

BUS RAPID TRANSIT: THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE RIGHT REASON?

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By William Hamilton

That clackety sound you're hearing at City Hall comes from the dominoes tumbling in council chambers. The trouble with dominoes is that even when they do fall in the intricate patterns their creators imagine, they leave a spectacular mess for the morning after.

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It started a couple of weeks ago, when Ward 11 Alderman Brian Pincott sold everyone on City Council on the concept of a new bus rapid transit study for his southwest constituents. Then on Thursday, Ward 13 Alderman Diane Colley-Urquhart leapt onto the bandwagon with a City Council motion of her own, calling for more bus rapid transit routes across Calgary. More buses on the roads mean more Calgarians out of their cars, which means local politicians finally following through on their pro-transit rhetoric, right?

Yet nothing so abhors a vacuum as hot air. Politicians love discussing bus rapid transit because it strikes the right notes about quickness and movement while disguising their fuzzy understanding of how public transit works.

The three routes Calgary Transit promotes as bus rapid transit are really modernised Blue Arrow 2.0 limited-stop services, which differ from the express routes that go straight from downtown to the suburbs without any stops in between, which differ again from the segregated busways and Plexiglas monuments of Curitiba and Ottawa that amount to bus-only expressway networks.

There's faint hope of knowing what you're getting when the politicians don't know what they want.

Now if you're thinking that someone at the city must have examined this bus rapid transit idea before, you'd be right.

Back in 1976, planners took a long, hard look at whether the original Blue Arrow buses they put on Calgary's roads in the early Seventies could be upgraded from no-frills limited-stop routes to rapid transit standards. They found it would take too many buses, too much fuel, too much labour, and too much room on roadways that would still be too congested anyway.

That's why Calgary invested in the C-Train light rail system.



The realities planners identified over thirty years ago are, if anything, even more acute in 2010. Sixty-foot bendy buses look like a bargain until it hits home that you have to buy three of them over the lifespan of one C-Train car to carry half the passenger load. Diesel isn't getting any cheaper. Transit drivers and mechanics still expect to be paid. And you probably don't believe that your new dedicated median busways will be expropriated, built, and paved for free by the Tarmac Fairy.

Effective bus service will still be a necessary part of an integrated public transit system in Calgary. Buses play an important role in drawing passengers to suburban C-Train stations. Several cross-town bus routes serve their riders well for short trips and long hauls. Express routes provide a valuable service for outlying commuters who need rush-hour alternatives to the car for getting downtown. Even the Blue Arrow 2.0 runs have had the stated objective since 2002 of building long-term demand and local support for C-Train service.

But any alderman who tells you bus rapid transit is just like light rail but cheaper is taking your wallet for a ride. Times may be tough, but City Council has just let sticker shock and blind panic overwhelm common sense. Light rail transit is a significant capital investment that bears long-term dividends in the form of operating costs that are one-sixth the price per passenger of

offering bus service. Spending that kind of capital on buses instead just chases good money after bad.

We've known for over three decades that the C-Train delivers strategic public transportation value in Calgary that buses simply do not. The members of City Council have failed in their duty to Calgarians this afternoon to come to their senses, and to take heed of this knowledge.

William Hamilton is the principal of Principia Communications Strategies, a Calgary-based consulting firm.



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