

Building an effective LRT (system) requires co-operation

This isn't something the city can do alone, so it's time for the outlying suburbs and the province to pitch in



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Thirty years ago this April, Edmonton kicked off the North American light rail renaissance, a movement that's only gained strength across the continent as time progresses. Yet as the decades have spun by, our system has largely languished, confined to a rather pathetic single leg attached to a downtown subway with so much potential.

Finally, it seems like that potential may be realized. The current south LRT expansion is badly needed—if only to upgrade the city's rapid transit from “laughingstock” to “mediocre”—and momentum is starting to build.

The fast-tracking of the LRT line to NAIT and the abandonment of bus rapid transit there suggests that planning to the West End and Mill Woods may be just around the bend—and as a result, there's potential to build something great.

Unfortunately, as much as City Council and the transportation department are pushing for a system that will build regional unity, there are a number of planning-related hurdles that they have yet to overcome. Much of this planning is internal, and the city will require radically

improved standards for integrating stations with adjacent land uses if we're to ever reduce car dependency. But if we're truly interested in tying this area together with steel, we need a huge change in regional thinking.

First and foremost, a regional planning board is required in order to form a cohesive picture of what the ultimate LRT system will look like. While it may make sense to tack a stub onto the east side of the subway to make NAIT accessible in the short term, if the final destination is St Albert—as current talk indicates—it would add ten minutes each way to student commutes. A line to Mill Woods and Beaumont makes more sense to branch from the other side instead. An extension to West Edmonton looks to be headed through downtown, but it could head along Whyte Avenue and out to Sherwood Park instead, hitting campus along the way.

The issue of how the system will be paid for also needs to be worked out before construction proceeds. If the City were to pick up the tab for construction but had no control over the way the LRT integrates with bedroom communities, I doubt any of the outlying suburbs would make a peep.

But if you were to suggest any kind of co-operation amongst the Alberta Capital Region Alliance, there would be no end to the amount of ruckus that would be raised. Though the 20-odd fiefdoms in the Greater Edmonton Area would disagree, they

wouldn't exist without the city or each other. Like it or not, we're all part of the same big community and economy, and we need to start acting like it.

Ultimately, any useful and binding solution must be imposed from above—yet the provincial election campaigns have been suspiciously silent on this issue. In late 2007, a report commissioned by the government recommended a regional planning board with binding land-use planning powers.

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However, the recommendation is hardly revolutionary, and is the bare minimum to return some semblance of order to the region. As a result, it remains a mere suggestion—much like the oil royalty recommendations the Conservatives opted to pick and choose from.

Like the tarsands, this is an issue that requires attention immediately—but, unlike the tarsands, the opposition parties haven't been any more vocal. Of the three main parties, none have properly addressed the Edmonton region. The Liberal Party's proposed “Big City Charter” would give Edmonton

the voice it deserves in provincial responsibilities, but stops short of giving the city any influence over its most immediate neighbours. The NDP has great plans to fund green energy with increased royalties, but without regional planning powers, their plan to curb urban sprawl would likely fall flat.

It's not especially surprising: while these parties could pick up seats in metro Edmonton, they would risk alienating their suburban voters. Anti-regionalist rhetoric has reached the ultimate level for Alberta, comparable to how we reacted to the dastardly NEP. Anything with even the slightest whiff of co-operation, let alone economic guidance, is immediately viewed in the worst possible terms in this province.

The NDP have budgeted a healthy surplus into their well-detailed campaign promises, but they're still considered that wacky socialists in a province where the greatest service the government is asked to provide is a pothole-free strip of asphalt between the gas station and Wal-mart. It doesn't take regional planning to build more sprawl, but it's needed to build a proper city, as well as a proper transit system.

If we're ever to move forward as a city and a province, we need to learn to work together. This isn't some Soviet five-year plan—it's just a group of leaders sitting down with a map and talking about how best to serve a prospering and growing region. Only in Alberta would that be a radical idea.

THE BURLAP SACK

Now that the weather has warmed up, nothing feels nicer than a long walk on a balmy Sunday afternoon. I stroll along, enjoying the sun's reflection on the melting snow, the cool breeze on my peaceful face, and the fresh scent of the spring air. And then suddenly, Splash! and I'm soaked.

This, my friends, is due to the action of some cad barrelling his tank of a vehicle down the puddle-ridden road. Clearly this individual has problems understanding the simple math of a big car plus a big puddle causing a large splash.

I look down at my pants that are now completely splattered with mud, and can't help but be frustrated. But my anger quickly turns into glee at the thought of my revenge.

This particular act of revenge requires the use of a burlap sack. Then, the snot-nosed brat and their obnoxious car are thrown in—did I mention that a muddy puddle already waits for them inside the sack? Following the beating, the sack will be left curbside next to the trash and recycling bags to be splashed by other careless motorists.

Maybe then they'll finally learn to slow down when approaching water on the road and to do what they can to avoid splashing pedestrians.

MARIA KOTOVYCH

The Burlap Sack is a semi-regular feature where a person or group who needs to be put in a sack and beaten is ridiculed in print. No sack beatings are actually administered.

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