

Rethinking Green: Save the environment: Don't take transit

BY KEVIN LIBIN, 11 December 2009



When the Toronto Transit Commission announced in November it would hike fares a 25¢ in the new year -- a roughly 10% increase -- it blamed the usual suspects: rising costs of fuel and wages.

The system, said TTC chairman Adam Giambrone, faced a \$100-million shortfall in next year's operating budget.

When the bad news broke, the [Torontoist.com](http://torontoist.com), compared the inflation of the TTC's 21 fare hikes in the past 30 years against the price of gasoline and against the inflation rate.

Consistently, the analysis found, TTC fares had risen faster than inflation, and far faster than the price of gas. Between 1980 and 2010, the cash fare, adjusted for inflation, soared more than 80% and token prices are up 50%. The price of a litre of unleaded gas? Up about 30%, without inflation. As for wage increases, Statistics Canada reported last year that the median full-time, full-year salary of average Canadians has hardly increased at all since 1980.

Although it is charging more than ever, getting heftier federal, provincial and municipal subsidies than at any time in its history, although fuelling a car is pricier; and though its customer base has never been larger or keener to reduce its carbon footprint, the TTC, the largest system in the country, is struggling as much as ever to stem its losses. If this is the future of public transit, it does not look bright.

As other major systems across the continent strain in similar circumstances, the strategy of public transit system boosters has been to promote the service as an environmental necessity. In the name of Mother Nature, North American transit systems have received billions in subsidies in recent years — even though they were never developed for environmental purposes in the first place.

If the goal is to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, air pollution and gas consumption, and maximize the environmental impact of sustainability spending, we may be better off without publicly funding transit at all.

“Subsidized transit is not sustainable by definition,” says Wendell Cox, a transport policy consultant in St. Louis, and former L.A. County Transportation commissioner. “The potential of public transit has been so overblown it’s almost scandalous.”

It’s not that environmentally minded transit promoters are being dishonest when they argue that city buses are more efficient than private cars: It’s that they’re talking about a fictional world where far more people ride buses. Mass transit vehicles use up roughly the same energy whether they are full or empty, and for much of the time, they’re more empty than full.

For the bulk of the day, and on quieter routes, the average city bus usually undoes whatever efficiencies are gained during the few hours a day, on the few routes, where transit is at its peak.

Last year, policy analyst Randal O’Toole ran the numbers for the CATO Institute, where he is a senior fellow, comparing mass transit vehicles to private vehicles, ranking each based on how much energy they consume and how much CO₂ they emit. The average motorized city bus, he reports, burns 27% more energy per mile than a private car and emits 31% more pounds of CO₂. The U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics confirms that the average city bus requires 20% more energy per passenger than the average car.

“Unfortunately, right now the state of the art is that you’re generally better off with private automobiles when you’re talking about energy utilization. About the only way that transit can be competitive for energy or for environmental quality is if the transit lines gets an incredible amount of use, far higher than

is now normally the case,” says Tom Rubin, a transit policy consultant in California, and former chief financial officer of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority. But crowded systems are a turn-off for riders, he says, so more passengers means even more buses and rail cars. “It’s almost impossible to make transit more attractive without spending a huge amount of money.”

The bus may be the most inefficient part of any major city’s transit network, but they’re the most vital part. Wider use of subways and light rail relies utterly on a feeder system of buses, says Michael Roschlau, president of the Canadian Urban Transit Association. “You can’t just run [Calgary’s] C-Train by itself and expect everyone to drive to the stations,” he says. “Same thing for the subway in Toronto or Skytrain in Vancouver.”

Without buses to carry them from their neighbourhood to the train stations, even fewer citizens would ride the trains, making trains, in turn, less efficient per passenger. Already, when trains, subways and streetcars are combined, the average public transit system is still no more efficient than private cars, according to the CATO study. All transit together does emit less CO₂ than passenger cars carrying the same number of people the same distance (about 13% less) but even that gap is disappearing -- fast.

The U.S. Department of Energy’s Data Book shows that while transit’s energy efficiency has worsened in recent decades -- transit buses today consume 4,315 BTUs per passenger mile, or about 50% more energy than in 1980 -- the trend in cars has been the opposite direction: Today’s cars are already nearly 20% more efficient than they were 25 years ago, down from 4,348 BTUs per passenger mile in 1980 to 3,514 in 2007.

The environmental case for public transit is falling just as fast, now that hybrid cars are achieving mass market status, with 65 models set to hit North American roads next year, Chevrolet planning to launch its electric Volt by 2011 and manufacturers rolling out super-high efficiency vehicles. In the next few years especially, the average energy consumption of passenger vehicles, and their emission levels, will only improve, with projections by the International Council on Clean Transportation showing the average auto

could beat all public transit modes for efficiency and CO2 within the next five years.

“At this point, a Toyota Prius is less greenhouse-intensive than New York City Transit,” Mr. Cox says. “Whatever advantage that transit has at the moment is going away very quickly.”

Once eco-conscious urbanites realize the bus is worse for the planet than cars, they’ll have little reason to keep riding, making transit’s comparative per-passenger environmental footprint look even worse. And while transit system operators talk of “greening” their fleet, the fact is they face substantial limits. Whatever green gains transit can make, automobiles can probably do better, Mr. Rubin says.

When the federal government, the B.C. government and BC Transit revealed plans to run 20 hydrogen-powered buses in Whistler, B.C., in February for the Olympics, even the hard-green David Suzuki Foundation balked at the preposterous \$2-million-per-bus price tag -- four times the price of a standard diesel -- arguing that the money would have been better spent on traditional transit initiatives, which “are on life support as far as the financial needs go,” Ian Bruce, the group’s climate-change campaigner, said.

He’s surely right about the pointlessness of what will amount to a four-year, \$90-million showpiece of technology not even remotely realistic for actual, financially strapped public transit systems.

And more money for diesel-powered buses may be hardly more worthwhile: The fact is that despite best efforts of transit planners and funding governments, and surveys showing a public keen on environmentalism, most commuters simply will not, or cannot, ride.

Last year’s census data confirmed that the vast majority of Canadians have little use for transit. Just 216,000 more people rode at least once than did in 2001, a half-a-percentage increase, but that’s actually a decrease relative to the 5.4% population growth over the same period. At the same time, Statistics Canada shows that operating costs for Canadian transit system has ballooned, up 30% from \$3.7-billion in 2003 to \$4.8-billion in 2007. In the United States, public transit’s market share for travel has fallen by a third

since 1980, from 1.5% to 1% in 2005. If anything were to get people out of their cars to stand at a bus stop, it would be the severe pain of soaring gas prices. But even as fuel in the United States approached the unseen price of \$4 a gallon in 2008, public transit ridership rose a mere 3.3%.

Transit boosters insist that we must go further, and redesign our cities to support transit systems. "Our cities continue to approve the suburban sorts of development that are very difficult to serve using public transit," Stephen Hazell, executive director of the Sierra Club of Canada, told reporters upon release of last year's disappointing ridership data. But the thousands of delivery trucks, taxi drivers, emergency vehicles, service trucks, car-bound workers and buses mean even high-density cities will keep needing highways, ring roads, bridges and flyovers. Meanwhile the massive cost of overhauling cities is just more billions to address an automobile environmental problem that is already on the way to resolving itself -- money that might be better, and more effectively deployed toward other earth-friendly measures, such as reducing traffic congestion.

A congestion charge toll implemented in Stockholm in 2007, for instance, reduced CO2 emissions in that city by roughly 16% last year, cut traffic by 18%, and, because it exempts low-emissions vehicles, led to a tripling of purchases of so-called green cars. Best of all, it sustains itself.

More roads, and more efficient roads, still won't address public transit's original, non-environmental purpose: providing mobility for citizens who lack their own. But where public transit is absent, or impractical, solutions for the small minority totally lacking other means have readily sprung up.

Ridesharing applications for smart phones -- users enter their location and desired destination and a cost-conscious carpooler responds -- are already in wide use, Mr. Rubin says. Self-sustaining, small-scale private jitney systems have successfully operated for years in Atlantic City and Puerto Rico (all North America's early public transit systems were privately operated until they were nationalized). And with billions freed up from public transit funds, it appears entirely feasible to simply offer subsidized Prius taxis, or even car subsidies, to the small portion of the public entirely reliant on public mobility. A study last year by HDR Decision Economics, commissioned by the Canadian Urban Transit Association, found that Canada's public systems will

need \$78-billion more in infrastructure spending and \$3.6-billion in annual subsidies to reach optimum capacity. For that kind of money, Canadian governments could, if they wanted, hand out \$16,000 car or taxi allowances to every single Canadian who rides transit even casually, and still have \$50-billion left over at the end of the decade. That plan wouldn't please the public unions and other transit-reliant lobbies pressing for more green-related transit funding. But it would relieve Canadians from having to perpetually prop up a system that's increasingly unsustainable -- financially and environmentally.

A conversation between the National Post, Kevin Libin, and Wendell Cox, a transport policy consultant in St. Louis, and former L.A. County Transportation commissioner.

Read more: <http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/fullcomment/archive/2009/12/08/live-chat-kevin-libin-on-the-trouble-with-transit.aspx#ixzz0ZrQKPYMa>

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10:39

National Post: Hello and welcome to our live chat on transit and the environment. Kevin Libin and Wendell Cox will join us shortly, feel free to start leaving questions now.

10:52

National Post: You can read the basis for today's chat, Mr. Libin's [story from today's paper](#).

10:54

Kevin Libin: Hello. This is Kevin Libin from the National Post. Welcome to our discussion with transport policy expert Wendell Cox, about the Trouble with Transit. Please go ahead and enter your questions and we'll begin in just a few minutes.

11:01

National Post: Let's lead off with a question from the live readers:

11:01

[Comment From Guest]

Have you noticed that the cities with most advanced and complex rapid transit systems, London, Paris and New York are also the most congested polluted and expensive?

11:02

Kevin Libin:

Good Morning everyone. Let's get started. Wendell, maybe we can kick off with you addressing the comment above, and then I've got a question for you.

11:02

Wendell Cox: Yes... the critical issue is density. Dense cities generally have more intensive transit systems, but the biggest problem is that the density makes the traffic congestion worse. As a result, pollution is more severe. I, for example, am living in Paris at the moment and can tell you that the pollution one breathes in the central part of the city is far worse than you will ever breathe in any Canadian city. Moreover, the higher densities tend to be associated with far higher costs of living

11:03

Kevin Libin: Wendell, one thing that fascinates me about this talk of transit as an environmental necessity, is that this doesn't really have anything to do with why transit was developed, does it?

11:04

Kevin Libin: Can you tell us a little bit about why transit started? It was originally private, correct?

11:04

Wendell Cox: Not sure I am following what you are getting at... However, when transit started, there was little concern about the environment

11:05

Kevin Libin: What I mean is, this talk of transit being Green, this is a recent selling point. That isn't how it's traditionally been viewed

11:05

Kevin Libin:

In other words, why did cities start using transit?

11:05

Wendell Cox: Generally, transit started in the larger cities of Europe and North America in the 1820s and 1830s. It was a huge improvement on the previous mode of travel, which was walking. And, yes, it was private

11:06

Wendell Cox: Green... yes... that is a new argument that has largely arisen in the last 3-4 decades. But there's nothing wrong with a new argument per se.

11:06

Kevin Libin:

And then these systems were gradually taken over by government. Why did that happen?

11:07

National Post: While we're on the subject, a reader has a question about government subsidies:

11:07

Wendell Cox: Cities started using transit because it made them more economically productive. Transit allowed people to live farther from their work and to travel further. The automobile was embraced for the very same reason, though its impact on the economy and standard of living was far greater

11:07

[Comment From insured]

I have read the article this debate is about and I find that most of the arguments made are ignoring very important facts. Firstly, what, if not a subsidy, was the \$10b given to the auto companies? Why have you not mentioned how much the oil and coal industries are subsidized? How, if anything, does this article address the countries poor?

11:08

Wendell Cox: Taken over by government because they were losing business so fast to cars that they could not survive without subsidies. Regrettably, in the process, incentives were at play that resulted in horrific cost escalation and a waste of much of the subsidy money into higher than inflationary management, staff and other costs

11:09

National Post: In Kevin's story today he uses an example of ballooning costs from Toronto's Transit Commission:

TTC's 21 fare hikes in the past 30 years against the price of gasoline and against the inflation rate. Consistently, the analysis found, TTC fares had risen faster than inflation, and far faster than the price of gas

11:09

Kevin Libin: It's an interesting point. A lot of groups believe that gas producers get rich subsidies in this country. The reality is quite different. It depends on how you define 'subsidy' but what happens in the oil industry is mostly the odd tax break, and most of those are disappearing.

11:10

Kevin Libin: It's nothing like the billions in direct transfers to Public Transit.

11:10

Wendell Cox: No one here is defending the auto subsidy. Nor am I suggesting subsidies are inappropriate. I am quite pleased to support subsidies for low income citizens and that was a principal thrust of my public activities as a principal member of the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission (3 terms). My problem is with subsidizing more than necessary. Every excess dollar spent to subsidize a particular transit service takes that dollar away from subsidizing another service that cannot be operated as a result. The bottom line is that we should be moving the maximum number of people for the \$ available

11:10

Wendell Cox: TTC costs per km have also increased inordinately

11:11

Kevin Libin: Wendell, people often talk about how the Japanese system works for transit as a way to promote similar modes—like high speed transit—here. Can you explain why it can't?

11:12

Kevin Libin: Why we can't have a profitable, well-travelled system as in Japan?

11:14

Kevin Libin:

Keep your comments coming. We'll get them to Wendell coming up.

11:14

What forms of transit should governments subsidize?

High-volume trains or light rail

What forms of transit should governments subsidize?

High-volume trains or light rail

(40%)

Buses

(0%)

Roads

(10%)

None

(50%)

11:15

[Comment From Laurie]

TTC's budget has increased by 100% in ten years. Does that seem rather unusual for a city this size?

11:15

Wendell Cox: High speed rail is another subject, happy to discuss, but has nothing to do with urban mobility... it is intercity.

The secret of Japan's success is two fold. First, nearly the entire system in the two largest urban areas (Tokyo-Yokohama and Osaka-Kobe-Kyoto, 35 & 18m people respectively) is private. There are 10 major private suburban rail companies in Tokyo, all of which pay completely for their capital and operations (including building routes) with passenger fares. The city subways in Tokyo nearly cover all of their capital and operating costs. The six or so commuter railways in OKK also are profitable.

The second factor is that both of these urban areas were wiped out in the War. They were shadows of their former selves, but then began growing very substantially. As they grew, the private companies expanded the rail systems, so they have comprehensive systems. It is inconceivable for such a network to be developed in an already developed urban area

11:16

Kevin Libin: Wendell, Laurie wants to know if a 100% increase in TTC budget over a decade is "unusual" for city the size of Toronto. That sounds like a heck of a jump.

11:17

National Post: Also, a comment on Kevin's story was asking about comparing apples to apples:
AKTor, Tuesday, Dec 8, 2009

US BTS numbers are national averages, which means they combine the energy efficiencies of, say, the transit system in New York, NY, with that of, say, the transit system in Kenosha, WI. For a more accurate comparison, Mr Libin should focus on the numbers associated with a US city that's comparable to Toronto's (which he takes to task in his opening paragraphs) -- say, Chicago.

11:17

Wendell Cox: TTC's cost performance does not seem at all unusual. It is exactly the same kind of thing that has happened to almost all transit systems in both Canada and the US. The problem is the public monopoly service provision model. The government of Canada would not grant Woolworth's a monopoly on groceries and tends to seek to avoid monopolies as much as it can, like other govts around the world. Yet when it comes to transit, governments in Canada pretend (and the US) monopoly is ok. It is not. There is no way to control costs

11:17

[Comment From Adam]

I believe that most people will take the most convenient quickest way to get to around. Rather than subsidizing transit would it make more sense to further increase the costs of driving an automobile in the city. Such as London's downtown car toll.

11:18

Kevin Libin: I certainly mention in my story that the money put into Sweden's congestion-charge system has led to massive cuts in GHGs from traffic, and far more low-emission vehicles on the road. Is that the kind of thing that we could be looking at?

11:19

Kevin Libin: Certainly Sweden is about as Green-minded a populace as you'll find.

11:19

[Comment From Laurie]

I also like the suggestion of congestion fees or downtown tolls. Stockholm is a perfect example.

11:20

Wendell Cox: Increase the cost of driving and you have a very negative impact on lower income citizens. A great deal of research has indicated that the best way to help a household move up the income ladder is to get them a car. There is no western (that is Can, US, EU, Austral) city in which transit provides comprehensive mobility to much more than downtown and the urban core. Yet 80 percent of the jobs in TOR are outside downtown.

11:20

[Comment From Gord tulk]

Does any jurisdiction operate their transit system privately.

11:21

Wendell Cox: Downtown London and downtown Stockholm are very small parts of their respective urban or metropolitan areas. Massive cuts in GHG emissions appear so only because of a very small base.

11:21

National Post: I think that goes to land use, another reader comment wondered:

Where in this article does it discuss the role of transit in affecting land use patterns which in turn, changes travel behaviour, reducing GHG emissions? Where in the article does it talk about the benefits of having a good transit system in improving local air quality and air pollution?

timeo, Tuesday, Dec 8, 2009

11:22

Kevin Libin: Let's answer Gord first. Wendell, what about privately run systems? Can they work?

11:23

Wendell Cox: There is plenty of private operation around the world. Stockholm runs all of its transit privately. Copenhagen, London, Adelaide, Perth, Auckland and Melbourne all run all of their buses privately. Denver and San Diego run about 50% of its service privately. The mechanism is competitive tendering, by which the public authority sets the routes, fares and schedules and then awards contracts for service for limited periods of time (3-5 years). A number of suburban rail systems are operating privately in Europe. Generally cost savings are in the range of 20-50%

11:25

Wendell Cox: Actually, if it were true that transit had that kind of impact on land use, it would increase local air pollution, because the higher densities would produce higher traffic levels, slower speeds and more stop and go traffic. The claims for reduction of GHG emissions from reducing travel in urban areas are overblown and generally do not take into consideration that GHGs do not fall in direct relationship to kilometers traveled, because as speeds drop and as there is more stop and go traffic, the reduction in ghgs is less. I wrote something at newgeography.com a few months ago on this.

11:25

Wendell Cox: Privately run systems do work... there is no question about it. Usually they will have to be subsidized, but at a far lower rate.

11:26

[Comment From David]

Why limit tolls to downtown areas? Toll every road in existence. Privatize them all, if need be. Let the market decide on the price to be charged.

11:26

Wendell Cox: I did not understand what the reader who cited TOR and CHI was getting at....

11:26

National Post: We got this question from:

[Gord tulk] -

Excellent topic gentlemen. Kevin your article mentions road congestion. Do either of you have antlything estimates of what investing in public transit instead of improving roads over the last few decades has cost us in lost time, energy and increased pollution? Also, do either of you have any insights into technology being developed in Germany and elsewhere where radar cruise control and other systems are being used to increase cars per mile on highways at high speeds (ie stageing)? Thanks

11:28

Kevin Libin:

I've talked to people about some fascinating technologies that I'm sure some of you are already aware of, which includes the kind of thing Gord alludes to: cars automatically driving, by GPS and sensors, at perfect distances, and constant speeds, etc.

11:28

Kevin Libin: It all sounds a bit George Jetson, but this stuff isn't far off. Do you follow these technologies Wendell?

11:29

National Post: Let's put some more of the numbers from your story on cars vs. buses:

Last year, policy analyst Randal O'Toole ran the numbers for the CATO Institute, where he is a senior fellow, comparing mass transit vehicles to private vehicles, ranking each based on how much energy they consume and how much CO2 they emit. The average motorized city bus, he reports, burns 27% more energy per mile than a private car and emits 31% more pounds of CO2. The U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics confirms that the average city bus requires 20% more energy per passenger than the average car.

11:29

Wendell Cox: There is no doubt that investment in transit systems versus roads in the urban environment has cost us dearly, in Canada, the US, Europe, and Australia. This, of course, is a politically correct view. But much of the expanded transit, in the form of rail systems, etc., was justified based upon reducing traffic congestion. It has done that nowhere materially. Further, research at the University of Paris the Univ of Calif, and the University of North Carolina has demonstrated a strong relationship between urban productivity (economic) and shorter commute times. Yet transit routinely takes more time than cars. Thank God the people didnt get out of their cars to ride transit, or we would not have had as much robust econ growth over the past few decades

11:31

Kevin Libin: Thanks to everyone for the great comments. If you're just joining us, we're chatting with Wendell Cox, an international policy consultant on transit. Before that, he was an LA County Transportation commissioner and a member of the Amtrak reform council.

11:31

Wendell Cox: GPS and the kind of things that Gord is talking about are the future. Moreover, in the GHG emissions discussion, it is well to remember that vehicle technology has a great potential to provide substantial reductions. If, for example, we could achieve Prius, mpg in the US as an average by 2050, we would reduce GHGs from driving by more than 60%, even with continuing increases in driving. By contrast, reports by advocacy groups and one commissioned by the US Congress project that GHG reductions from land use and transit strategies would be less than 10%

11:32

Wendell Cox: Follow them to some degree. They will happen whether I follow them or not!

11:32

[Comment From Martin]

Wendell perpetuates the myth that road pricing impacts low income folks. Very few low income people can afford the \$8,000 required to operate a car on an annual basis. The CD Howe Institute, University of Southern California and other research consistently shows that road pricing helps lower income people when the revenues are earmarked back to transit and active transportation infrastructure. Road pricing also decreases the number of cars on the road making the human modes much more enjoyable.

11:35

Wendell Cox: One has to be very careful about the data used to indicate how much people spend on cars. The average is far below the \$8000 indicated, because lower income people do not buy new cars... and these figures include the price of the new cars. These are very misleading numbers, because they include costs that go well beyond needs. They include, for example, the large number of expensive SUVs, etc. All of the data is clear --- you maximize mobility, you maximize the potential for low income households to move up the income ladder.

11:37

[Comment From David]

The only sustainable form of non-water transport humans have devised is also the most efficient: the bicycle. It requires minimal infrastructure and it is very energy efficient, more so even than walking. All talk of transit being subsidized is really just a cover for subsidizing something else.

11:37

Wendell Cox:

As regards the comparisons between cars and buses in GHG emissions, there is a more important issue (this is not to take away from Randal O'Tooles fine work). It is that we are comparing things that have little relationship to one another. Generally, transit is not substitutable for autos. There are exceptions of course. Clearly if one works on Bloor Street, it makes sense to go to work on the TTC... or if you are near Union Station, to go to work by GO. But for the 80% of people who do not work downtown, there is generally not a viable transit option. There is no question of transit's efficiency with respect to getting people to downtown. There is no hope for it to do the same thing in most of the rest of the community.

11:38

Kevin Libin: I'd certainly think most Canadians would have no problem with subsidizing low-income people for toll roads. As it is, we subsidize ALL transit riders, including the executives headed downtown to their penthouse offices.

11:38

Wendell Cox: A modern city of 6 million people (or 2 million) cannot sustain itself on bicycles.

11:39

[Comment From Laurie]

So I erred in giving up my car last year? I thought I was doing the right thing for the environment...

11:39

[Comment From Martin]

Kevin's article was one-sided in that it only looks at transit subsidies. According to Transport Canada, motorists/truckers are subsidized to the tune of \$25 billion a year when it comes to road building and maintenance -- this does not include the \$9 billion in environmental costs (emissions, noise) or the \$62.7 billion subsidy in direct and indirect costs associated with automotive crashes (almost \$18 billion in Ontario). The GPS-based road pricing being initiated in Holland would work much better in the Ontario context than the Swedish charge.

11:40

Wendell Cox: Subsidizing to improve mobility for low income people sounds like a good idea...it works for transit and it could work for road pricing. But I caution that cordon pricing schemes like London and Stockholm have little more than local applicability. Better examples are the automated toll systems on freeways of Dubai, Singapore, Santiago and, yes, 407.

11:40

Wendell Cox: You can do what you like and should. Most people will probably not follow you.

11:41

[Comment From js]

Your article says that it's a "fictional world" where more people ride buses. But what about in Toronto, where 1.5 million of the roughly 3 million take the TTC every day?

11:42

Kevin Libin:

One thing I was hoping to get to in my article, but didn't quite have the room, is this belief that if we funded more transit, we could slash our subsidies to roads, etc. To a small extent that's true. But major highways, expressways, bridges, flyovers, etc. won't go away. There are too many service trucks, cargo vans, delivery boys, taxis, and city buses etc. to stop funding roads, so to some extent, it's a false choice

11:42

Kevin Libin:

I think the GTA was a lot bigger than 3 million last I checked.

11:43

National Post: Another bus question from the comments section, touting LNG buses as the answer to all our ills:

Transit is a method to move people to their jobs and classes not to save the environment. But natural gas fueled buses would improve air quality in areas with lots of vehicles/buses.

RogersJi, Tuesday, Dec 8, 2009

11:43

Kevin Libin: That's probably more like 1.5 million out of a catchment area of roughly 9 or 10 million, because a lot of riders are commuting in from Barrie or Oakville or wherever. But it is true that Toronto has higher ridership levels than average. But still in the minority.

11:44

Wendell Cox:

Would be interested in reviewing the report. You have much higher road taxes in Canada than in the US. You also have insurance to pay for the accidents. In the US, virtually all intercity roads are paid for by fuel taxes. Local roads have some tax support, but would be needed whether or not there were cars.

11:44

[Comment From js]

I said Toronto, not the GTA. That doesn't answer the question.

11:46

[Comment From js]

If ttc was more heavily subsidized it could become more accessible to people living outside the city centre, thus giving public transport the chance to increase numbers.

11:46

Wendell Cox:

Do not have the modal numbers for the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto, so cannot comment. Recall that at this point more people in the GTA live outside Toronto than in it. There is no question but that transit is important in Toronto. You just pay far too much for it and if the costs were under control, many more people could be carried.

11:47

Kevin Libin:

Wendell, this is a common argument I've run into: that if we just gave transit more money than we do, then it would work better and carry more people, What do you think?

11:48

Wendell Cox:

.I would counter that if TTC's unit costs (cost per km) were no more than necessary, then many more people would have access to its services. Frankly, the answer to every question at TTC for decades has been "more money." Canada will never be able to mint enough money to satisfy its appetite for money. This is a real problem and puts at risk any thought of seriously increasing the share of transit in the GTA or the GH over the longer haul.

11:49

[Comment From Martin]

It is the cars that are holding up the transit because most must operate in mixed traffic. I ride my bike 9 months of the year so that I'm not held up by the vehicles that take up all the space on the existing roads!

11:50

[Comment From David]

All service vehicles that are truly required will be able to pay for road tolls. It's moving people that is the difficulty, not goods. Rail freight is the only self-sustaining transport mode around, and it manages that despite subsidies to its competitors - yet passenger rail transport requires massive subsidies. Wendell's answer about large cities was a dodge - he still hasn't told us what this mythical sustainable form of personal transport looks like yet.

11:50

National Post: We should wrap up in about 10 minutes, or 12 p.m., but here's a thought for you two:

It seems like there is a balance to be struck between the economic people moving aspects of transit, and the greenhouse gas/ environment elements: Is there a way ahead without spending more money on the former to the detriment of the latter?

11:51

National Post: In other words, solve the transit and environment crisis, in 10 minutes or less please :)

11:51

Wendell Cox: We've already tried that. Since 1970 we in the US have increased transit expenditures nearly 300%, after adjustment for inflation. Yet, we have had transit ridership increases of less than 20%. No sector of the economy has seen cost increases of this magnitude. You have done better in Canada, though the cost escalation has been severe. Your better performance had to do with the fact that all money came from the local area or the province. Federal funding is what wrecked the US and took away any incentives for cost effectiveness. Regrettably, you are going down that road.

Europeans are far smarter on this. Most European nations have devolved transit funding away from the central governments to local and regional governments. Other people's money is easier for public officials to spend than that of their own constituents.

11:51

Kevin Libin: Good question about the tradeoff, but what struck me most about this is that we're sinking billions into transit at the very moment when it's losing the race with cars for lower emissions/fuel consumption.

11:52

Wendell Cox: Dont understand the "dodge" point

11:52

Kevin Libin: We'll have gold-plated transit systems, just as we're all driving around in near- zero emission vehicles

11:52

National Post: So, as Wendell describes, do we need a political solution?

11:52

[Comment From Martin]

If you build infrastructure for automobiles, you will get automobiles. That is what we've done (through subsidies) since the second world war. Now it is time to pay back those subsidies through parking pricing, road pricing and carbon pricing. Then a balance will be achieved both in terms of mode share and subsidies.

11:53

[Comment From David]

What is this sustainable mode of personal transport? Stop dodging the question.

11:54

National Post: I think an hour-long chat to answer that question hardly dodges it.

11:55

National Post: Any final thoughts on the way ahead?

11:55

Kevin Libin:

I would imagine the political solution may be politicians rethinking their uncritical love of transit, particularly at the municipal level. I heard a city councillor yesterday call "stupid" the idea that transit investment might not be wise. These politicians have a vested interest in building these large projects, to some extent. Others may be simply too convinced of outdated, or invalid approaches.

11:55

Wendell Cox: For modern cities to work, people need to be able to get from every square meter of the urban area to every other in a relatively short period of time. This creates the necessary labor efficiencies, economic growth and reduces poverty. Cars are a necessity at this point and are getting more environmentally friendly. With the advances that are on the horizon, cars will be sustainable. At Prius fuel economy, cars are less GHG intensive than the NYC transit system... There is no point in having something that is supposedly sustainable (like transit) that cannot meet the mobility need. Transit is about downtown and that's pretty much it, whether in Europe, Canada or the US.

11:56

Kevin Libin: There's a lot of legacy building that goes on politically. Remember Mel Lastman's drive to get that Sheppard extension built. It was his passion.

11:56

[Comment From Adam]

Isn't the biggest advantage for urban transit the reduction in road congestion. Reducing congestion would also increase productivity and quality of life residents. How come we hear only the environmental benefits of transit instead of the congestion reduction benefits?

11:57

[Comment From insured]

The title of this article would seem to suggest that the 'solution' is to have less ridership....is that honestly a 'solution' or at least, your solution or just attention grabbing?

11:57

Wendell Cox: The monuments to pride that have been built are legendary. The overprojection of results... The lack of any responsibility or accountability. It is all summed up by what I consider the most outrageous transit project in the world... The Delhi Metro... which has annual subsidies per capita greater than the average income per capita of India. That's how bad it can get.

11:58

Wendell Cox: Transit does not reduce congestion. Never has never will. This is not to say that we should discontinue the TTC... that would increase traffic congestion. But from one point in time to another, transit has never materially reduced traffic congestion

11:58

Kevin Libin:

I've just one some quick poking around to try and find ridership stats for the TTC, to address a point that came up earlier. On the average business day, the TTC collects about \$1.5 million in fares, which I'd reckon suggests something in the neighbourhood of 3 or 400,000 riders (to and from work, \$2 each way?). That's out of a total GTA population of 8 million or so, I believe.

11:59

Wendell Cox: More ridership is better than less, but at no more cost than necessary. Also, people should be allowed to make their own choices, which is the real genius of the Canadian econ system

12:00

Wendell Cox:

Transit market share, as I recall, in the GTA (not the GH) is in the range of 12% on a passenger km basis

12:00

Kevin Libin: That's my recollection as well. And in fact, that's about one of the highest rates in North America isn't it Wendell?

12:01

Kevin Libin: So 12% is about as good as it gets?

12:02

Wendell Cox: Gets a bit better in some European urban areas... like Paris at 25... but one must remember is that all of these data have been trending down. Used to be 40% in Paris.... shares have stabilized, but there is no seriously likelihood that they will increase materially.

12:02

Kevin Libin: Well, we should wrap things up. Thanks again to Wendell Cox for answering our questions, and to all of you for asking them. Watch for the rest of our Rethinking Green series tomorrow and Thursday.

12:02

Kevin Libin: Thanks Wendell.

12:02

Wendell Cox: A pleasure to be involved. Thank you to all the participants

12:02

Kevin Libin: From me as well. Thanks guys.

12:03

National Post: Thanks everyone for your participation, and for your (mostly) thoughtful questions for Kevin and Wendell. As Kevin mentioned, keep reading new instalments in our series on unexpected ways to help the environment on Nationanpost.com/climate.