

Not all transit make sense

Bob Ransford
Special to the Sun

Saturday, June 14, 2008

More convenient public transportation means more affordable housing.

The costs associated with your daily personal transportation have to be factored into your total shelter costs. Those transportation costs are growing quickly -- in fact, almost daily, with skyrocketing gas prices. One way of easing housing costs is to improve public transit and make it easier for you to choose this more affordable means of moving about the city to meet your daily needs.

It's not easy today moving around Vancouver using public transit. Despite the billions of dollars spent on transit improvements in the region over the last two decades, the truth is that billions more need to be spent if we are to rebuild an integrated public transit network equal to the one that existed in the area 60 or more years ago.

Every dollar spent needs to maximize the public benefits. The expensive SkyTrain technology, with kilometres of underground tunnels, is not maximizing those dollars.

The \$2.8 billion needed to build the proposed 12-kilometre Millennium Line subway extension along Broadway to UBC could install and equip 175 kilometres of a modern grade-level tram system, which would be about 60 kilometres longer than Vancouver's extensive streetcar system that existed in 1928. That is the conclusion of a recent study completed by UBC's Design Centre for Sustainability, which looked at the costs and benefits of alternative transit systems.

Imagine living in Vancouver and, within a three-or four-block walk from your home, being able to get on a frequent streetcar that links to a system with connections in all directions in virtually every corner of the city. The foundations of that system exist today because the ease of transportation afforded by the streetcars that existed until about 60 years ago established the pattern of Vancouver's commercial arterial roads and adjacent neighbourhoods that still define the city.

The study by UBC Prof. Patrick Condon and his colleagues Sigrid Gruenberger and Mark Klaptocz questioned whether there were more affordable alternative to the existing SkyTrain. It compared the current plans for the Millennium Line extension to UBC with the recent development of the Portland tram system. Portland and Vancouver are remarkably similar cities, making them ideal for comparison.

The estimated costs of the Millennium subway line to UBC are about \$233 million per

kilometre. The costs for the new tram technology chosen by Portland were only \$16 million per kilometre.

Research on Portland's tram system also revealed how the new street-level transit system produced overlapping benefits, like more intensified land use in the area (EcoDensity in reality), improved access for the elderly and an overall improvement in civic quality of life as people were able to move around more freely.

During the formative years of Portland's streetcar construction, the amount of development adjacent to the new tram line increased exponentially. After the line was built, the potential for density within one block of the line was 90 per cent higher than in the blocks farther away.

Many will argue that streetcars can't achieve the same travel speeds as subway systems and therefore not as many people will use the system. Portland's system is one of the cheapest transit systems, but also one of the slowest. But speed is really only important if you want to move a long distance from one part of the region to another. Lower operational speeds are better if the objective is to move people within a city district and create complete communities where people live, work, shop and play.

Richmond lost the opportunity to truly revitalize No. 3 Road and make its downtown compact and walkable when it failed to fight for a new split system that would have seen SkyTrain end at the first station in Richmond linking to a grade-level streetcar system down No. 3 Road. Instead, the ugly SkyTrain elevated guideway has effectively killed No. 3 Road while it whisks people out of Richmond's downtown to shop in Vancouver.

Decision-makers ignored a study completed prior to the awarding of the Canada Line concession that showed that switching to a streetcar system for the Richmond portion of the line would create enough cost savings to extend the Canada Line another seven kilometres along an existing right-of-way from Richmond's city centre all the way to Steveston. The additional travel time from downtown Vancouver to Richmond's city centre would have been five minutes.

Decision-makers ought to pay attention to the results of the UBC study before making the next costly decision on public transit.

Bob Ransford is a public affairs consultant with COUNTERPOINT Communications Inc. He is a former real estate developer. E-mail: ransford@counterpoint.ca

© The Vancouver Sun 2008

CLOSE WINDOW

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