

SUBMISSION TO WINNIPEG CITY COUNCIL
ON THE RAPID TRANSIT ALIGNMENT

Alan Freeman, Private Citizen

I moved to Winnipeg in December 2011 and became a Permanent Resident in May 2012. From 2001 to 2011 I worked for the Mayor of London, England in the economics unit of the Greater London Authority. I worked on Culture, the Living Wage, and Economic Development.

I am an enthusiastic supporter of Rapid Transit, and with my colleagues I provided economic and planning projections for many London transit plans starting with major extensions to the bus network and the Congestion Charge. My team helped evaluate projections for transit revenue, job and wealth creation, and environmental impact.

Transit is both critical in its own right, and pivotal to development, poverty reduction, and emission control, as we understood when we created the Stratford transit node at the centre of a major deprived area, the site of the 2012 Olympics and the place where Eurostar, CrossRail, and the London tube and bus network all meet.

I feel there are questions needing answers to ensure the new development both meets its objectives and is financially robust. I hope my submission assists the council and its planners by placing these questions in the public domain. I hope it helps the public by getting the answers from you.

City procedures made me choose between presenting for and against; it is because I don't yet have those answers that I opted to oppose. I think the project will work better, and you will have a better relation with the citizens you were elected to serve, if they hear your answers.

My concern is that the effects of this investment, like any other, should be considered in such a way that

- (1) benefits can be fully realised
- (2) needless detriment can be avoided
- (3) unavoidable detriment can be limited and compensated

This calls for evidence and information that I couldn't find in the report. It may well exist; it should then be made accessible for the public, which will lay the basis for informed dialogue.

My main concern is that a sound transit investment depends not just on land costs but ridership projections. That's where its revenue comes from. So if an investment leads to less than the hoped-for change in ridership, that alters its true cost to the public. This may show in later fare hikes or subsidies.

Suppose, when the functional study is done, you find that ridership will be significantly lower in the chosen alignment than it would have been for the rejected alternatives. The true cost of your choice will then be higher – by the revenue loss over its lifetime – than the costs on which you based your decision.

I cannot judge if this is true from the information in the report. You have that information; I think you should make it available, and take account of it.

My second concern is that the link between investment in transit and expected development works both ways. Development usually benefits a city in its own right, and transit investments help secure those benefits. But the investment also depends on development, because that's what produces the extra fares which ultimately pay for it.

The less sure we are about the development, the more Transit-Oriented-Development turns into 'Development-Oriented-Transit'.

How sure are you that the developments described in the report will take place? How much does the alignment depend on them? What will be the cost impact if they don't happen?

Again, the report doesn't say enough for me to judge. It does however lean heavily on prospects for new development. A sound decision should stand on its own two feet on the basis of existing, known developments. It is then not at risk from decisions not yet made. This also allows for flexible dialogue around legitimate concerns about the impact on Open Areas, because development options would remain genuinely open.

My third concern is unintended traffic effects. When assessing how new transit affects ridership, planners expect new systems to be attractive because journey times are shorter. But transit decisions are comparative. In London the bus and Congestion Charge strategies were integrated; we had to make it easier to travel by transit – and harder to travel by car. That's one reason dedicated bus lanes, for example, are part of the transit planner's armoury.

When Rapid Transit takes buses off the roads, paradoxically it makes it easier to travel by car. This can unexpectedly reduce ridership. This makes the argument against lane reduction on Pembina less persuasive. Actually, restraints on alternative traffic routes may well be needed to secure the shift to transit that you want.

This could be set right, at the functional stage – but for that reason, the option of additional traffic-reduction measures elsewhere has to stay on the table.

Again, you have information that I do not. I am however concerned that the report veers toward treating private traffic reduction as an unequivocal Bad. I urge you to ensure that the widest possible range of traffic management measures which may be needed to get the riders on the buses, remain on the table at all times.

My final concern relates to the way impacts are assessed. I don't live next to the Parker Lands but I share concerns that Winnipeg should preserve as much Urban Open Space as it can.

My job as a cultural economist in London taught me that the internet age has transformed the way cities work. Creative individuals and enterprises, both in technology and the arts, are the key to the modern successful city. Winnipeg is well-endowed with a vibrant creative scene and I believe it could become one of North America's great creative centres.

Creative industry works on a whole-city basis. Those same students that are going to use the new transit route will stay to make Winnipeg prosperous, if it is attractive in every sense – pleasant to live in, to walk and cycle through, to skate and ski in, to enjoy sport, experience nature, and delight in a cultural life with no equal on the continent. The built and natural environment must see to that. Every piece of heritage, every patch of land or waterfront, every piece of the jigsaw that makes up our culture in the broadest sense, is as much a part of our infrastructure as a bus or a snowplough.

If a part goes missing, we all lose; not just the people next door but everyone in the city, and their kids, and their kids too. That is a cost – a hidden cost, but a real one.

The British Treasury requires every public authority to assess all possible impacts, positive and negative, of any new investment. I was surprised to find that requirement is not standard for Winnipeg or Manitoba planning decisions. You might say 'this isn't the way things are done here'; that doesn't mean they are being done right.

I hope a proper accounting for all costs and benefits becomes a normal part of planning and public dialogue. It should begin at the functional stage of this project and include the environmental impact of all options including the options of enhanced protection of urban open spaces and supplementary traffic management which, I have suggested, remain on the table.

This will rebuild the trust and dialogue which I believe to be below the level called for by such a necessary project, or deserved by the people of this great city. It will ensure that Winnipeg's first full Rapid Transit pays off in every sense of the word.

And the future will probably thank you for it.

Alan Freeman Tuesday, 19 March 2013