Presentation on Transportation Planning to Environment Committee, City of Winnipeg

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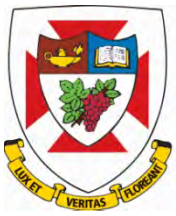
by Lloyd Axworthy & Terry Partridge
1973

The Institute of Urban Studies



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PRESENTATION ON TRANSPORTATION PLANNING TO ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE, CITY OF WINNIPEG

Published 1973 by the Institute of Urban Studies, University of Winnipeg

Note: The cover page and this information page are new replacements, 2016.

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PRESENTATION ON TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

TO ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE, CITY OF WINNIPEG

by

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April 16, 1973

1. At the planning seminar of April 2 and 3 held for City Councillors, the administration made it quite clear that they believe a substantial freeway system will be necessary for Winnipeg over the next twenty years. It was also clear that a majority of councillors present on the second day had some serious reservations about freeways. At the same time, there was a general feeling that transport corridors should be preserved, and options kept open.

2. With the present uncertainty, this is perhaps a wise course. It does, however, leave things in a position of stalemate, with the possibility of unnecessary blight, a big question mark over the railway study (that was based on the freeway plan), and a general lack of direction. This situation, councillors and administrators alike, seemed to find very unsatisfactory.

3. The stalemate can be broken, but only if the planners, the policy-makers, and the public develop a clearer understanding of the reasons behind the divergent views, so that a basis for either concensus or knowledgeable political choice becomes possible.

4. This brief is an attempt to begin the process. It contains an explanation and a critique of some major assumptions underlying the W.A.T.S. proposals, followed by some positive suggestions for future action.

BACKGROUND ON TRANSPORT PLANNING

5. At one time decisions on transport investment were conducted on a piecemeal basis. Roads were built where traffic was heavy, and little consideration was given to the factors creating the condition or to integrating plans for the future.

6. New methods prompted largely by massive U.S. federal spending programs, were developed in the fifties to provide a firmer foundation for long-term plans. These methods, which were used in the W.A.T.S., now take into account the effects of future population and employment growth by area, the impact of road and transit facilities on travel generally and on the choice of public versus private transport, and finally the effects of congestion on the route choice of private vehicles.

7. These new methods provide a much better understanding of the situation. Unfortunately, with the increasing technical sophistication, the process has become very much the private preserve of a few experts. The methods are, however, a long way still from being able to replicate reality. They include many unproved assumptions and value judgements, and this has never been made clear in the W.A.T.S. report.

8. It is therefore important that policy-makers, and the public understand the basis of the recommendations, and participate in formulating the assumptions on which future plans are based.

9. This is especially true in light of recent findings on the impact that urban expressway systems have on the social, economic, and environmental conditions of a city. To give some examples:

-- expressway systems do not serve the transportation needs of many disadvantaged groups, especially the old, young, and minority groups;
-- expressway systems have a discriminatory effect on the job and economic opportunities of central city residents;
-- the economic costs of supporting a transportation system based on the automobile are both hidden and exorbitant;
-- the environmental effects in terms of noise, dirt, etc. are serious and the freeways often have a negative and fragmenting effect upon the urban landscape.

10. Based on factors such as this, it is unfortunate that the proposals for railway removal were predicated in the main upon the replacement of a railway system with an expressway system. This has strongly coloured the debate over railway relocation and has meant that the full range of alternative benefits of railway removal have not been discussed.

11. It is also unfortunate that the planning process in both W.A.T.S. and Railway Removal did not include a much higher degree of consultation,

involvement and participation of citizens of this city. One strong lesson about planning has become clear in recent years -- and that is that public participation should be an integral part of planning right from day one; not after the study is completed. There are multiple benefits in terms of: 1) a more realistic appraisal of needs of the total population, that is not often available from a purely statistical study; 2) the development of an understanding and awareness of the problem and solution by the public, thus often avoiding major conflict; 3) ideas and proposals not considered by experts can come to light. Increasingly such methods are being employed in other Canadian and American cities and the possibility of a serious process of citizen consultation is very feasible with the kind of unique local government system we have here, which links local communities to a regional council.

12. What we would like to provide is first a look at the assumptions of the W.A.T.S. report, secondly to look at similar assumptions about the railway study and third to present some alternative courses of action which might be considered by this Council. The objective is to begin developing a strategy towards the transportation system that would begin developing a capacity to meet the full body of social and economic needs of the city and to do so in a way which fully involves the citizen in decisions of such importance to him.

THE W.A.T.S. ASSUMPTIONS

13. A number of key assumptions used in W.A.T.S. are described below. Many are open to serious question, and cast strong doubts on the validity of the report's recommendations.

14. The distribution of population and employment as prescribed in the Development Plan, and later revised by the Downtown Plan, was assumed to effect traffic patterns and transport requirements. But, although the background report on the April 2 seminar states, "a given transportation plan can significantly influence the pattern and distribution of land development", there was virtually no recognition of this in the W.A.T.S. report. Land use was assumed identical for all schemes tested. An example of the influence on land patterns is illustrated by a recent American study conducted by R.F. Muth in his book, Cities and Housing. He says, "the building of urban express highways has undoubtedly contributed greatly to the urban decentralization of the fifties". This suggests a clear conflict between the aims of the Downtown Plan and the freeway proposals.

15. The radial freeways were originally justified on the basis of an expected increase in downtown destined rush hour trips from 24,085 in 1962 to 42,800 in 1991. Of the extra trips, 5,300 were forecast due to increased employment expected in the downtown. By far the largest part of the increase, 13,415 trips, was based on the assumption that most of the people who used to travel to work before or after the 7:30 to 8:30 a.m. rush hour, would in the future choose to travel in the height of the peak. The

reason was that more downtown employees in the future will work in offices, and the peak time will fit their work schedules more conveniently. This assumption contradicts observed trends in other cities, where the peak tends to spread rather than concentrate as the general level of traffic increases. No doubt 1971 traffic counts would show the same to be true in Winnipeg. The radial freeways are now, however, being justified as through routes for cross-town trips. In short, it is the same plan with a new rationale.

16. Forecasts of the relative use of public transport and the automobile were, reasonably enough, based on the relative performance, in terms of time and cost, of the two modes between different home-work points in the city. It was, however, unreasonable to base car journey times on off-peak travel conditions, even though the final traffic forecasts were for the rush hour. This was of little importance in 1962, when little congestion existed, and when public transport consisted of buses running on the same streets as cars. It does, however, grossly underestimate the advantages of rapid transit over cars travelling on congested streets. This is a serious deficiency in the forecasting method, and may explain why an alternative scheme with modest road improvements, together with practical, reasonably priced bus-ways or light rapid transit, was never tested.

17. These are but a few of the problems, which are discussed in more detail in the attached paper, "Why W.A.T.S.". The common element in all these assumptions is a failure of the forecasting method to adequately respond

to road conditions. For this reason, cities that have built freeways normally generate more traffic than they expected, and the congestion problem remains. Cities that have not, find that conditions adjust in various dimensions, and the problems are far less severe than predicted.

THE CRITERIA FOR CHOICE

18. It is also important to pay some attention to the criteria on which a decision is based. There has been a tendency in many places to think that congestion must be eliminated at any cost. This is an illusion. Congestion is a characteristic of concentration of activity. While it is a nuisance, it is more than compensated by the increases in productivity that urban concentrations offer.

19. In the final analysis, the suburban beltway would save less than 3 minutes per rush hour for the average Winnipeg traveller. Adding total annual time savings for all travellers, and comparing with total annual costs for the beltway produces a cost figure of $5.30 for every travel hour saved. At that rate the city could better afford to pay some motorists to travel at different times of the day, or stay home from work altogether. The value for money of the radial freeways is even worse.

20. Besides looking at total benefits, it is important to pay attention to the way these benefits are distributed. The freeway proposals would make a comprehensive public transport system financially untenable to operate. The old, the young, the handicapped, and the poor would therefore be sacrificed for the benefit of the able-bodied car driver.

PROPOSALS FOR FUTURE ACTION

21. At the present time, the above analysis may appear as confusing, and perhaps as one-sided as the W.A.T.S. recommendations. This could be overcome by a form of public hearings where experts and advocates of various positions could present briefs and evidence, and be subject to cross-examination in order to get to the heart of the matter. In fact, the opportunity to utilize and test the capacity of the community committee-resident advisory system to provide an effective system of public participation planning is at hand. There has been some questioning about the validity of the system. Now is the time to find out. Council could organize within the next 6 months a fully open discussion of transportation options in each community committee area asking resident advisors to tap public opinion and solicit representations. There are a number of private research and resource organizations able to lend assistance in translating technical material and presenting options, if they were asked. Winnipeg has been able to mobilize large scale public involvement behind such celebrations as the PAN-AM games, it would seem equally worthwhile to do in regard to the critical matter of transportation.

22. In the meantime, it was made quite clear at the April 2 seminar, that all the railway relocation proposals tested assumed the existence of the freeway system. If studies are to proceed on this issue, it would be better to develop new rail rationalization proposals, that are not based in the first instance on the freeway plan, rather than seletting one from the present set for further study. Such proposals should take into account:

1) economic costs and benefits of railway removal without freeway use; 2) future possible uses of main line railway in central city as part of an overall intra, inter-urban transportation system; 3) costs and benefits of partial removal, that could be proceeded with immediately.

23. For example, the C.P.R. yards, the C.N. East Yard, and the Fort Rouge Yards could all be moved out without relocating the main lines. This point has been made by the planners and railways themselves. This would provide many of the benefits in terms of open space, new housing sites described in the railway study without the environmental impacts in the suburbs. It would not, of course, provide routes for freeways. In addition, environmental tunnel covering or something of the sort recommended for the new suburban locations, could be used on the lines passing through the centre.

24. Finally, arising from hearings, and also the expressed views of councillors at the April 2 Seminar, it would be a great advantage to provide directions to the planning department to produce more public transport alternatives, and to base their forecasts on assumptions that are acceptable to councillors. Testing of reserved lane busways, and light rapid transit alternatives would be of great value and could be the basis for discussion within different community committee areas, of their transportation needs.

25. These suggestions are proposed with a conviction that they would break the present stalemate and expedite, rather than delay the orderly and efficient development of Winnipeg.