



More transit, fewer roads in city's new master plan

Road projects worth hundreds of millions could be shelved, cancelled to help pay for light rail, buses

Jake Rupert

The Ottawa Citizen

Tuesday, November 11, 2008

Hundreds of millions of dollars worth of Ottawa road projects will be postponed for years or cancelled to help pay for the city's new mass-transit plan, if city council follows its staff's advice.

On the block are proposals to widen the Airport Parkway, Highway 174, Campeau Drive, Prince of Wales Drive and Eagleson Road.

The suggestions were included in the city's new master transportation plan, which was presented yesterday.

If council passes and follows the plan, it will bring the city into the 21st century with a focus on mass public transit over roads, city planners say.

Staff are still proposing to build \$666 million worth of roads over the next seven years, but almost all of them are in growing suburbs and would largely be paid for by fees collected from developers.

Typically, the city spends about \$150 million a year on roads; the plan calls for that to be chopped to \$95 million, with the savings spent on transit.

Together with a new official land-use plan to be released later this month, the transportation plan will help shape what the city will look like and how people will get around.

The goal is a "compact, transit city," planners say.

The deputy city manager for planning and transit, Nancy Schepers, said both plans are focused on bringing real "smart growth" to the city. The goal is to limit sprawl and the costly new roads, sewers and other services that go with it, emphasizing development along transit lines.

The plan also includes recommendations on how to proceed with the light-rail plan, and for better cycling and pedestrian routes.

Ms. Schepers said she believes if the city follows the recommendations, "all citizens for the next 100 years" will benefit.

Under the plan, the spine of the light-rail system, including a downtown tunnel, would be built in three phases over 20 years, as the money becomes available.

The first phase, costing \$1.7 billion, would see the construction of a downtown tunnel with a light-rail line running through it and along the current bus Transitway from Blair Road to Tunney's Pasture. This phase would also see the extension of the Transitway deeper into the suburbs.

The second phase, costing \$900 million, would see the construction of a southern light-rail line from Bayview to the South Keys plaza, as well as an extension of the western light-rail line from Tunney's Pasture to Baseline Road.

The third phase, costing \$400 million, would see light rail extended further south and more extensions of the Transitway to serve the suburbs.

The plan doesn't foresee light rail extending into the east and west suburbs before 2031, but it is possible that could happen sooner if the money becomes available and the suburbs reach density targets to be unveiled in the official land-use plan.

Several things could torpedo the plan, and the big risk is money. All cost estimates are rough and based on 2007 dollars. City finance officials say the municipality can afford one-third of the plan, and they need the provincial and federal governments to kick in a third each.

The plan postpones a north-south light-rail line for several years. That could put at risk support from several councillors who represent southern wards.

The plan will be debated by city council's transportation and transit committees next week and at city council later this month.

Mayor Larry O'Brien said he supports the recommendations and expects the support of about 17 of 23 councillors when the matter comes to a vote.

He said he understands relying on the provincial and federal governments for funding will be an issue, and he's willing to look at "alternatives." He suggested the city might consider a form of a public-private partnership, or "P3" to get the project moving. A private firm might be interested in investing in the project in return for part of the revenues the system generates," he said.

"There are all kinds of variations on P3s. Perhaps it's time to get out of the box on funding."

Rideau-Vanier Councillor Georges BÉdard, who wants a mass-transit system in place quickly, said he doesn't think the city can afford staff's recommendations and doubts the plan will get off the ground any time soon.

He said the \$1.7-billion price tag for the first phase, in 2007 dollars, shows the folly of cancelling the city's old \$1-billion plan, which would have started with a rail line running at street level west across downtown before turning south and extending to Riverside South.

"Poor decision-making has left us in one hell of a mess. I don't think we will get that kind of money, and future councils will be stuck with trying to fund this unaffordable project. We are in a quagmire, and I think we will be in it for quite some time."

He said he didn't think the mayor's P3 suggestion was very helpful. He said if the city comes up short on funding, it would be better to take out a loan to cover the capital costs.

For more on transit plan, See page C1

© The Ottawa Citizen 2008

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#). All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#). All rights reserved.