

## Too Much, Too Late

*LRT itself should be understood as a tool to **guide** development more so than one that **generates** development in and of itself, and likewise Transit Oriented Development (TOD) is not a product of transit alone, but the interaction between a complex set of local factors.* The North American Light Rail Experience: Insights for Hamilton, McMaster Institute for Transportation and Logistics, 2012.

*In a medium-size, low density city like London a BRT system, if built, will fast become an obsolete, under-used, costly white elephant.* Professor Sid Noel, London Free Press, April 22, 2017.

*The 2005 edition of Journal of American Planning published a comprehensive study across 20 countries and concluded that planners and politicians not only misinform, but deceive the public when building large infrastructure projects. In a follow-up study released in 2009, in the California Management Review, little had changed – costs end up 45 percent higher than projected; ridership numbers fall 50 percent lower than forecast.* Royson James, Toronto Star, April 22, 2017

In 2013, the London Transit Commission prepared a business case for a Bus Rapid Transit System. The plan was based on an incremental approach, with an estimated cost of \$380 million and a benefit to cost ratio of 1.8, far superior to the ratio used to support the Waterloo LRT system. This business case was endorsed by City Council and received preliminary approval from the Province.

Fast forward to November 2015, when City Council was presented with a document proposing development of a hybrid LRT/BRT system. Despite the obvious flaws in the discussion supporting the recommendation and the lack of any supporting evidence that this plan would be better for London than the LTC plan, Council approved the proposal.

Fast forward again to May 2016, when Council was advised by staff that it should approve the “Full Bus Rapid Transit Network Alternative”. Much was made of Council’s flip-flop. The reality was that the flip-flop was made the previous November when some senior staff in City Hall decided that “city building” was more important than an efficient public transit system. The reversion to a bus rapid transit system was an acknowledgment that, despite all the rhetoric about city building, BRT was the only system that made sense. We can almost be certain that the reversion was “encouraged” by the Province whose staff saw no benefit in pumping money into a losing cause.

The document presented to Council in May, 2016 contained some other clauses which bring us to the latest plan presented at PIC #4 in March. Two of these clauses read:

- that a Rapid Transit Conversion to Light Rail Transit technology be endorsed as a strategic direction.....;
- the Civic Administration be directed to design the Full Bus Rapid Transit Network Alternative taking into consideration a future transition to a Light Rail Transit technology.....”.

As a result, what is being presented to City council and to the public now is a thinly disguised rail based system. How else can one explain the use of dedicated lanes, the insistence that there be two-way transit flow on King Street, the need to create a “transit hub” at King and Clarence? How else can one explain that the only change to the concept drawings presented to the public was a switch in the vehicles shown, not the transitway concept? How else can one explain that the length of the Richmond Street tunnel is because longer and less steep grades are needed to accommodate rail based vehicles. And how else can one explain the inclusion of the

Hybrid and Full LRT alternatives in the evaluation summary included in the presentation material for PIC #4?

There is not a single jurisdiction in North America that has attempted to force dedicated transit lanes on narrow (20 metre) street rights of way in the downtown core. These streets are used by pedestrians, cyclists, delivery vehicles and car traffic as well as public transit. By imposing dedicated transit lanes, levels of service of all other modes of transportation are significantly reduced. Development on these streets will be effectively sterilized since access to properties on the street is restricted.

Although it is not clear in the concept drawings, it appears that the bus lanes will be physically separated from traffic lanes by a curb. How will this affect maintenance and snow clearing? If an accident or bus malfunction blocks a bus lane, the whole system grinds to a halt. And if we are looking at one bus every five minutes in the bus lane, that's a lot of asphalt sitting unused for most of the time. It may be unintended irony, but the ubiquitous rendering of two transit lanes on King Street shows the entrance to the Covent Garden Market parking garage completely blocked off.

How have other cities dealt with the issue of bus rapid transit in general and in the downtown area specifically? Attached are some examples of bus rapid transit which have proven successful.

### **Brampton**

Brampton was one of the first jurisdictions to develop bus priority lanes on arterial streets for its Zum rapid transit. The photographs show the use of auxiliary right turn lanes for transit with the addition of queue jump lanes which permit the bus to move directly through the intersection from the right turn lane. This is a low cost feature that could be implemented immediately at numerous locations in London.

### **Newmarket**

York Region recently constructed a 3 kilometre busway on Davis Drive from Yonge Street to Patterson Street. At both ends of the busway, there is a transition from shared lanes to bus lanes. At intersections, medians are provided to guide turning traffic but for most of its length, there is no physical separation between the bus lanes and traffic lanes. Surrounding land uses are primarily commercial, not residential.

### **Ottawa**

For over 25 years, OC Transpo in Ottawa has successfully operated buses on transit priority lanes on the one-way street pair of Albert Street and Slater Street in the downtown core. A feature of these lanes is that they allow for some curbside parking, with "bump-outs" at station stops. While buses have priority at all times, other traffic is only prohibited during peak hours.

It is worth noting that transit service to and through downtown Ottawa is so well established that the City is now constructing a light rail system. Instead of converting the Albert/Slater bus lanes, however, the LRT line will be underground through the whole downtown area, similar to the LRT routes in Edmonton.

### **Winnipeg**

The Southwest Rapid Transit Corridor was recently opened in Winnipeg. This is a busway, operating in its own right-of-way adjacent to the CN Rail main line. At its north terminal, the busway intersects with Main Street. Southbound buses turn directly from Main Street to the busway, northbound buses exit the busway at Harkness Avenue and proceed via Mayfair Avenue to Main Street. On Harkness Avenue and Mayfair Avenue, buses share the traffic lanes. On Main Street, buses use priority lanes, similar to those in Ottawa.

Although it is almost twice the size of London, Winnipeg and London share many similar characteristics. Both are trisected by rivers and both have major rail lines

running through the inner city. Both have only short lengths of controlled access freeways within the built-up area of the City. Winnipeg has opted for a bus based public transit system, including a transit only street downtown and now a dedicated busway. London should be looking to Winnipeg as a model.

Finally, let's look at some of the claims made to justify BRT and LRT.

*"Great transit makes great cities"*. By any measure, London Transit is one of the most efficient transit systems in Canada. We have the highest ridership per capita and the lowest cost per capita. We are great.

*"London is the only major city without rapid transit"*. We are also the only major city without a dedicated performing arts centre and a tax supported symphony orchestra. Because one solution does not fit all cities, we should be looking at the best fit for London, not copying what some other city has done to solve its particular transportation problem.

*"We need BRT/LRT to attract and retain young professionals"*. No question that a good transit system makes a city liveable and attractive. But this is only one of many factors contributing to a liveable city. See above re a performing arts centre.

*"A BRT/LRT system will attract growth"*. There is no evidence to support this contention. In fact, a comprehensive study of 30 LRT systems in North America carried out for the City of Hamilton found that rapid transit systems were successful in those cities which already had robust growth. The best that rapid transit systems could do was help to shape that growth and encourage transit oriented development.

At this point in time, the issue is not about which route to choose but whether or not London should be proceeding with the BRT concept as presented at PIC #4. There seems to be a huge gap in the process from concept to the system being presented now, a gap which should have been filled with analysis and research into best practices elsewhere. Does the proposed BRT system meet the City's needs? Does the scale of the concept fit existing or even future urban development? Will the benefits of improved transit service justify the costs and disruptions inherent in its development? Will the Province and the Federal governments even support the implementation of the proposed system?

It's time to go back to the beginning, to the 2013 LTC plan, and start doing some realistic planning, based on best practices elsewhere, and get it right.

Frank R. Berry, P.Eng.

Frank Berry is a transportation planning engineer with more than 50 years' experience as a consultant and with local and provincial governments. He is a former chair of the London Transit Commission and a former chair of the Covent Garden Market Corporation. He was project manager for the initial feasibility study for the Winnipeg Southwest Transit Corridor and also for the London Urban Transportation Study in 1974. Over the last 21 years, as F. R. Berry & Associates, he has provided transportation and traffic planning input to many major London developments