

An Advisory to Council About Solving Ottawa's Transportation Mess

**Dr. Barry Wellar
Distinguished Research Fellow
Transport 2000 Canada,
Professor Emeritus
University of Ottawa
wellarb@uottawa.ca**

Source Information:

**<http://www.transport2000.ca/>
January 18, 2008**

(Note: The original Advisory was dated December 09, 2007 and was posted December 30. As suggested by reviewers, revisions have been made to provide additional information for parts of the Advisory, and to make several of the recommendations to the mayor and councillors more explicit. In addition it was suggested that I remind/inform readers that this is an Advisory, and as a result emphasis is on improving council's decision-making process, and not on attempting to provide a multi-modal transportation plan that clears away a transportation mess that has been developed by design in the City of Ottawa over the past 30 years.)

An Advisory to Council About Solving Ottawa's Transportation Mess

**Dr. Barry Wellar
Distinguished Research Fellow
Transport 2000 Canada,
Professor Emeritus
University of Ottawa
wellarb@uottawa.ca**

CONTEXT

Since my appointment as Distinguished Research Fellow at Transport 2000 Canada in early 2006, I have published reports and made a number of presentations at academic, professional, technical, and community meetings in Canada, the U.S., and Europe. Whenever appropriate I incorporated empirical evidence about the transportation situation in Ottawa in the publications and presentations. I am gratified that Transport 2000 disseminated those communications through *TransportAction* and/or posted them on its website (transport2000.ca). Further, over that same span of time I have been interviewed for dozens of television, radio, and newspaper stories about Ottawa's transportation situation, and I have also written a number of letters to editors as well as columns on that subject.

As some readers are aware, this work at Transport 2000 continues a practice that extends back to 1972 when I began participating in the public debate about the state of transportation in Ottawa, and contributing to the public record of that debate through publications, presentations, and numerous media events. During the early years (1972-1979) of my involvement in Ottawa's transportation discourse I held various research/policy positions at the federal Ministry of State for Urban Affairs. In 1979 I joined the University of Ottawa where I held the positions of Professor of Urban and Regional Planning until 1985, and then Professor of Geography and Environmental Studies until my retirement in 2005.

The next several sub-sections outline how my research background and my involvement in public policy matters at the federal, provincial and local levels contribute to the design and content of this Advisory for Ottawa's mayor and councillors.

Once the background material on research approaches is complete I raise the issue of council's treatment of Ottawa's grassroots organizations with an interest in transportation, and then close the Context section by discussing the connections that mayor and councillors must quickly establish if they are to succeed in solving Ottawa's transportation mess.

Merging client-driven and curiosity-driven research perspectives

My professional career phases at Urban Affairs and the University of Ottawa provided ample opportunity to develop and refine a policy researcher's perspective on the various transportation processes affecting the National Capital Region.

The federal government experience informed me about the political, institutional, and jurisdictional nuances of client-driven research in transportation planning, and the university position emphasized the curiosity-driven dimension of theories, hypotheses, forecasting techniques, etc., regarding such matters as land use-transportation integration, inter-modal connections, transportation system performance measures, and models of trip generation, inducement, and distribution patterns. And, very importantly, through a number of projects, assignments, and appointments to boards and committees, I was frequently able to combine both perspectives when undertaking research tasks.

Readers wanting to know more about the relationships between client-driven and curiosity-driven research are referred to the text of the Anderson Lecture that I gave at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Denver. As the recipient of the Anderson Medal in 2003, I was invited to present the Anderson lecture in 2005, and the topic chosen was: *Significant Advances in Applied Geography from Combining Client-Driven and Curiosity-Driven Research Methodologies*. The text of the Anderson Lecture can be viewed at: <http://aqsg.binghamton.edu/wellar2005.pdf>. As for readers who wish to have only an introduction to the two research fields, the following comments on how the perspectives shaped the design of this Advisory may suffice.

Experience in client-driven research

Between 1972 and 1979 I had discussions and exchanged communications with hundreds of Canada's federal, provincial and municipal politicians, with many hundreds of bureaucrats in departments and agencies across the country, and with thousands of 'ordinary citizens' interested in the issues that were in my purview at Urban Affairs as a senior researcher, theme coordinator, director, and senior policy advisor.

The benefits of that experience which are pertinent to writing this report include learning about the competing motivations of elected and appointed officials, the disparate weights given to urgent versus important issues when politicians make self-serving decisions, the often seemingly illogical nature of intergovernmental relations, the too-frequent failure of

governments and councils to make and maintain connections among policy, program and plan processes, and the sometimes head-shaking discrepancies between events occurring or impending in the real world and the seemingly irrational responses of politicians to “the writing on the wall”.

Among my lessons learned while in the federal government was that of being properly prepared to understand the origin and derivation of materials and comments issued by elected officials. Towards that end, I paid special attention to the dossier or C.V of these individuals. The purpose of this attention to detail was to identify politicians who actually had formal training of a professional, technical, or practical nature for a very pragmatic reason. That is, this information allowed me to distinguish between the very few politicians with substantive credentials, and the remaining very large proportion of elected officials who are merely opining on a subject about which they may in fact know very little beyond casual reading and personal experience.

Admittedly both groups of politicians tend to have something to say on just about any topic -- they are in public office, after all -- but individuals with little or no formal training in a field are obliged to rely on ‘common sense’ for their positions. While I believe it is important and fair for everyone to have his/her fair share of common sense, *it must be emphasized that the ‘common sense defense’ is too often the refuge of those who cannot methodologically explain their views.* As noted below, I return to this theme when discussing the elected officials ultimately responsible for making the decisions that will either extricate us from, or bury us even deeper in Ottawa’s transportation mess.

Experience in curiosity-driven research

As for curiosity-driven research, its primary objectives are two-fold: add to subject matter knowledge, and add to ways and means of continuing to add to subject matter knowledge through advances in research methods, techniques, and operations. This research can be theoretical or empirical, or a mix of the two, the research questions can come from many sources including the researcher’s imagination and previous investigations by others, as well as from governments, businesses, the media, and community groups that have questions in search of answers. Readers may recognize the phrase ‘search for truth’, which is often used to characterize curiosity-driven research.

In the case of transportation planning in the City of Ottawa, there is a clear advantage to having experience in both the client-driven and curiosity-driven research domains. That is, decisions about the what, where, when, etc., of transportation systems and services are made by elected officials,

and knowledge about how these individuals tend to make decisions can be very useful when analyzing and interpreting their decision processes and proposed or anticipated decision outcomes.

On the other hand, transportation planning is a field that involves hundreds of aspects that vary among communities throughout the world, and one important feature of curiosity-driven research is that it invites many types of compare-and-contrast studies involving a multitude of sites, situations, and circumstances. Knowledge about research into transportation planning in cities similar to and different from Ottawa in structure, function, density, environs, etc., provides a sound basis for investigating the cause(s) of Ottawa's transportation problem(s).

Merging the research domains

I have engaged in both client-driven and curiosity-driven research in my public service and academic careers, and I continue to engage in both types of research as a consultant, as a continuing, active member of the academic community, and as a member of governmental as well as professional and technical boards. Based on that experience, and the evidence that I have reviewed to date on the origins and perpetuation of Ottawa's transportation situation, I believe that the transportation mess afflicting this city from north to south and east to west, and especially in the downtown area, is due in large part to decisions that failed to fully take into account what the two research domains can contribute to informed debate on transportation planning issues. To correct this shortcoming, one objective of the Advisory is to suggest remedial actions that have due regard for both research domains.

In closing this section on the research dimension I note that this Advisory, brief though it is, may be intimidating and possibly overwhelming for elected officials who prefer to be spoon-fed with one-page summaries of lengthy reports on complex issues. However, Ottawa's transportation mess did not suddenly drop in from the ether; it was created by elected officials who apparently rarely read the reports behind the one-page summaries. As a result, therefore, of not doing the relatively easier reading in simpler times, and making more informed decisions 30, 25, 20, 15, 10, and 5, 4, 3, or 2 years ago, mayor and councillors are now confronted by a large and growing build-up of sophisticated reading materials in both the client-driven and curiosity-driven research domains.

To assist in the task ahead, this Advisory includes advice to the mayor and councillors on how to effectively merge the two domains as a means of intelligently dealing with Ottawa's transportation mess. It is acknowledged at the outset, however, that due to the complex and entrenched nature of the transportation mess, and the widespread absence of research expertise

among the mayor and councillors, these suggestions are at a basic and preliminary level. And that is a good thing. As both research domains inform us, getting the fundamentals correct at the start is key to getting good answers to good questions, and I believe that a compelling case is made for the five remedial measures that the mayor and councillors must institute in order to avoid compounding Ottawa's transportation mess.

Then, once those remedial steps have been taken, the mayor and councillors will be positioned to pursue a much more intelligent transportation future for Ottawa.

In closing this section and ensuring that no important stone is left unturned, *the mayor and councillors are reminded (or informed as the case may be) that Ottawa's transportation future is as much about money as it is about service.* Moreover, they are reminded that many area residents have already criticized them for their F-level performance when it comes to explaining the City of Ottawa's sorry financial story, or Ottawa's failure to heed the sustainable transport movement call for reduced expenditures on roads and more on the walk, cycle, and transit modes. Clearly, in Ottawa the transportation mess is compounded by a financial mess, and vice versa, so this city faces a long, steep learning curve when it comes to designing and implementing a research agenda that effectively addresses both of the entrenched messes.

Respecting grassroots organizations in the research process

The concluding remarks in this part of the Context section reflect my many years of involvement with grassroots groups in Ottawa, as well as in a number of other communities in Ontario and across Canada.

It was my experience while with the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs, and the University of Ottawa, that grassroots organizations such as community associations and other public interest groups deserve a full measure of respect for the quality of ideas, effort, and earnestness that they provide on a volunteer basis for their communities. Further, and identifying a feature directly pertinent to this Advisory, every public interest group that I have contacted was more than willing, it was eager to participate in research projects.

In this Advisory, I am severely critical of Ottawa's mayor and councillors because I believe they have at best only a vague idea of the important transportation research tasks that these groups can perform. In anticipation, therefore, of the age-old excuse, "Who knew?" that community groups could do these things, it may be instructive to inform the mayor and councillors that the research tasks these groups have taken on as participants in my projects alone include:

- **Conduct newspaper scans of transportation issues;**
- **collect pedestrian and vehicular traffic data;**
- **review transport features of official plans;**
- **synthesize conference workshops and sessions for rapporteur reports;**
- **review goals, objectives, and methods of transportation studies;**
- **review intersection performance index formulations for ease of comprehension by lay people;**
- **field test pedestrian and vehicle traffic survey instruments;**
- **participate in focus groups to prioritize transportation policy objectives;**
- **assemble intersection modal use data bases;**
- **interpret the results of parametrical and statistical analyses;**
- **suggest variables to elaborate transportation concepts;**
- **participate in Delphi technique applications to specify walkability concepts and variables;**
- **comment on Walking Security Index research project terms of reference and involvement of ‘ordinary people’ in selecting variables;**
- **provide information on the disposition of transportation-related issues by the Ontario Municipal Board;**
- **make inquiries about the level of vehicle window-tinting reporting and enforcement in their municipalities;**
- **provide feedback on relationships proposed for examination in university students’ transportation assignments, theses and dissertations.**

These are a portion of the client-driven and curiosity-driven research projects that community groups in Ottawa have undertaken with me, and I am aware of numerous other research projects that have benefited from their involvement. It does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that these groups not only have a lot to offer Ottawa’s quest to get out of its transportation mess, they are likely critical to the success of the research base supporting the attempt to deal with the mess.

Moreover, and especially in view of the criticisms arrayed against Ottawa’s failure to get things right in any transportation mode, it warrants emphasizing that these groups not only did the requested research, but they did it well, they did it with conviction, and they did it with a spirit of partnership that is gratifying to someone who places a lot of weight on the importance of engaging ‘ordinary citizens’ in his research programs. And this praise is not given casually, since my judgment is supported by a professional record of having taught undergraduate and graduate research methods courses for more than 25 years, and of receiving a number of research contracts and, awards, as well as appointments to national and international research panels and committees. In my experience, these

groups are an outstanding research resource, and their active participation in the research processes in every municipality in Canada, including Ottawa, should be a “no-brainer”.

The fact that I accepted the appointment of Distinguished Research Fellow at Transport 2000 Canada is testimony to the regard in which I hold such groups, and in my opinion should be shown to them by all Canadians, including elected officials. Indeed, it is precisely my high regard for these groups that brings me to take issue publicly with the treatment their documents, communications, and other representations on transportation issues have been accorded by Ottawa’s municipal politicians over the past seven years.

As the reader would no doubt agree, if these groups were engaging in frivolous and vexatious activities, and were generally regarded as being time-wasters at best, then there would be good reason for mayor and council to treat them politely by hearing them out, and then quickly moving on to focus attention on more compelling players in the transportation piece.

However, to my knowledge no one has ever claimed, much less provided evidence, to demonstrate that descriptors such as frivolous, vexatious or time-wasters are appropriately applied to such public interest groups such as Transport 2000 Canada, Friends of the O-Train, Citizens for Safe Cycling, or Ottawalk. Further, it is my belief that in regard to such criteria as expertise, commitment, and reliability, they are among the first rank of such groups across Canada, and perform at the highest level in terms of providing mayor and council with an outstanding connection to the citizens of Ottawa.

As a result of the important contribution that these groups make to Ottawa’s transportation discourse, I take strong exception to the treatment that their suggestions, preferences, recommendations, and other inputs to the transportation planning process in general, and the research aspect in particular, have been and are accorded by mayors and councillors. To make a long story short, I attended numerous council and committee meetings over the past seven years in which transportation matters were at issue. I remain appalled that representations by these and similar public interest groups have been treated with disdain verging on contempt by many of Ottawa’s municipal politicians.

(Note: In the interests of focus, this communication does not deal with the equally distasteful treatment that community groups have received from some members of staff when transportation issues are raised, and particularly when those issues entailed questioning the research

purportedly underlying staff positions in any of the transportation modes. A subsequent Advisory may explore this matter in detail.)

A very significant consequence of this Advisory, if it is acted upon in the manner proposed, will be a massive change in the class culture at city hall. Specifically, in these new cultures the mayor and councillors will sincerely welcome and appreciate public interest delegations that represent other residents. The matter of particular import to this report is that municipal politicians understand and accept that these public interest groups know substantially more than any member of council about the walk, cycle, transit, and private motor vehicle modes, movement of freight by truck versus rail, and the role of telecommuting, teleworking, and teleconferencing as alternatives to moving people via vehicle-based transportation modes.

Since it is obviously wasteful and dysfunctional in the extreme that this expertise is not being effectively used, the Advisory seeks to galvanize council to mend its relations with grassroots organizations, and to earnestly seek whatever help it can get from these groups to deal with Ottawa's widespread and deeply-rooted transportation mess.

Can council make the necessary connections?

This is an Advisory and not a how-to-do-research manual for Ottawa's mayor and councillors. As a result, they are obliged to read between the lines and do some thinking on their own about the why's and how's of the research process, much along the lines of what is required of students who start a term badly and want to rise above an 'F' grade by course's end.

In this case the politicians' assignment is straightforward, there is no wriggle room, and it will be abundantly clear whether they are moving from their current 'F' to a 'D' in transportation planning. (Note: There is little substantive difference between a high 'F' and a low 'E', hence the target of a 'D' grade.) Further, this assignment does not involve a whole batch of material that no one has had the opportunity to see before. Rather, it is all about assembling the known, pertinent bits and pieces and making the connections that were not made by previous councils, and have not been made to date by the current council.

That is, the mayor and councillors must figure out how to effectively and efficiently connect client-driven and curiosity-driven research methodologies in a transportation planning environment, and then intelligently apply that methodology in a comprehensive review of the research offerings of Ottawa's grassroots organizations. Upon satisfactorily completing those two preparatory rounds, and adopting a research mindset to guide future deliberations, mayor and councillors then

need to build on what has been learned in the first two rounds. That is, using what they have learned about the formal research process, it is then necessary to derive the questions which must be asked and answered if the mayor and councillors are to sort out and begin to solve Ottawa's current transportation mess, and prevent further monumental bumbles.

It is my impression after some 35 years of city hall-watching that very, very few of Ottawa's municipal politicians will be eager to embrace the idea of achieving the research connections suggested in this Advisory. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect that they will do what needs to be done out of necessity. That is, since some of them have already made public pronouncements such as "there is no magic bullet", "there is no silver bullet", "there is no obvious solution", "the so-called plan is not a plan", "I have no idea how the pieces fit", it is reasonable to conclude that most of them realize that there is no way to avoid the heavy mental lifting that is part-and-parcel of methodologically designed research.

However, this is an 'F'-rated council in the field of transportation planning, in a city that has bungled the transportation file for 30 years. It is entirely possible that mayor and councillors will concentrate their efforts on "studies" of the transportation mess, rather than deal with a worsening situation that they helped to create. This is known as a 'cut-and-run' strategy, and is frequently adopted by politicians for various reasons, including situations where lack of understanding of an issue and lack of leadership combine to paralyze the decision-making process, or turn it into a protracted smoke-and-mirrors exercise.

Due to the possibility that Ottawa's present mayor and councillors could opt for three more years of the 'same old, same old', and do little or nothing to fix the transportation mess, that avenue needs to be taken into account in the Advisory. I refer to this as the potentially *really bad news* on the immediate horizon if council fails to get its policy research act together before it makes any non-trivial decisions affecting the transportation system structure and function.

While discussion of the actual consequences of council not changing its ways is beyond the scope of the Advisory, it appears likely to me that should council go that route then within a year Ottawa's expanded transportation mess will become the focus of attention of Ottawa's pedestrians, cyclists, transit users, private motor vehicle operators, businesses, taxpayers, visitors, other levels of government, and the media.

As indicated below, Ottawa's financial state is always front page news, but I sense that widespread loss of mobility across several modes could vault transportation to the top of the public's gripe list in 2008.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL VIEW OF OTTAWA'S TRANSPORTATION MESS

I am the lead author on an article titled "*Local Governments' Record of Assessing the Impacts of the High Tech Industry on Ottawa's Land Use-Transportation Relationship: 1970s-2005*", which has been posted on the Transport 2000 Canada website (transport2000.ca) for a number of months. The article is scheduled to be published in a book of readings about Ottawa in the immediate future, and interested readers can follow this website for details. The point about mentioning the article in the Advisory is that it discusses the formation and perpetuation of Ottawa's transportation mess at length, so there is no need to go into the details again. Instead, readers who want to examine the many contributors, decisions, and events behind Ottawa's history of transportation bungling over the past 30 years can refer to that source document.

Ottawa's transportation mess was identified in the 1970s

As documented in the examination of Ottawa's land use-transportation relationship, 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.

Hello Ottawa council chamber, anybody there, alert, paying attention?

The presentation that is especially pertinent to this column is titled "Sustainable transport: Is there anybody here who can win this game?" This address was given at a well-publicized luncheon meeting of the Kiwanis Club of Ottawa in February 2007. As can be seen by viewing the PowerPoint slides that were posted on several websites (e.g., transport2000.ca), the 1975 newspaper article was mentioned in my Kiwanis Club of Ottawa remarks.

Further, a number of pointed suggestions were made about how the City of Ottawa could rescue its floundering quest for a transportation plan. Two such suggestions/advisories were that the City of Ottawa immediately and wholeheartedly commit to achieving sustainable transport best practices, and to publishing annual reports on what it has done to increase walk, cycle, and transit trips, and reduce trips by private motor vehicle.

Bearing in mind, therefore, that in addition to being posted on the Web, the presentation, “Sustainable transport: Is there anybody here who can win this game?” was given in downtown Ottawa (about a 12-minute walk from city hall), that a number of people in attendance are directly interested in and affected by the City of Ottawa’s transportation deliberations, and that a number of attendees are politically connected to the mayor and members of council, these elected officials have had ample opportunity to link my 1975 newspaper article and my 2007 Kiwanis address.

Ignored by Ottawa mayor and councillors, visiting expert treatment in Belfast

It is now nine months since the Kiwanis Club of Ottawa presentation, and I have not heard a ‘peep’ from the mayor or any of the councillors about my effort to rattle their cages and get them to step up to the plate in the sustainable transport best practices game. On the brighter side, however, the organizers of the 2007 National TravelWise Association (NTWA) Conference saw my Kiwanis Club presentation on several websites. Within a week of speaking in Ottawa, I was engaged as the international plenary speaker at the 2007 NTWA conference in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

For those who keep track of these things, attendees at NTWA conferences include elected officials and transportation managers, administrators, and professionals from Local Government Authorities in the United Kingdom (UK). Imagine my surprise at hearing during the conference, and within days of returning home, that Local Government Authorities in the UK were already working on implementing suggestions that had not elicited a single comment or question from Ottawa’s mayor and councillors.

The current transportation plan is broken, and it appears that council has no strategy and no ideas about how to fix it

In closing this section on the history of Ottawa’s transportation mess, there are two questions that need to be asked and answered to validate the Advisory, and to put a foundation in place for future reviews of the transportation planning performance of Ottawa’s current mayor and councillors.

First, are there grounds to argue that *Everybody Else*, including previous mayors and councillors, are totally to blame for Ottawa's current transportation mess?

Second, is it evident that the present mayor and councillors have full knowledge of what needs to be done, when, where, why, how, by whom, at what costs for what benefits, to identify and push all the buttons involved in clearing up Ottawa's transportation mess?

Double-checking of the available evidence points to an unequivocal No answer for both questions. Without a doubt previous municipal politicians repeatedly bungled the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton/City of Ottawa transportation file in the preceding three-plus decades. That said, over the past year the current mayor and councillors have contributed their own bumbles to the file. As a result, this council also goes into the history books as part of the cause of Ottawa's transportation mess as we end 2007 and enter 2008.

As for having the knowledge to think its way out of a transportation mess that has become intimidating in its complexity, I have yet to meet one adult taxpayer in Ottawa who is prepared to even try to qualify the current mayor and councillors as transportation planning experts, individually or collectively.

Further, I believe that the mayor and most councillors are aware of this low regard factor, and agree that their record of thinking and doing in the transportation field is seriously deficient. Hence, it is my impression that the mayor and most councillors are willing to accept that they must adopt a new culture for thinking about, and making decisions on transportation matters if the mess is not to deepen.

It is the thesis of this Advisory, therefore, that the current approach to research at the political level in Ottawa is a leading factor behind the perpetuation of the transportation mess by the mayor and councillors. In recognition of my obligations to Transport 2000 Canada, and my duties as a professional planner (RPP-OPPI, MCIP), the next section of this Advisory discusses five remedial measures which, when implemented, will make a major contribution to stopping the deterioration of all modes of Ottawa's transportation system, and to creating a foundation for solving an urban transportation problem that has been piling up for 30 years.

WHY PRESENT THIS ADVISORY NOW?

In addition to receiving invitations to discuss sustainable transport initiatives in other jurisdictions, throughout 2007 I received 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. For professional and personal reasons, I declined the vast majority of those invitations. However, because the situation has worsened considerably in recent months, and because there may be forces at work that make a comment at this time more likely to be appreciated by at least some members of council, this Advisory is a partial response to some of those requests.

I hasten to add that I am well aware of the fact that our present mayor and councillors, and their predecessors on two previous councils, have been subject to voluminous criticism for Ottawa's transportation mess. Further, I am fully aware that despite the volume and sharpness of the criticisms, the messages of concern have not been given their due regard by the mayor or councillors.

However, drawing encouragement from one of the many inspirational messages attributed to Everett Dirksen, the late, great senator from Illinois, and paraphrasing him slightly, perhaps I may be able to apply some heat that will help mayor and council to see the light before they bungle again.

FIVE REMEDIAL STEPS TO DIRECT THE MAYOR AND COUNCIL IN THEIR STRUGGLE TO RESOLVE OTTAWA'S TRANSPORTATION MESS

To make my position on Ottawa's transportation mess perfectly clear, it is my assessment that the mayor and the rest of council are performing at the 'F' level in their transportation deliberations. And, it is my further assessment that their thinking processes are in serious need of major, remedial adjustments if Ottawa is not to be afflicted with thousands more person-days of futile argument and debate and, worse, with even more colossal transportation bumbles within the current term of office.

How, then, to help mayor and councillors get out of the 'F' category and up to a 'D' in transportation planning? This may be construed as an overly challenging transformation exercise to set out in a brief Advisory, but hope springs eternal for optimists. To this optimist, the place to start is with five remedial measures that rise to the top as "must do" things if our municipal politicians are to overcome their collective 'F' in transportation planning. Moreover, there is no time to waste.

Remedial step 1: Declaring all drawing materials 'off limits'

Step number one in the remedial process is quite simple, the problem it addresses is common to all municipal councils that assume competencies they do not have, and its importance cannot be over-emphasized. That is,

all local and regional transportation, land use and other maps, as well as sheets of blank paper, pens, pencils, crayons and other drawing materials must be declared off limits to the mayor and councillors whenever they are in a public venue, or anywhere near a television camera or other imaging device, beginning immediately.

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.

As readers with children, grandchildren or good memories know, this kind of creative activity is great fun in elementary school. However, when politicians hold their latest drawings up to the cameras the phrase ‘class doofus’ comes to mind, as does the grade of ‘F’ for those who confuse cheap theatrics and foolish grins with substance.

Contrary to the apparent perceptions of a number of members of council, drawings slapped together during “bull sessions” are not plans, wish lists compiled over coffee in the cafeteria are not plans, and piles of half-baked ideas picked out of newspapers, talk radio rants, or intermission conversations during hockey games are not plans. They are low-value brain fodder at best, and do nothing to address Ottawa’s transportation mess. Moreover, and contrary to what politicians might expect from the media play received, these kinds of silly stunts seriously erode the public’s confidence in council’s ability to ever be able to play the sustainable transport game at anything better than the ‘F’ level.

So, step one is for the mayor and councillors to totally stop drawing for public consumption anything remotely related to any mode of transportation, and especially not the complex and interconnected transit and private motor vehicle modes. *If the mayor and councillors are in any doubt about this advice, I remind them that while a good drawing may be worth a thousand words, it often requires many thousands of words to try to correct a bad one.*

Remedial step 2: Drop the swagger

It is imperative 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 perceive the inputs of the transportation planning process, their musings about outcomes and outputs is widely regarded as pie-in-the-sky delusions, and council as a group has not demonstrated that it knows 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, technical, technological, 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 have been 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, pops up on their computer screens, or arrives in a brown envelope.

Until those changes of character 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.

Remedial step 3: On the tunnel issue, start with the basics

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?

To my knowledge this most fundamental of tunnel questions has never been asked by any Ottawa council, much less kept before the public until it was fully and intelligently answered. As a result, the mayor and councillors should not try to save face by agreeing that it is time to get back to basics.

Simply put, Ottawa's municipal politicians have never directly dealt with the basics of the question posed, so they cannot get back to that state in the process because they were never there in the first place.

Following from remedial step 2, the honest thing for mayor and council to do is to drop the swagger, admit that they have attempted to avoid heavy mental lifting on the tunnel issue, and accept that they must start at the most basic level if their decisions are to be based on anything other than musings, personal preferences, extremely limited life experiences in the transportation field, and the amount of influence held by the last person they spoke to before voting.

Admitting that it was an error to by-pass the basics outlined in the question above is not the end of the line for council, however, because this remedial step requires obtaining answers to each of the parts of the basic question. And this phase of the deliberative process may be even more difficult than usual, because the political culture at Ottawa city hall appears to be more inclined to rely on vague promises and fast-talking than on deep thinking.

Comparing the current Ottawa council case to many others that I have witnessed in my career, it appears to be abundantly clear on the tunnel issue that the mayor and councillors have been making it up as they go along. Or, to re-phrase, I have not encountered any signs that their tunnel vision is 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 job list rather than a coherent program.

To get from the 'F' to the 'D' level in the tunnel deliberations, mayor and councillors need to spend quality time contemplating the core question, and then getting informed answers to all the parts of the core question. Based on the experience of the past seven years, they should put out the word that they are looking for informed citizens to help check all the answers at least three times.

Remedial step 4: Reading 101 for Ottawa's mayor and councillors

There is ample evidence that Ottawa's mayor and councillors are way, way behind in their reading on the large changes occurring in the transportation world. A strong indicator of their questionable reading habits is that no one on council seems to have made the point about the worldwide discussion of systemic structural and functional changes in the urban domain, and the need for politicians at all levels, including the municipal level, to wrap their brains around the idea that the city of 2017 will be very different from the city of 2007. Moreover, those changes are not all going to occur in year 10, they are already happening.

Read anything substantive about how rapidly urban change is occurring?

By way of illustration of the new day that is dawning, it is highly likely that in ten years private motor vehicle traffic in downtown Ottawa will be at least 30% lower than it is now due to 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' transportation 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 the mayor and councillors to ask the right questions to get the right answers in order to make the right decision about whether to tunnel, when, where, and, most importantly, for precisely what benefits at what costs?

The art and science of asking intelligent questions

I hasten to add here that any member of council who did not hear a wake-up call when he/she read that last paragraph will not likely be of much help in dealing with remedial steps 3 and 5. As known by professors, researchers, lawyers, criminal investigators, inventors, mental health workers and others who are leaders in the art and science of inquiring, asking the right questions is frequently a very difficult piece of business, and very often those who get the best answers in any field are those who asked the right questions.

Regrettably, Ottawa's mayor and councillors are not known for their questioning expertise. Through attendance at council and committee meetings, as well as at various functions in a range of venues, I have had dozens of opportunities to witness Ottawa's current mayor and councillors in action, and to hear what others think of their performance. I do not recall anyone ever saying that a member of council really knows how to ask questions that deal with the essence of significant relationships. Instead, most comments that I have heard are consistent with my opinion that the questions posed by past and present council members tend to deal with trivial points of order and self-evident truths, or readily available details in reports on the desks in front of them. Rarely does questioning by Ottawa's municipal politicians involve anything that requires a university class or two in transportation planning in order to fully appreciate the answer.

Operating on the premise that mayor and councillors want to get out of the transportation mess, it follows that they want the answers that will achieve that objective, and it further follows that they want to ask the questions that will produce the answers that will, at minimum, keep them from adding to the mess. That achievement would move them from an 'F' to a 'D'. And if things go really well, the answers they get will enable them to start cleaning up the mess, and maybe improve their grade from an 'F' to as high as a 'politician's C'.

Which prompts a make-or-break question for mayor and councillors: Where are you going to find the right questions to ask about transportation planning, bearing in mind that you are in the midst of a transportation mess that is partly the result of bad questions asked and bad answers acted upon by your predecessors? That is your problem to solve, but I suggest that you begin paying a lot more attention to your reading habits, and especially what you read. The following brief comment may be instructive in that regard.

Mayor and councillors read anything about holes in the EA process?

As to the importance of what council members read, consider these harsh bits of reality. Over the past year I have heard a number of members of council confidently refer to this, that, or the other “environmental assessment”, or EA for short. This pronouncement is frequently made with the puffed-up air of someone who has just awarded himself/herself the Nobel Prize in rocket science.

Well, before getting too smug about the EA concept, and perhaps thinking or hoping that it displaces the need to think, the mayor and councillors would be wise to bear in mind that EAs were done for many of the road widenings that have gotten Ottawa into its current transportation mess. And if that is a worrisome comment for members of council they should take a deep breath, because there is more EA bad news in the hopper that calls for immediate consideration and action by our municipal politicians.

As you the reader is no doubt aware, widening of sections of Highway 174 as well as more sections of 417 are currently being promoted by the Province of Ontario for EA approval. However, we already know that previous road-related projects that met EA standards have directly added to Ottawa’s transportation mess. It follows, therefore, that the following pointed action must be vigorously pursued by the mayor and councillors:

Obtain from the Province of Ontario a clear, timely, evidence-based, and comprehensive explanation as to how adding more private motor vehicles to Ottawa’s urban transportation network is good for Ottawa’s environment, or its inhabitants.

On its face, the notion of having EAs support road widenings that generate and/or induce more private motor vehicle traffic is beyond illogical, it is bizarre. However, it is precisely that kind of crooked thinking about road network expansions that has approved annual increments to Ottawa’s transportation mess over the past 30-plus years. It is high time that Ottawa’s mayor and councillors found this out for themselves, and pursuing the above path will provide the sharp wake-up call that some

members of council need if they are to keep the transportation mess from spreading and deepening.

With regard to finding reading materials that challenge the validity and utility of EAs in transportation, there are hundreds of columns, reports, and letters to the editor in Ottawa's community and daily newspapers that deal explicitly with this topic. Indeed, as part of their search for questions to ask the Province of Ontario, the mayor and councillors may learn that while the Ministry of Transportation, Province of Ontario, regularly mentions the concept of "improvement" in its advertisements about environmental assessments of highway projects, there is no published Ministry definition of what "improvement" means in operational terms or any other non-trivial terms.

(Note: The preceding statement is based on a dozen or more communications on this issue with Ministry officials and MPPs during the period 1997-2006. Although the term is still used in Ministry advertisements in 2007, I have never seen anything in writing that even begins to explain the connection between highway construction projects and "improvements" to the environment or anything else for that matter. After eight or nine years of 'dancing with bureaucrats' the jury is in on this issue for me, and the mayor and councillors are forewarned that *using the term "improvement" in association with an environmental assessment in Ontario is at best a deception if the key operational concept is not fully defined by operational variables and elaborated by pertinent performance and output measures.*)

And the bad news about EAs goes on and on. For example, EAs conducted in the Province of Ontario have nothing to offer to alternative transportation strategies, and do nothing to achieve sustainable transport practices. Moreover, and despite the multi-year history of EAs, and despite the warnings in thousands of books and reports, the transportation sector ranks as Canada's second-worst offending sector (behind industry) in regard to the emission of greenhouse gases! Why is it, our mayor and councillors might ask, indeed must ask, that environmental assessment procedures in Ontario are not designed and enforced to bring about an end to degradation of the environment by the transportation sector in urban areas such as Ottawa?

No doubt Premier Dalton McGuinty, Minister Jim Watson, and other MPPS from Ottawa have their own answers, and perhaps there are even government-approved answers to questions along that line, and I invite council members to get these answers in writing. When the answers arrive they can be compared with my explanation, namely that sloppily-written legislation, murky terms of reference for EA studies, shoddy analyses,

limited to non-existent intervenor funding, and lack of enforcement are among the reasons that the good idea of environmental assessment has turned into a form of high-sounding deception in Ontario.

I note for background information purposes that I participated in the design and implementation of one of the original environmental assessments while a professor at the University of Kansas (1969-1972). Many of the EAs that I have reviewed over the intervening years greatly depart from the original spirit and intent of this evaluation methodology.

And, lest there be any doubt, let me make it clear that EAs involving the highway component of the transportation field are often among those that deserve a grade of 'F'. Fatal flaws in EAs that are pertinent to this Advisory include:

- collecting massive amounts of data but doing very limited and superficial analyses;
- applying very low and narrowly-defined standards of system performance when calculating the impacts of expanding highway networks in metropolitan regions; and,
- using assessment procedures that do not account for the cumulative effects of impacts that occur when sections of highway expansion are "assessed" independently of other highway expansion projects.

What I would add in 2007, therefore, is a word of extreme caution whenever the mayor and councillors are anywhere near a real or potential encounter with an EA. Given just the above criticisms of the failed outcomes of the EA process in Ontario and Ottawa, it is clear that we have gone well beyond what might be called a shoddy, sloppy practice.

For me the words deception and even fraud are among those that come to mind when I learn that a member of council with no training in the field is touting an EA "finding" as the signal to proceed with a tunnel or any other transportation system initiative. In point of fact such a contention has no methodological basis, and is merely the opinion of someone who has no recognized credentials to evaluate much less support an EA outcome. Need I say more about the EA trap?

It appears fair to close this EA discussion by commenting that the mayor and councillors have a lot of intensive reading to do in order to achieve even an informed lay person's understanding of the purposes and limits of environmental assessments in transportation planning. And, that being the case, I must further conclude that until the mayor and councillors acquire the knowledge to properly understand the interpretations and implications of findings obtained via the application of EA methodology, all EA-related initiatives in transportation must be put on hold.

More reading

Identifying all the reading that mayor and councillors need to do in order to lead Ottawa out of its transportation mess is far beyond the scope of this brief note. It is my impression, however, that at a minimum mayor and councillors are in urgent need of directed, remedial readings on such topics as:

- applying and mis-applying the ‘business case’ philosophy and technique to support decisions involving the provision and delivery of mandated public infrastructure and services in general, and transportation infrastructure and services in particular;
- all modes of transport involving people (walk, cycle, transit, private motor vehicle), freight (rail, truck), and especially the creation of mutually reinforcing inter-modal relationships;
- the electronic transmission of data as text or images in order to promote and establish telecommuting, teleworking, and teleconferencing as alternatives to people using private motor vehicles for work, shopping, etc., purposes;
- **and, most importantly if the “F” grade is to be overcome, all aspects of sustainable transport principles and practices, with emphasis on the practices component (See step 5)**

Remedial step 5: Let’s go, council! Let’s go! Do your best to get out of the loser’s bracket in the quest for the Sustainable Transport Challenge Cup

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 many variations on the theme of sustainable transport has been featured internationally at conferences for years.

Sustainable transport best practices not even discussed by Ottawa’s council?

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. Moreover, those same scans indicate that many, perhaps most, and possibly all the mayor’s 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 before mayor and councillors are pushed, pulled, or stagger into opting for a transportation plan that may be approved in a matter of months, but could have massive, negative social, economic, financial, and environmental impacts that stretch out over the next 50 years, and beyond. As a result, whatever time is still on the clock must be used very productively, and that means doing only the things that directly contribute to formulating and implementing sound urban transportation policies in all the modes within the purview of the city of Ottawa.

Cram time for mayor and councillors

In the few minutes of the 11th hour that remain for the 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 the policies underlying a transportation master plan. Then, once the mayor and councillors have their sustainable transport house in order at the policy level, it is a matter of council ensuring that City of Ottawa staff do as they are told in regard to making sure that the practices are actually put in place, and then maintained.

(Note: I am well aware that staff does not always do what it is told to do by the mayor and councillors. As a case in point, on 26 February, 2003 the following recommendation of the Transportation and Transit Committee was approved by city council. **“Direct staff to continue to pursue the development of methods that can be used to assess pedestrian safety at intersections, using both the information developed by the Walking Security Index, other analytical techniques, and report to Committee and Council.”** *It almost four years after that instruction was issued, and repeated inquiries have failed to turn up any evidence that anything was actually done to perform the assigned task.* It appears that the instruction has been ignored by staff, and there is no tracking mechanism to ensure that instructions are in fact respected. This failure of governance problem must be corrected by council in order to resolve the transportation mess.)

No ‘Cole’s Notes’ to bail out politicians, hard slogging ahead

To my knowledge there are no ‘Cole’s Notes’ that might help the mayor and council bone up on sustainable transport principles and practices during the cram period. If that is true, and there is no other short-cut available,

then our municipal politicians are obliged to scour the various literatures on the topic of sustainable transport, and they must figure out for themselves what it all means. No walk in the park, you might say.

As to where to turn for suggestions on locating reading materials that tell all about sustainable transport practices, City of Ottawa staff may already have an online bibliography that politicians can access. Further, Ottawa's grassroots organizations might be able to offer some help, such as by assisting council with the all-important task of ranking sustainable transport practices along the worst-to-best scale or ladder.

My only other suggestion is that because the idea of the Sustainable Transport Practices Cup is introduced in the Background Paper and the Plenary Address that I prepared for the 2007 TravelWise conference in Belfast, those materials may warrant examination by the mayor and councillors. The Background Paper is titled "Sustainable Transport: Is There Anybody Here Who Can Win This Game?", and the title of the Plenary Address is "Sustainable Transport by Design or by Default? Either Way the Wasteful Ride Is Over". Both can be viewed at the Transport 2000 Canada website (transport2000.ca)

CONCLUDING COMMENT

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 this city's Internet branding will include a very explicit reference to the failure of the mayor and councillors to effectively deal with the transportation mess:

"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 loser among losers".

In concluding this Advisory, I am pleased to acknowledge the support that my sustainable transportation research, publications, and presentations have received from Transport 2000 Canada. However, the materials contained herein do not necessarily represent the views of Transport 2000 Canada. Further, all statements and any errors are solely my responsibility.

About the Author

Barry Wellar is a graduate of Queens University (Arts & Science 1964 (Gen. B.A.), and 1965 (Hon. B.A.)), and Northwestern University (M.S., 1967, Geography; PhD., Geography, 1969). He was Assistant Professor and Research Associate, Department of Geography, Institute for Social and Environmental Studies, and Space Technology Laboratory University of Kansas, 1969-1972, and then Senior Research Officer, Director, and Senior Policy Advisor, Ministry of State for Urban Affairs, 1972-1979.

In 1979 he joined the University of Ottawa as Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and the School of Urban and Regional Planning, and was appointed Full Professor in 1980. Courses taught included urban, rural and regional planning principles and practices, research methods and techniques, geographic information systems, transportation, and urban geography. He retired from the University of Ottawa in 2005, and now serves as President, Wellar Consulting Inc.

Dr. Wellar is the author of several hundred papers and reports in such fields as transportation, research methods and techniques, urban and regional planning, information technology, geographic information systems, remote sensing, housing and its environment, land information systems, economic development, and applied geography. He has authored and contributed to many hundreds of media articles. For lists of his publication titles and a selection of papers, reports, and media items visit wellarconsulting.com and Geomatics.uottawa.ca/wellarweb/home/htm.

Awards and recognition received include the Award of Merit, National Association of Towns and Townships (U.S); the Horwood Award (Urban and Regional Information Systems Association), the Anderson Medal (Applied Geography Specialty Group, Association of American Geographers); the Award for Service to Government or Business (Canadian Association of Geographers), the Ullman Award (Transportation Geography Specialty Group, Association of American Geographers) and, the President's Award for Service to the University Through Community and Media Relations (University of Ottawa),

In addition to his role as Distinguished Research Fellow at Transport 2000 Canada, Barry Wellar's community and professional services include appointments as: President, Applied Geography Specialty Group, Association of American Geographers; Distinguished Geomatics Scientist, Laboratory for Applied Geomatics and Geographic Information System Science, University of Ottawa; Research and Policy Advisor, Ontario Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods; Chairman, Anderson Medal of Honor Committee, Association of American Geographers; and Program Director, Geography Awareness Week, Canadian Association of Geographers.

