

# **Taking steps towards the end of the automobile era**

**by Barry Wellar**

***Ottawa Citizen*  
Ottawa, Ontario  
December 9, 1975**

## **Introduction**

During the 2008 Anderson Lecture by Dr. Marilyn Brown on "Carbon Lock-In: Barriers and Enablers of a Climate-Friendly Future", the discussion referred to such related materials as William Garrison's 2007 Anderson Lecture on legacy systems, and the 1975 newspaper article by Barry Wellar titled "Taking steps towards the end of the automobile era". I am pleased that we have made the Anderson Lecture by Dr. Garrison available through a website posting, and that we are now adding Dr. Wellar's 1975 newspaper article to our collection of website offerings.

As some readers are aware, the Applied Geography Specialty Group supported the preparation of a *Proceedings* that included the presentation on legacy systems by Dr. Garrison and the comments by Discussants. The *Proceedings* was edited by Barry Wellar, Chair, Anderson Medal Committee, and can be viewed by visiting the AGSG website at: <http://agsg.binghamton.edu/garrison2007.pdf>.

During the 2008 Anderson Lecture discussion it was requested that the 1975 newspaper article by Barry Wellar be posted on the AGSG website. The text of the article by Dr. Wellar has been reproduced, and we are pleased to make it available on the AGSG website.

A brief background statement by Dr. Wellar precedes the newspaper article to provide context for comments written more than 30 years ago. The purpose of the remarks is to provide insight into an article written in 1975 that is very pertinent to today's discourses on such topics as legacy systems, carbon lock-in, sustainability, walkability, price of gasoline, expenditures on transportation infrastructure, depletion of automobile-associated resources, and the design and implementation of new transportation system performance measures.

**Seth Marcus, Webmaster  
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## Background

The motivation behind this newspaper op-ed piece in 1975 was my perception that Canadian governments at all levels, as well as corporations and citizens from coast-to-coast, were seriously unaware of the inevitable cumulative and increasingly negative consequences of perpetuation of the automobile era. It was my sense that drastic steps needed to be taken in order to come to grips with forces that had not only gained economic momentum over the previous 50 years, and especially since the 1960s, but which were coming to permeate the social mind-set of Canada's business and political interests in particular, and adult Canadians in general.

In 1975 I was a senior professional at the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs, Government of Canada, and I was also actively involved in transportation, planning, and other community-oriented matters in different parts of Ottawa and Canada's National Capital Region. The venue that best lent itself to expressing my concerns in a timely, unrestricted, and public way was the *Citizen Forum*, a feature of the *Ottawa Citizen* which was and is a major daily newspaper in Canada's capital.

The *Forum* was an especially attractive feature among activists, because it provided an opportunity to go beyond a letter-to-the-editor in discussing an issue of public interest. Further, although the bar was set high in terms of what got published in the *Forum*, there was no editorial interference by the newspaper in regard to content. Of course, no Government of Canada has ever taken kindly to senior civil servants criticizing government policy in public, but that is another story.

After an initial splash, it was back to 'business as usual' for area governments, as well as for the development industry, the business community, and the vast majority of citizens. I never saw or heard a public challenge to anything in the article, but I do not recall it being an agent of change either. For many years the article was accorded what might be termed 'polite indifference'.

**By the mid-nineties, however, things began to change in terms of interest in the 1975 article. Catalysts or stimuli included the growing importance of such related topics as climate change, energy shortfalls in general and those involving fossil fuels in particular, greenhouse gas emissions, thinning of the ozone layer, urban sprawl, loss of agricultural land, air pollution, obesity, increased emphasis on walkable cities, rapidly growing concerns about the transportation-public health connection, limited financial resources for transportation infrastructure, and a greatly increased, worldwide emphasis on sustainability. As a result, in recent years there has been a significant increase in requests for copies of the article, and for comments on particular sections.**

**Both the 2007 Anderson Lecture by William Garrison on legacy systems, and the 2008 Anderson Lecture by Marilyn Brown on carbon lock-in, raise issues, examine relationships, and consider alternatives that are similar to those in the newspaper article. And lest there be any doubt, the topics of the 1975 article and the Garrison and Brown Lectures are currently central to public policy debates in governments at all levels, in business deliberations, and in applied geography research projects in a number of countries in general, and in the U.S. and Canada in particular. However, and this point is repeated for emphasis, as examination of the text of the article written in 1975 reveals, a number of these issues, relationships, and alternatives were expressed more than 30 years ago.**

**While it is not possible for the brief newspaper article to have either the scope or the depth of the Garrison and Brown Lectures, it appears to usefully relate to both Lectures in a very constructive way. That is, it serves as a reminder of some of the forces behind the origins of legacy systems in the field of transportation, it disabuses anyone of the notion that dealing with carbon lock-in will be easy when it comes to changing behaviors in the field of transportation, and it suggests a number of reasons for bringing the automobile era to a close in the immediate future, that is, within the next decade.**

**Barry Wellar  
Ottawa, Ontario  
April 28, 2008**

# **“Taking steps towards the end of the automobile era”**

**by Barry Wellar**

***Ottawa Citizen,*  
Ottawa, Ontario  
December 9, 1975. Page 6.**

Traffic counts (from inside express buses 10 and 11) at the intersection of Island Park Drive and the Parkway have so far yielded the following tally for both east-bound and west-bound traffic flow during the morning and evening rush hours: one-person cars (273); two-person cars (19); four person cars (3). That is, out of a total of 297 cars, 90 per cent of them carried one person! Is this not such an obvious and inexcusable waste of resources that further comment is unnecessary?

Buses carrying in excess of 70 passengers wait at lights and intersections while one or a dozen cars (carrying one person each more often than not) proceed through. On what grounds could it possibly be conceived that such a situation should be tolerated?

Relatively little of the home-to-work-to home journey, which represents the major portion of car energy use, is made over routes allowing 70, 60, or even 50 miles per hour; for millions of Canadians it is a daily eight to 40 miles, stop and start round trip, at 40 miles per hour or less. Traffic at the higher speeds accounts for less than 20 per cent of private car travel. How could anyone really believe that speed limit reduction is advanced as a solution to the car problem, rather than a recognition that a problem exists?

The Citizen (Oct. 9) tells us that the City of Ottawa is installing a computer to improve traffic flow. Presumably if the traffic flow improves, then we can resolve current congestion problems, and maybe handle even more automobiles at some 260 intersections. Is it the policy of officials to encourage automobile traffic in Ottawa and Hull?

Transportation facilities consume resources that can be put to alternative uses (housing, recreation, etc.) and cars consume resources that can be put to alternative uses (chemicals, food, heating, etc.). Does anyone believe that anything more than a small percentage of resources committed in the name of the car are being put to their highest and best use?

All levels of government are experiencing great difficulty in advancing meaningful solutions to urban transportation and associated problems.

On the other hand, few if any individuals would ever think to challenge a neighbor or office colleague who drives a car (no passengers) to work, even though a bus could give him virtual door-to-door service. In fact,

many car drivers are either oblivious to or are consciously opposed to the notion that their cars could stay in the garage with only a minimum amount of “sacrifice”.

While it has not reached tidal wave proportions, there is at least a groundswell indication that many people in Ottawa, the Province of Ontario, and the country as a whole have serious misgivings about the car continuing as a dominant force in our way of life.

What to do? It would be presumptuous to propose that instant solutions are at hand (it has been proclaimed that “our national transportation policy is a mess”), but we can at least begin to put on paper a body of talking points. Several of these, ranging from the political to the practical, and national to local in scale, are offered for consideration:

- Selected streets in Ottawa (for example. Montreal Road, Rideau, Scott-Richmond, Carling, Bank, Woodroffe, Parkways) should have buses-only sections and lanes during the morning and evening peak hours.
- Buses should be equipped with devices for changing light signals upon approach
- Buses in cities should have legal and acknowledged right-of-way for turns at intersections and into traffic, regardless of street signals and markings.
- Cities (like Ottawa) should introduce smaller, more maneuverable buses to complement the large models currently in use, particularly in neighborhoods where buses travel on residential streets, and during off-peak hours.
- Capital expenditures by governments on prospective urban transportation facilities with an automobile bias should be postponed for a minimum of five years.
- Operating costs for transportation facilities should be diverted into public transit-related expenditures for a five year period.
- Difference in journey-to-work time between a private automobile and public transit should be considered when calculating hours on the job. After all, why should a bus rider have to leave home much earlier and get home much later than his car-driving neighbor?
- Gasoline prices in smaller or more remote communities which cannot support a public transit service should be subsidized by revenues collected from gasoline sales in places like Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Hamilton, etc. where there is no excuse for not using public transit for work and other trips.
- No transportation (or other) project of any level of government should be started without examination of the results derived from a counter-project research study. To ensure that both pro- and anti-project forces have the same material resources at hand to carry out the studies, both should be funded in equal amounts by the sponsoring institution.

- **Governments should begin to speak publicly, now, about the inevitable demise of the automobile industry as we currently know it, and problems associated with worker displacement must be faced.**

**The futurists of a decade ago suggested that the negative aspects of the automobile were increasing at an algebraic rate, and that problems of any magnitude were a number of generations away. Unfortunately, things are coming to a head at a geometric clip due to accelerated urbanization, population increases, and the exponential rate of depletion of automobile-associated resources.**

**But what has all this got to do with the guy who drives his car back and forth to work? Nothing more than taking the first step in a journey of a thousand miles.**

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**Dr. Barry Wellar is Professor Emeritus, University of Ottawa, Distinguished Research Fellow at Transport 2000 Canada, and Principal of Wellar Consulting. He is a recipient of the Anderson Medal for excellence in applied geography, the Ullman Award for excellence in transportation geography, and the Canadian Association of Geographers Award for Geography in the Service of Government or Business. Dr. Wellar is a Past President, Urban and Regional Information System Association, a former Chair, Applied Geography Specialty Group, Association of American Geographers, and is currently Chair, Anderson Medal Committee, Association of American Geographers, and Program Director, Geography Awareness Week, Canadian Association of Geographers.**