

Federal funds for light rail projects, maybe*

Transportation in Canada's urban regions is in need of major improvements.

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.

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 involves a reciprocal relationship that must be respected. That is, intimate integration means 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.

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.

Anatomical sourcing approaches such as "rule of thumb" and "gut feeling," along with vague notions such as so-called "common sense," are not a sound means of making informed decisions involving complex choices when the outcomes affect millions of lives, billions of taxpayer dollars,

BARRY WELLAR



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 communicated, and to then rigorously oversee the reporting process from the beginning of the project through to the end of the first decade of operations.

Transportation is one of the infrastructures identified in the Joint Interdependent Infrastructure Research Program, which was created 10 years ago by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, in partnership with Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada.

Recent research reveals a troubling shortfall. That is, few if any municipal or provincial governments have comprehensively examined interdependencies among transportation modes, or the interdependencies between transportation and the other infrastructures, much less incorporated those interdependencies in public policies, plans, or programs. 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 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.

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.

Dr. Barry Wellar is a professor emeritus at the University of Ottawa For information about background materials used for this comment, contact Dr. Wellar at wellarb@uottawa.ca.

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