



Five steps to get Ottawa out of its transportation mess

BY BARRY WELLAR

The current transportation mess in Ottawa began to take shape more than 30 years ago. One of my early commentaries on this subject was published in the December 9, 1975 edition of the Ottawa Citizen, and it was titled “Taking steps towards the end of the automobile era.” My focus at that time was on the need to deal with emerging transportation problems in the Region of Ottawa-Carleton, but the article was generally applicable to the field of urban transportation in Canada, the U.S., and elsewhere.

In recent months I have had occasion to re-visit that column in presentations at meetings in Canada, the U. S. and Europe. The reason for the growing interest in the article is that now, in 2007, some 32 years after they originally appeared in print, most of the research ideas, policy recommendations, and suggestions about achieving sustainable transportation practices are being considered, and many are being acted upon by governments, corporations, advocacy groups, and researchers in Canada and other countries.

The presentation that is especially pertinent to this column was titled “Sustainable transport: Is there anybody here who can win this game?”, and it was given at a luncheon meeting of the Kiwanis Club of Ottawa in February 2007.

In addition to receiving invitations to discuss sustainable transport initiatives in other jurisdictions, I have received a number of requests from professional organizations, businesses, community associations, government officials, the media, and other interested parties to comment on various aspects of Ottawa’s current transportation situation. This commentary is a partial response to those requests, and the focus of my attention is the performance of Ottawa Mayor Larry O’Brien and councillors.

These elected officials (and their predecessors on two previous councils) have been subject to voluminous criticism for Ottawa’s transportation problem, but it appears that the messages of concern have not been getting through.

Drawing on 35 years of engagement in both transportation planning and municipal politics, it is my assessment that Mayor. O’Brien and the rest of council are performing at the ‘F’ level in their transportation deliberations. And, it is my further assessment that they are in serious need of major, remedial adjustments if Ottawa is not to be afflicted

with many more hours of futile debate and, worse, a series of colossal transportation blunders committed within the current term of office.

Step number one in the remedial process is quite simple, but its importance cannot be over-emphasized. That is, all maps of Ottawa, as well as sheets of blank paper, crayons and other drawing materials must be declared off limits to mayor and councillors beginning immediately.



Urban geography expert Barry Wellar gives Ottawa city council an F grade for their work on local transportation issues.

These graphic instruments are being used on a seemingly daily basis by elected officials to lobby for their favourite routes for light rail tracks and bus lanes from east to west, south to north, and all points in between, and then there are the scads of flip chart renderings of rail tracks and bus lanes running above and below ground through downtown.

Step number two requires that mayor and councillors drop any semblance of swagger when it comes to transportation planning discussions and decisions. On the evidence of the past year, they have a very weak grasp of how to even perceive the inputs and outputs of the transportation planning process, much less how to intelligently query, direct, and use staff and

consultants, or how to define and negotiate multi-million dollar contracts that have huge economic, financial, and legal implications.

The mayor and councillors can clear the air by openly admitting that they do not understand the complexities of urban transportation planning, and that their failed attempts to prescribe solutions for a problem they do not understand were at best foolhardy and self-serving. Further, they should all take an oath to stop jumping up to salute every light rail and bus transit trial balloon that drifts over city hall.

Until those character things happen, the mayor and councillors will deservedly continue to be perceived as great pretenders in transportation planning, and the credibility chasm between mayor and council and thinking area residents, as well as between the City of Ottawa and provincial and federal funding agencies, will widen and deepen.

Third, before committing to an expenditure of \$400-\$600 million on downtown tunnels for light rail and/or buses, and perhaps upwards of \$800 million if the digging proves difficult, mayor and councillors need to obtain the multi-part answer to a fundamental question that should have been asked and answered in detail years ago. That is, what are

the assumptions, premises, conditions, and objectives associated with the tunnel option?

On the tunnel issue to date, mayor and councillors have been making it up as they go along, rather than being guided by a methodologically designed framework for comprehensively and rigorously comparing options. As a result of that top-of-the-head, seat-of-the-pants, and gut feeling approach, we have been affronted by notions rather than facts, impressions rather than evidence, and bits-and-pieces of a downtown transportation construction program rather than a coherent vision.

Fourth, there is ample evidence that mayor and councillors are way, way behind in their reading on the large changes occurring in the transportation world. Further, they need to wrap their brains around the idea that Ottawa in 2017 will most likely be very different from Ottawa in 2007.

By way of illustration of the new day that is dawning, it is highly conceivable that in ten years private motor vehicle traffic in downtown Ottawa will be at least 30% lower than it is now due to a combination of climate change pressures, major adjustments in travel mode choices caused by quantum changes in fossil fuel supplies/costs, the increasing priority given to the walk, cycle and transit modes for people movement, and the increased shipping of freight by rail rather than by truck.

This scenario is a far cry from the 'same old, same old' mentality that currently prevails in Ottawa's city hall, and it renders much of the present opining about a tunnel moot and even counter-productive. It follows, therefore, that the pressure is on mayor and councillors to ask the right questions to get the right answers in order to make the right decisions about whether to tunnel, when, where, and, most importantly, for precisely what benefits at precisely what costs?

The fifth stage in the remedial process has its roots in the newspaper article written 32 years ago, and the sustainable transport presentations in 2007 to the Kiwanis Club of Ottawa (February), the Association of American Geographers in San Francisco (April), and the National TravelWise Association in Belfast, Northern Ireland (November).

Many sustainable transport best practices have been published in the open literature for decades, and the topic of sustainable transport has been featured internationally at conferences for years.

However, scans of local media articles as well as City of Ottawa committee and council documentation suggest that the mayor has never entertained the concept of sustainable transport much less used it in public, and indications are that many if not most and possibly all his council colleagues suffer from an equally abysmal level of knowledge about sustainable transport best practices. Is it any wonder, therefore, that terms like bungle, blunder, boondoggle, disaster, farce, fiasco, mess, and screw-up are so frequently used to describe Ottawa's transportation situation?

There is very little time left before council is pushed into opting for a transportation plan that may be approved in a matter of months, but could have massive social, economic, financial, and environmental impacts that stretch out over the next 50 years, and beyond.

In the few minutes of the 11th hour that remain for mayor and councillors, I suggest that they spend every available moment in the cram mode, trying their utmost to comprehend the meaning of sustainable transport best practices, and then developing a rational process of identifying, adopting, and implementing a strategic selection of these practices as the core component of a transportation master plan.

If these five remedial measures are acted upon in a timely manner, then I believe there is a high likelihood that transportation planning discussions at City of Ottawa committee and council meetings will rapidly become more productive, the associated decisions will become increasingly definitive, and a creditable master transportation plan that is grounded in sustainable transport best practices could be achieved within this term of office.

On the other hand, if those measures are not adopted then I expect that Ottawa will become the flip side of Portland, Oregon in the transportation planning community, and our claim to fame will be posted all over the Internet: “If you want to experience a city that has no clue when it comes to achieving sustainable transport you must visit Ottawa, Ontario. It’s a real head-shaker”.

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