

# Best Practices Framework Needed for Sustainable Transit in Ottawa

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# Best practices framework needed for sustainable transit in Ottawa

*What must the city do to ensure we have the right light rail plan?*

**by Dr. Barry Wellar**

Special to the Ottawa Business Journal

OVER THE PAST THREE years the Ottawa Business Journal published numerous editorials, articles, and letters to the editor that created a very rich body of fact and opinion regarding Ottawa's transportation situation.

One topic that received considerable attention from politicians, community associations, the business community, and citizens was "sustainable transport," frequently in the company of such concepts as smart growth, new urbanism, quality of life, greenhouse gases, air pollution, public health, and sprawl.

It was my expectation, therefore, that sustainable transport would be a central and thoroughly debated issue in this election.

However, we are now well into the campaign, and I have encountered very little material that explains the positions of mayoral or council candidates regarding sustainable transport, and how they would lead this city into a sustainable transport future.

What we have instead is a blaming exercise over light-rail contracting procedures that were hidden from taxpayers, a lot of top-of-the-head talk on transportation systems and operations by candidates with no actual expertise in the field, and piles of political brochures that tend to make only vague references to transportation. Worse, very little evidence is available that allows voters to assess how candidates stand on transportation-related matters, or their priorities in giving direction to the high-priced staff and consultants hired to lead us into a sustainable transport future.

Unless there is a dramatic change in the next several weeks, and the positions of candidates are publicized and discussed, area residents are going to be stuck with another mayor and council who "make it up as they go along" when transportation issues arise. That approach to public policy making over the past 25 years is what got Ottawa into the current mess, so quick action is needed to get the issue of sustainable transport practices into the municipal campaign before votes are cast Nov. 13.

Based on research for the report, Sustainable Transport Practices in Canada: Exhortation Overwhelms Demonstration, I suggest that the best practices used in that study are an excellent means for finding out where the candidates for mayor and council of Ottawa stand in terms of achieving sustainable transport.

The term "best practices" refers to activities that most effectively contribute to making sustainable transport practices a reality. In this article nine best practices are briefly outlined, and illustrative questions for candidates are presented.

***Sustainable Transport Test.*** This test evaluates transportation, land use, and other proposals and projects in terms of the number and proportion of walk, cycle, transit and private motor vehicle trips that they create for people and the number and proportion of kilometres of shipping by rail or truck that they create for freight. Does Ottawa have a sustainable transport test? Has it ever been applied? If not, why not?

***Integrated Land Use and Transportation System Planning and Development.*** This best practice was established in the 1960s, and is applied to ensure compatibility between the transportation infrastructure and land uses. Key concerns are the numbers and types of trips that are generated, induced or diverted by different types of land use designations and densities, and changes in the transportation-land use connection over time. Has Ottawa achieved this best practice for all of the walk, cycle, transit and private motor vehicle modes? If not, why not?

***Smart Growth.*** Ottawa held a summit on smart growth, and the term appears in numerous City of Ottawa declarations. Where is the evidence that Ottawa has achieved sustainable transport practices in accordance with the principles of smart growth?

***Development and Adoption of a Pedestrian Charter.*** A charter for pedestrians is a major instrument for improving the walking experience of pedestrians. Has the City of Ottawa implemented a pedestrian charter or bill of rights? If not, why not?

***Incorporating Time as a Criterion for Defining Sustainable Transport.*** This best practice incorporates a timeframe with proposals and projects so that progress in achieving sustainable transport objectives can be measured and evaluated. Does the City of Ottawa ensure that numeric start, interim and end points are assigned to proposals, standards, plans, etc., for the purpose of quantitatively measuring actual changes in the extent and rate that sustainable transport is being achieved in practice?

***Incorporating the Geo-Factor in Sustainable Transport Measures.*** Geographic information systems (GIS) applications support sophisticated transportation studies and operations that are based on a variety of geographic relationships. Is the City of Ottawa using the full power of GIS software to measure changes arising from implementation of sustainable transport practices in all of the walk, cycle, transit, and private motor vehicle modes of transport? If not, why not?

***Using Indexes for Decision Support.*** Indexes and similar analytical instruments are especially useful in complex transportation studies and are among the primary set of decision support tools available to assess the match between transportation situations and proposed solutions. What indexes are used by the City of Ottawa to make decisions involving sustainable transport practices?

**Defining Road/Highway Improvements in Sustainable Transport.** The term "improvement" has been used in the transportation field to refer to projects that increase intersection, road segment and network capacity, or reduce impediments to vehicular traffic flow. As a sustainable transport best practice, improvements are defined and measured according to the extent and rate that trip volumes and modal shares shift from private motor vehicles to the walk, cycle, and transit modes for people, and from trucks to trains for freight. How often does the City of Ottawa apply this best practice?

**Implementing Measures to Achieve Alternative Transportation Strategies.** This best practice is achieved by simultaneously increasing the number and share of trips made by the walk, cycle and transit modes while decreasing the private motor vehicle component. Has the City of Ottawa consistently implemented this best practice?

I suggest that questions based on these best practices will quickly reveal which candidates best understand the significance of achieving sustainable transport objectives, and which of them are likely to make decisions that will lead us to a sustainable transport future.

*Barry Wellar is a Distinguished Research Fellow, Transport 2000 Canada, and Professor of Geography (ret.), University of Ottawa. This article is based on the White Paper, Sustainable Transport Practices in Canada: Exhortation Overwhelms Demonstration, which can be viewed at [www.transport2000.ca](http://www.transport2000.ca).*

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**Postscript:** *As previously discussed in other venues, in both direction and content the column is generally applicable to other localities in Canada and abroad, is pertinent before, during, and after municipal, provincial, and federal election campaigns in Canada and abroad, and, very importantly, feedback reveals that it is a useful instrument for quickly and effectively distinguishing between idle talkers and earnest doers when it comes to taking informed steps to actually achieve sustainable transport practices. Additional online productions which elaborate the postscript and/or the theme of sustainable transport best practices can be viewed at this (Transport Action Canada) website (see the link above), as well as [www.slideshare.net/wellarb/documents](http://www.slideshare.net/wellarb/documents) and [www.wellar.ca/wellarconsulting/](http://www.wellar.ca/wellarconsulting/).*