

Smart Commute – North Toronto, Vaughan

Organization

Smart Commute – North Toronto, Vaughan

Status

Started 2001, ongoing

Overview

Smart Commute – North Toronto, Vaughan (NTV) is a not-for-profit transportation management association (TMA). It is part of a network of TMAs across the Greater Toronto Area and Hamilton, most of which were created as part of the regional Smart Commute initiative funded by Transport Canada's Urban Transportation Showcase Program and local governments. Smart Commute NTV was the first TMA in Ontario, and provided a model on which others have been based.

After several years of partnership-building among GTA municipalities, businesses, institutions and transit agencies, the organization was established in 2001 at York University as the Black Creek Regional Transportation Management Association (BCRTMA). Since then, it has developed a comprehensive package of transportation demand management (TDM) programs for partner employers in north Toronto and Vaughan. In collaboration with its partners, Smart Commute NTV works to reduce traffic congestion, improve air quality and advocate for sustainable transportation.

Smart Commute NTV has achieved notable results in a variety of areas. Its programs with 13 partner employers reach about 72,000 employees and students, and in 2006 reduced over 61 million vehicle-kilometres of travel and 14,000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions compared to 2005. It has also conducted extensive outreach efforts to raise awareness of sustainable transportation among Greater Toronto Area residents.

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Resources

- Smart Commute – North Toronto, Vaughan (www.SmartCommuteNTV.ca)
- Smart Commute Association (www.smartcommute.ca)

Community context

The Greater Toronto Area (GTA), which includes the City of Toronto and four adjacent regional municipalities, has more than five million residents. Rapid development in suburban areas means that the GTA's population and employment are becoming more decentralized. A growing number of commuter trips are made between suburban communities, and most of these are made by car because suburban transit services are not frequent or convenient outside a few key corridors.

The City of Vaughan lies in York Region, to the north of the City of Toronto's northwest sector. Vaughan's population grew more than 30% from 2001 to 2006, and its employment areas are also expanding rapidly. The Yonge and Spadina subway lines of the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) end to the south, within the City of Toronto. In Vaughan and the northern part of Toronto, there are many major employment centres that subway commuters can only reach by transferring to local buses. Transit commuters travelling between Toronto and Vaughan also have to pay an extra fare when they transfer between TTC and York Region Transit vehicles. Recent government announcements have promised funding for bus rapid transit and subway extensions to serve some of this area.



Approximate area served by Smart Commute – North Toronto, Vaughan

Policy and program context

Plans and policies of the City of Toronto and Region of York both support the creation of more sustainable transportation systems. To this end, transportation demand management (TDM) measures that modify travel behaviours are viewed by both municipalities as an important complement to the provision of infrastructure and services for transit, carpooling, cycling and walking.

One such TDM initiative is Smart Commute – North Toronto, Vaughan (Smart Commute NTV), which is part of the Smart Commute initiative funded by Transport Canada's Urban Transportation Showcase Program, GTA municipalities and the City of Hamilton.



Smart Commute NTV is one of several transportation management associations (TMAs) in the GTA that promote commuter options to business associations and employers. The TMAs are aided by a regional Smart Commute Association that provides tools, centralized coordination and promotion.

Rationale and objectives

Smart Commute NTV is helping to address the need for a more efficient transportation system in the GTA. Current transportation behaviours need to be shifted toward more sustainable choices if increasing traffic congestion is to be slowed or ultimately reversed.

In its original form (as the Black Creek Regional TMA), Smart Commute NTV responded directly to the needs of several large employers and activity centres that were facing parking shortages, inadequate transit service and growing commuter delays.

Today, Smart Commute NTV is an incorporated not-for-profit organization that works with multiple partners to implement TDM solutions in north Toronto and Vaughan. While the organization has grown since its beginning in 2001, its core objectives remain unchanged:

- To reduce congestion and improve air quality by helping commuters to use more sustainable transportation modes such as transit, carpooling, cycling and walking
- To improve local infrastructure and transit accessibility by advocating for sustainable transportation
- To encourage transit-supportive development and province-wide smart growth strategies
- To increase opportunities for TMA collaboration with businesses, institutions, boards of trade, governments and non-governmental organizations

Organizational history

Initial stages

In 1998, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities issued a call for pilot projects to promote active and sustainable transportation. In response, the City of Toronto proposed to explore the formation of an employer-based TMA.

The City of Toronto held a Roundtable Breakfast in 1999 with over 100 representatives from businesses, transit systems, interest groups, academic institutions, consulting firms, and provincial and municipal governments. Subsequently, a TMA Steering Committee was formed with 30 members representing a similarly wide range of stakeholders. To generate broader interest in TMAs, a one-day TMA Forum was held in early 2000 featuring experts from the United States and Canada.

Soon afterward, a meeting of stakeholders from northwest Toronto identified common issues such as parking shortfall, workplace accessibility, and difficulties with employee recruitment and retention. The Black Creek area, which included 52,000 university students and 100,000 employees of 5,000 business establishments, was growing rapidly and faced significant congestion and transit accessibility issues.

Creation of Black Creek Regional TMA (BCRTMA)

In July 2000, the BCRTMA Steering Committee was established with representation from the City of Toronto, City of Vaughan, Region of York, Province of Ontario, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, Toronto Environmental Alliance, North York Chamber of Commerce and Vaughan Chamber of Commerce. To enable a strong public-private partnership, the Steering Committee decided that the BCRTMA should be formally associated with the North York Chamber of Commerce.

With financial assistance from the Toronto Atmospheric Fund, the BCRTMA's business plan was completed in October 2000. Further public-sector funding was successfully attracted from Transport Canada's Moving on Sustainable Transportation Program, Toronto Atmospheric Fund, Province of Ontario, City of Toronto, Region of York and City of Vaughan. In addition, several large employers (Bombardier Aerospace, York University, Knoll North America Corp.) agreed to pay TMA membership fees. York University contributed office space and equipment, while Knoll donated office furniture. In total, over \$200,000 in cash and in-kind contributions was secured.

From March 2001 (when a full-time TMA Executive Director was hired) through 2004, the BCRTMA worked to develop and offer services to employers in its service area (as discussed in the next section). In 2003, it was incorporated as an independent entity and renamed Smart Commute – Black Creek (SC-BC).

Creation of Smart Commute – North Toronto, Vaughan

In 2004, Transport Canada's Urban Transportation Showcase Program agreed to fund a regional Smart Commute Association and a network of TMAs in partnership with municipalities in the GTA and Hamilton. As the only existing TMA in the area, SC-BC was a model for the creation of other TMAs. When the Smart Commute initiative was formally launched in 2005, SC-BC's service area was expanded with support from the City of Vaughan, and a second TMA project was initiated in northeast Toronto with support from the City of Toronto. To reflect these changes, SC-BC was renamed Smart Commute – North Toronto, Vaughan.

Current activities

Smart Commute NTV recruits partners through a variety of means including special events, networking meetings, referrals and cold calls. Once the interest of a potential partner organization has been confirmed, Smart Commute NTV staff meet with key stakeholders within the organization to present its programs and discuss the employer's needs related to parking management, environmental responsibility or employee retention.

To support its operations, Smart Commute NTV relies on partnership funding from participating employers. Individual partnership agreements contain detailed work plans that are customized to meet the unique needs of each workplace, with funding based on a cost-recovery principle. The organization has established several partnership packages (ranging from "medallion" to "platinum") to guide initial discussions with potential partners.

While the programs offered to each partner employer by Smart Commute NTV vary according to the employer's needs, some are described below.

Workplace analysis and strategy development. Smart Commute NTV staff can:

- Conduct an on-site assessment of an employer's commuting policies, infrastructure and related issues
- Provide a confidential transportation survey to identify employees' commuting patterns and concerns, and to measure the potential uptake of TDM programs
- Establish a "baseline" measurement as a basis for future monitoring
- Create a Transportation Options Summary that can be distributed to employees and used to promote transportation alternatives during employee events
- Conduct employee focus groups to gather feedback on implemented measures and study changing attitudes

Ridematching. Smart Commute NTV helps partner employers establish branded subgroups within Carpool Zone, a user-friendly web-based ridematching program developed by the regional Smart Commute Association. Employees also have the option of expanding their search to include area commuters employed by other organizations. Smart Commute NTV staff help employees sign up for ridematching, and monitor the success of ridematching efforts.



A typical Carpool Zone screen viewed by ridematching participants

Workplace promotional events. Smart Commute NTV staff attend workplace events organized by partners, where they distribute promotional and educational materials, discuss commuting options, answer questions and offer prizes to encourage participation. Examples include:

- Sanofi Pasteur Ltd.'s annual Environment, Health and Safety Fair in June
- Parc Downsview Park's annual Earth Day Tree Planting Festival in April

Special events. Smart Commute NTV organizes workplace events for partners to promote transportation alternatives, provide educational materials and commute counseling, and offer prizes. Examples include:

- Smart Commute NTV holds annual bike events at York University each summer and fall, offering a free meal and bike tune-ups to cycling enthusiasts.



Smart Commute NTV staff, partners and participants enjoy the 2006 fall bike event at York University

- More than 200 business executives, elected officials, municipal staff and area employees attended the “Unlock Gridlock” transportation fair at Enbridge Gas Distribution in September 2006. Attendees received a barbeque lunch, tried a Segway, learned to tune up their bikes, signed up for Carpool Zone ridematching and learned about the sustainable transportation initiatives of Smart Commute NTV and its partners.



Dignitaries travelling in a vanpool vehicle arrive at the “Unlock Gridlock” event in 2006

- Smart Commute NTV offers interactive employee workshops on topics like bicycle safety, carpooling, public transit and the Emergency Ride Home program.
- For the GTA-wide Clean Air Commute event every June, Smart Commute NTV often pays partners’ registration fees, delivers and collects promotional and tracking materials, holds lunchtime clinics for employees, and enters participating employees into prize draws. As of 2006, Smart Commute NTV also began coordinating the participation of many partner employers in the national Commuter Challenge event that occurs every June.

Emergency Ride Home (ERH) Program. Smart Commute NTV initiates, administers and promotes an ERH program at select partner workplaces. The program is free for employees. It ensures that registered employees who commute without their car (e.g. by transit, cycling, walking or carpooling) are reimbursed for their use of transit, a taxi or rental car to get home in the event of an emergency (e.g. carpooling driver falls ill, carpool vehicle or bicycle breaks down). Registered employees are entitled to four emergency rides home per year.

TDM consulting. Smart Commute NTV works with employers to plan, implement and evaluate workplace-specific TDM initiatives like vanpooling, shuttle services, transit incentives (such as volume transit pass programs offered by transit agencies) or telework programs.

Advocacy for sustainable transportation. On behalf of partner workplaces, Smart Commute NTV advocates for improved transit (i.e. routes, frequencies, shelters) and other commuting option improvements through speaking engagements, industry functions, stakeholder committee meetings, deputations, consultations and public and media relations.

Partner recognition. Smart Commute NTV highlights contributions by partner workplaces through its website, brochures, media events and interview, trade shows, presentations and promotions.

Results

Some of Smart Commute NTV’s overall results include:

- Currently implementing TDM programs with 13 partners in north Toronto and Vaughan, representing about 72,000 employees and students
- Together with partners, reduced over 61 million vehicle-kilometres of travel and prevented over 14,000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions in 2006
- More than 1,000 carpoolers registered in March 2006
- Developed a guide to help employers design and implement transit fare subsidy programs
- Obtained media coverage that raised awareness of the organization’s activities among 6 million commuters
- Attracted almost 900,000 hits to the Smart Commute NTV website in 2006-2007, representing an almost 100% increase over the previous year
- Received the 2005 Bicycle-Friendliest Suburban Business Award from the City of Toronto
- Held its largest ever Bike Event at York University in September, 2005 with more than 200 attendees.
- Attracted more than 200 business executives, elected officials and area employees to the “Unlock Gridlock” transportation showcase event in September 2006, hosted by Enbridge Gas Distribution
- Hosted or attended more than 15 outreach and education events in 2006-2007, reaching thousands of local employees and students
- Opinion surveys of participants in all Smart Commute TMAs revealed very high levels of satisfaction
- A Decima Poll conducted in November 2006 reported that 10% of GTA residents recognize the Smart Commute brand and 17% recognize Carpool Zone

The following inset boxes showcase the results achieved by Smart Commute NTV together with several of its partners.

York University

In the late 1990s, 70% of York University commuters drove alone to and from campus. The institution projected significant expansion in the years ahead and foresaw growing congestion and costly parking and infrastructure needs. In response, the University undertook several initiatives including leadership in developing the BCRTMA. Together, the organizations worked with partners to:

- Increase daily bus service to campus by almost 150% from 2001 to 2006
- Establish the York University GO Transit Highway 407 express bus route (about 12,000 daily rides) and a campus GO Transit rail stop (about 350 daily rides)
- Offer discounted TTC monthly passes and GO Transit student identification cards
- Improve carpooling and cycling amenities

The results of their efforts have been significant. From 2001 to 2006, York University's population growth of 28% was effectively absorbed by transit, carpooling, cycling and walking. Some more specific outcomes include:

- 60% of trips to and from campus are made using modes other than single-occupant vehicles
- The deferral of plans to build two campus parking garages (saving about \$80 million)
- A reduction of about 44,000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions in 2006-2007 compared to 2001-2002
- Avoidance of about 16,000 vehicle round-trips to and from campus each day in 2006-2007 compared to 2001-2002

In collaboration with York University, Smart Commute NTV currently offers successful campus programs including an active Bicycle User Group (BUG) with more than 300 members, a carpooling database with approximately 800 registrants, and an Emergency Ride Home program for staff and faculty.



GO Transit buses arrive at the York University campus

Enbridge Gas Distribution

Enbridge is committed to a healthier environment and works with Smart Commute NTV to champion sustainable transportation initiatives. It supports "Vaughan Smart Commutes," a new initiative involving interactive and educational events to build interest in sustainable transportation among Vaughan employers and employees.

Enbridge is also active in the Carpool Zone ridematching program, and has a number of internal initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These include a successful employee vanpool program, with two natural gas vans carrying up to nine people each from Barrie and Durham Region. The vehicles are leased and insured by Enbridge, and riders pay a monthly fee.

In 2006, Enbridge worked with Smart Commute NTV to host the "Unlock Gridlock" event.



At the "Unlock Gridlock" event, participants could ride a Segway and visit interactive booths of Smart Commute NTV partners

Parc Downsview Park (PDP) Inc.

PDP is responsible for managing the development of about 240 hectares of land at the former Downsview military base. In 2006, it undertook a planning exercise to establish guidelines for a new sustainable community. Smart Commute NTV actively participated in the development of sustainable transportation options for the Park.

The resulting guidelines go well beyond the familiar standards of suburban-style development. It requires pedestrian-oriented streetscapes and an extensive network of bicycle lanes and pathways. Development will include medium- to high-density residential uses and some mixed-use areas, with reduced minimum parking requirements and priority parking for bicycles, carpools and low-emission vehicles.

Participants

Governments and agencies that provide support to Smart Commute NTV include:

- Transport Canada
- City of Toronto
- City of Vaughan
- York Region
- Toronto Atmospheric Fund

Smart Commute NTV is implementing workplace TDM strategies with a variety of partners:

- Educational institutions — York University, Seneca College
- Governments and affiliated organizations — Environment Canada, City of Vaughan, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, Parc Downsview Park Inc.
- Non-governmental organizations — Universal Workers Union Local 183, Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario
- Private businesses — Sanofi Pasteur Ltd., Knoll North America Corp., ING DIRECT, Enbridge Gas Distribution, Dillon Consulting, CH2M HILL

Resources

Smart Commute NTV operates two TMA projects and employs four total staff including an Executive Director, two Program Managers (one for each TMA project) and a Program Coordinator.

Smart Commute NTV also relies on the support and expertise of its Board of Directors as well as a Northeast Toronto Advisory group with local business leaders who offer expertise in marketing, planning, parking, transportation, real estate law, energy efficiency, public affairs and environmental management.

Smart Commute NTV's annual budget for both TMA projects is about \$300,000 to \$350,000 in cash, plus in-kind contributions. Its operating budget is subject to change depending on current priorities, new partnerships, government funding levels and other factors.

Smart Commute NTV and its predecessor organizations have received financial support from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the Toronto Atmospheric Fund, EcoAction, the City of Toronto, the City of Vaughan, York Region and Transport Canada's Moving on Sustainable Transportation Program and Urban Transportation Showcase Program. Smart Commute NTV also receives funding from partner workplaces for the services it delivers.

Timeline

1999. Stakeholder breakfast held

2000. TMA Forum held, TMA Steering Committee formed

2000. Business plan completed, startup funding secured

2001. Executive Director hired, operations of Black Creek Regional Transportation Management Association begin

2003. Organization incorporated as Smart Commute Black Creek

2004. Partnership agreement reached to implement Smart Commute initiative across GTA and Hamilton

2005. Organization renamed as Smart Commute – North Toronto, Vaughan to reflect expanded service area upon the launch of the regional Smart Commute initiative

Lessons learned

This section outlines some of the most important lessons learned throughout the history of Smart Commute NTV.

Seek champions. TDM initiatives are not always easy, and rarely yield immediate results. TMAs need champions from governments, institutions, non-governmental organizations and private-sector companies who lead by example, support Smart Commute NTV's mandate, and follow through with persistence. Actions that mark a champion could include multi-year financial commitments, support for innovative TDM pilot projects, providing peer group referrals, or speaking to third-party organizations on behalf of Smart Commute NTV.

Emphasize long-term collaboration with stakeholders. TMAs need to work with a range of potential funders, customers and other service providers. Ultimately, success will depend on the ability to coordinate team efforts. In building partnerships, TMAs should emphasize their venture's long-term nature because many initiatives require consistent support over a significant timeframe.

Collaborate with other TMAs. Sharing the development of tools and delivery of services with other local TMAs can save time and money. Close cooperation between TMAs within a single municipality can also be effective in dealing with local government, such as in identifying elected officials who are willing to act as champions.

Do market research. Smart Commute NTV serves a large area with thousands of potential clients. To conserve resources and maximize results, it is important to target recruitment efforts effectively. Market research can include analysis of survey data and economic development reports, consideration of workplace populations and levels of transit accessibility, and feedback from cold calls and meetings. Smart Commute NTV has found that companies most likely to show interest in partnership include those

with a demonstrated interest or leadership practices related to employee wellness, corporate social responsibility, ISO 14001 registration or environmental issues, as well as those facing transportation challenges related to parking shortages, employee absenteeism or turnover, or pending relocation or expansion. Typical partners are large companies with over 200 employees, although efforts are made to deliver programs to smaller companies by recruiting in geographic clusters (e.g. industrial parks).

Be flexible. The early years of an organization like Smart Commute NTV offer numerous opportunities to learn from experience and new information. The organization must be able to adapt quickly. For instance, the discovery that 90% of business establishments in its initial service area had fewer than 40 employees led to a “corridor strategy” that targeted workplace clusters. As well, when early market research indicated that most employers were reluctant to pay for TDM programs that were generally unfamiliar to them, a strategy of providing complimentary introductory programs was introduced to showcase the benefits of TDM and build a stronger business case before introducing mandatory fees.

Follow a customized fee-for-service model. Smart Commute NTV has found that employers are willing to pay for programs they value, when presented with a business case. Issues of concern vary from one workplace to another, however, and companies respond better to a business case built on their particular circumstances. Customized partnership agreements are effective vehicles for business cases that link desired benefits to necessary costs—meaning that partners only pay for programs they want. Customized agreements also provide a solid foundation for measuring TMA performance against expectations, and make it easier to forecast and justify the need for staff and funding resources.

Build strong relationships with partner employers. When possible, establish multiple relationships with key staff of partner employers. Reliance on a single contact can create difficulties if that person falls ill, takes on a different role or leaves their job. The inclusion of staff from groups like facilities management, human resources, marketing, communications, environmental health and safety, and government relations can help create a collaborative environment that supports a TMA’s mandate. For example, at ING DIRECT, Smart Commute NTV is supported by the organization’s “Green Team” that includes representatives of various departments.

Accompany outreach efforts with tangible service improvements. Outreach measures that promote and encourage the use of commuting options are important to build awareness and give individuals the information they need to make good transportation decisions. However, the potential effectiveness of outreach is limited without service improvements that offer a meaningful benefit for individual commuters, and shift the balance in favour of sustainable commuting options.

Hire entrepreneurial and dedicated staff. TMAs require business-minded, people-oriented staff who are open to taking calculated risks. They should be creative and quick to adapt to new insights, be able to approach TDM from a user’s perspective, and have a strong understanding of urban transportation, marketing and communications. Personal passion also helps to maintain a long-term vision and deal with the inevitable frustrations, but should not obscure the need for TMAs to follow businesses principles.

Next steps

Smart Commute NTV will build on its success by strengthening existing programs and developing new ones. The organization’s priorities for the near future include:

- Exploring the business case for a proposed door-to-door shuttle in its Northeast Toronto TMA area, focusing on the Consumer’s Road Business Park. The shuttle would complement existing area transit services by providing a peak period and mid-day connection between four or five area employers and the nearby subway station.
- Reviewing legislative flexibility for vanpool services, to enable more businesses to offer vanpooling as an alternative to driving for commuters.
- Reviewing the potential for car sharing to minimize fleet size and cost for businesses, to discourage single-occupant vehicle usage by employees, and to provide another travel option for area residents.
- Continuing to promote the business case for TDM, to showcase the results of current partnerships, and to recruit and retain champions and new business partners.
- Improving coordination with other TMAs across the GTA, Ontario and Canada to build capacity, learn from best practices and maximize resources.

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