



Riding the rails means parking the cars

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As published in *Calgary Herald*, Sunday, June 1, 2008

The World Madness Institute's Transportation Division recently released a report claiming that most North American commuters are huge supporters of public transit -- for others, not themselves.

The surveyors interviewed 10,000 people and discovered that 77 per cent of Americans and 89 per cent of Canadians wanted their municipal governments to either introduce or expand their local light rail transit system. They were almost unanimous in wanting to get everyone else's cars off the road to cut their own travel times.

The study proves a global trend -- more people drive and fewer take public transit -- yet they universally think everyone else should "do their bit to save the environment and conserve energy."

The glaring exception is London, England. Since 2000, 45 per cent more people ride transit daily and 10 per cent have stopped driving altogether. According to the London Transit Authority, they accomplished this while slashing subsidies, privatizing most of the city bus lines, and deregulating the underground through a series of public-

private partnerships. They cut crime by installing on-board video cameras and boosting the surveillance monitoring of platforms and transfer stations. In short, their system flourishes in a free-market environment.

After all, "public transit is not inherently inferior to the private automobile; it can out-compete the car when and where market forces reign," says Lawrence Solomon, *Toronto Sprawls* (2007).

The Calgary Chamber of Commerce suspects most Calgarians want city hall to expand our light rail transit (LRT). And, like the general population, our members complain a barrel of crude oil sells for about \$130 and no level of government wants to lower the high taxes paid at the pumps.

Like the rest of the country, Calgarians want world-class transit. Most applaud the notion of getting people out of their cars and relieving the traffic congestion. Yet when city hall recently introduced its best option for the west leg of the LRT, many were opposed and NIMBYism (not-in-my-backyard) raised its head.

Every LRT expansion has seen citizens unhappy with proposed routes, the lack of transparent consultation, the noise, and the alleged decline in property values. In actuality, once the lines were built property values increased. Neighbourhoods appreciate their transit stops and view them as assets to their communities.

The chamber believes that new LRT lines are often derailed by local opposition despite the fact these major infrastructure projects are valuable to the entire city. These land-use decisions are inherently political and frequently determine the popularity of the local alderman.



According to the chamber's research, particularly contentious zoning applications often take twice as long to be approved as non-politicized applications. Therefore, the city recommends the applicant always undertake extensive community and aldermanic consultation before submitting the application.

Ideally, council's involvement in the approval process is to set broad policy direction, similar to the structures of the federal and provincial governments. Practically however, the aldermen are often directly involved in approving the land use and zoning applications for their constituents.

Perhaps city hall places too much emphasis on local community consultation (which is important) and ignores the input of citizens from every other community who might park their cars and take transit into the area to work, shop, learn, or play.

After much consideration, the chamber recommends council:

- Develop a set of citywide consultation protocols for all major land use applications to ensure bigger picture impacts are considered along with local ones.
- Weigh the valuable contribution from local community groups within the framework of a metropolis consultation and context.
- Create an electoral reform commission to review the current ward system and investigate moving to a mixed representation model in which council is composed of both ward aldermen and citywide aldermen.

The chamber applauds city hall's verdict to move forward with the west leg of the LRT. The impacted communities need this infrastructure. It's also the right decision for Calgary.

With worsening traffic snarls, more smog and escalating gas prices, now is the time to build affordable, efficient public transportation.

Maybe Calgary, like London, can convince more people to park their cars and ride the rails. If the World Madness Institute polled our citizens in a decade would they discover that 89 per cent of Calgarians supported the use of mass transit for themselves?