the headlines, he faces stiff competition and consistently terrible polling numbers outside his suburban strongholds. Of the three serious contenders at the provincial level, the Liberal government has tried to promote investment through the Metrolinx revenue tools proposals, while the New Democratic Party is promoting corporate taxation to pay for transit.

Progressive Conservatives could very well win the election, as the left-wing vote is split between the Liberals and the NDP. The Tories argue that funding can simply be found by cutting waste, abuse and fraud. If they win, there is a distinct possibility that much of The Big Move could be cancelled. If the NDP, the Liberals or a coalition government wins, the

expansion is far more likely to forge ahead, though full implementation could still be tricky.

"The entire Big Move — I don't expect to live to see it all built, and I'm 65, so I'm planning to be around for a while," Munro concludes, with his best-

case scenario. Worst case? "If this doesn't get built, the people who suffer far more will be the people living out in the suburbs, because us fat and happy folks downtown already have our transit system."



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jake Blumgart is a reporter and researcher based in Philadelphia. He covers labor rights, transit policy and social welfare issues, often with a regional focus.



## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Lauren Adolfsen is a designer and illustrator based in Los Angeles. In May 2011 Lauren received her MFA in graphic design from the Yale School of Art. Since 2003, Lauren has made claymation shorts and sold retail products under the name Snack Mountain. You can read about her latest projects at [blog.snackmountain.com](http://blog.snackmountain.com).