

Federal Funds for Light Rail Projects? Maybe, but First*

In 1974, Minister of Transport Jean Marchand opined that “Canada’s national transportation policy is a mess”. Forty years later it is not apparent that we have more or less of a national transportation policy mess, but media sources, professional communications, and municipal government documents are clear that transportation in Canada’s urban regions is in need of major improvements.

And, it is also clear that the sorry state of transportation in Canada’s urban regions is not an accident. Rather, it is a direct result of decisions made by all levels of government, business, and individuals, and especially over the past three decades, a finding discussed in detail in reports prepared for the project,

Methodologies for Identifying and Ranking Sustainable Transport Practices in Urban Regions, which I undertook in 2008-2009 for Transport Canada.

(<http://www.wellar.ca/wellarconsulting/TCProjectSynopsis.pdf>)

Four recommendations are made to the Federal Government in the event that it decides to embark on a light rail infrastructure program in the foreseeable future. By way of brief context for the recommendations, Canada’s municipal, provincial, and federal governments are all in dire financial straits, with limited prospects. Moreover, there is solid evidence that unless appropriate conditions are incorporated in contracts, federal funds for light rail projects could actually do more to perpetuate than to mitigate such transportation sector-related problems as greenhouse gases, unfairness in municipal property tax burdens caused by work-trip commuters, and growth in transportation system operating costs.

Intimate Integration of Transportation Planning and Land use Planning

Intimate integration of transportation planning and land use planning involves a reciprocal relationship that must be respected. See, for example, *Geographic Factors as a Core Element of Sustainable Transport Best Practices in Metropolitan Regions in Canada*.

(http://www.transport-action.ca/dc/AAG_2007_Fleming_Lecture_Final.pdf)

Intimate integration means that the walk, cycle, transit, and private motor vehicle infrastructures of urban transportation systems are planned to effectively, efficiently, economically, and most sustainably support residential, commercial, industrial, recreational, institutional, and other land use activities. And, reciprocally, land use components are planned so that they effectively, efficiently, economically, and most sustainably support the walk, cycle, transit, and private motor vehicle modes of moving people and goods.

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Variations of the intimate integration principle have been advocated for at least 50 years. Nevertheless, and for reasons beyond the scope of this note it has not been broadly adopted and implemented in Canada, with unfortunate consequences. That is, flawed policy choices by all levels of government have prevailed, and the dysfunctional relationship between the transportation sector and all the other land uses is a matter of record in every metropolitan region in Canada.

The federal government is long overdue to make intimate integration the *sine qua non* of successful light rail funding applications.

Performance Measures

Anatomical sourcing approaches such “rule of thumb” and “gut feeling” are not a sound means of making informed decisions involving complex choices when the outcomes affect millions of lives, billions of taxpayer dollars, and multi-billions of dollars in light rail-associated expenditures by both the public and the private sectors.

It is therefore incumbent upon the federal government to ensure that before any light rail funds are allocated, taxpayers are fully informed about how the returns on light rail expenditures are to be measured and reported, and to then rigorously oversee the reporting process.

Cutting to the Chase in Designing New Measures of Transportation System Performance, a companion report to the Transport Canada project on sustainable transport decision-making, discusses the need for new performance measures.
(<http://www.transport-action.ca/dc/CuttingToTheChase.pdf>)

Interdependent Infrastructures

Ten years ago the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, in partnership with Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, funded the Joint Interdependent Infrastructure Research Program (JIIRP). For details see, for example, “Core Information Challenges and Opportunities, 2010-2020: Building on Strengths”.
(<http://www.wellar.ca/wellarconsulting/home.html>)

Transportation is one of the infrastructures identified in the JIIRP program. Recent research revealed a troubling shortfall. That is, few municipal or provincial governments have comprehensively examined interdependencies among transportation modes, much less the interdependencies between transportation and the other infrastructures. And, for that matter, there is little published evidence that the Government of Canada has done its own homework on this topic.

Consequently, I believe that federal expenditures on light rail should be put on hold until all affected governments demonstrate a clear understanding of infrastructure interdependencies, with special regard for the transportation sector due to its wide-ranging social, economic, environmental, public finance, sustainability, and security role in urban regions.

Reporting Requirements

Canadians are justifiably irritated when mega project proposals are thrust upon them in the form of massive technical reports loaded with hundreds of mathematical and statistical equations and formulae, dozens of tables of numbers, paragraph after paragraph of jargonese, appendices loaded with engineering drawings, and shallow, cheerleader-type Open House song-and-dance presentations.

Geographic information systems (GIS) represent a new era of informing and listening to the public about light rail and other geography-based initiatives that are best represented by maps and other easy-to-understand graphics, supported by numbers and text.

The federal government needs to ensure that any light rail funding is conditional upon recipients meeting this new informing-listening standard, which is outlined in the presentation, *The Emergence of Geographic Information Systems as a Core Public Policy Research Tool: Comments on the Paradigm Shift*.

<http://www.slideshare.net/wellarb/fldq-presentation-wellar-final-2>

* **“Federal funds for light rail projects, maybe”** was published in the *Hill Times*, April 4, 2016. The column is an invited Op-Ed (opinion) on the light rail transit component of the Transportation Policy Brief, which was organized by the *Hill Times* as part of its 2016 federal budget review. The online Op-Ed is available to *Hill Times* subscribers. Due to space constraints and the layout design of the *Hill Times*, details about background documents and links to background documents, are not included in the Op-Ed. As a result, readers of the *Hill Times* article are invited to contact the author for those kinds of details. **“Federal Funds for Light Rail Projects? Maybe, but First ...”** is the original text submitted for the Op-Ed, and it contains the titles of documents and projects, and the links to referenced materials. The statement is posted as a means to promptly respond to inquiries from *Hill Times* subscribers, and to inform *Hill Times* non-subscribers about the light rail transit Op-Ed.