Congestion: It's what we need to keep the city livable

Vancouver's new transportation plan aims to keep vehicle traffic tied up while pushing alternatives

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In the afternoon rush, when the Lions Gate Bridge and the Stanley Park Causeway are bumper to bumper with northbound cars and Georgia Street begins to plug up, it's hard to fathom that this is part of a grand plan, and that it's working. But it is.

"Congestion is our friend," declares Vancouver city councillor Gordon Price, who is ready to promote the plan at the drop of a bicycle helmet.

The Lions Gate, Price argues, is more than an aging three-lane bridge. It is also a metering device that helps limit the amount of motorized traffic entering the downtown.

The provincial government's 1990 decision -- cheered by Vancouver council and North Shore municipalities -- to fix the Lion's Gate instead of building a bigger bridge or a tunnel linking the city centre and the North Shore was "by far the most important transportation decision of the '90s," he says.

"We've got a vibrant, growing, healthy downtown and the most attractive and affluent suburbs in Canada [on the North Shore], and in between is a three-lane bridge. It's been like that since the 1930s. What's wrong with this picture?"

Nothing is wrong with it, in Price's view, and in the view of every Vancouver council since 1972.

People make decisions to allocate their time efficiently, and the Lions Gate's limited capacity helps many of them decide to take the SeaBus, or stay home, or live downtown. The result is a downtown that's not overrun with cars.

The traffic congestion caused by the aging bridge, Price points out, is confined mostly to its North Shore approaches, the bridge itself, the causeway and Georgia Street. It doesn't interfere much with life in downtown Vancouver, the West End, and the residential neighbourhoods of the North Shore.

So, he says, the bridge has performed "brilliantly" in helping preserve a downtown Vancouver that's the envy of the world.

Chief city planner Larry Beasley acknowledges the city has an explicit policy not to increase existing capacity for private cars to enter the downtown.

But, he adds, Vancouver has gone one step further with its new Downtown Transportation Plan, passed earlier this summer.

"We have just short of 80,000 people living downtown," Beasley says, "and now we have to start thinking about movement around the downtown in an efficient way if we really want to manage the congestion.

"And so this plan really talks about more bikeways, more walkways, and other convenient ways to move, without necessarily taking away from the auto capacity that's there."

Some opposition to the plan has come from the business community, particularly the Vancouver Board of Trade, which terms it "well-intentioned," but criticizes it for not reflecting commercial interests, and calls for some major changes.

The board agrees downtown Vancouver is a great place to live.

"But livability," it says in a brief to council, "has not led to a strengthening of the business and commercial life of downtown Vancouver."

"The commercial future of the downtown area is dependent upon good vehicular access and parking," the brief says.

The board and the Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association both criticized the plan's "obsession with bicycles." The DVBIA said cyclists represent "a minuscule percentage of the population and there is no indication that this user group will increase in the future."

Better Environmentally Sound Transportation (BEST), an alternative transportation advocacy group, counters that "these business groups cite little evidence for their claims, and where they do, they tend to misrepresent the known facts about cycling in Vancouver."

BEST says Greater Vancouver sees 90,000 bicycle trips every day, 8,000 of them to downtown Vancouver.

"In essence, we're pretty supportive of the plan," says BEST policy director Ray Straatsma. The group likes the plan's expanded bike-path network, but thinks more work needs to be done on transit priorities and efficiency improvements.

The Board of Trade forecasts more people will be living and working downtown, and comments: "We are concerned that the plan does not offer dynamic support for the growth of business from which the projected growth in employment will presumably emanate."

While it picks some nits in the plan's details, it also makes a major recommendation that appears to be at odds with its spirit: Start planning immediately "on a future underground arterial system to serve a third crossing of the harbour and the vehicular needs of the downtown beyond 2021."

The board says the city's plan appears to ignore increased traffic that will result from an expanded convention centre, further port development "and other, yet to be conceived developments."

It concludes that "increased traffic congestion is very costly to the regional economy," and that "it is very important that the Downtown Transportation Plan not add to this huge drag on the regional economy."

Price bristles at that.

"It's always there," he says, "this hope, dream, expectation of a car-based transportation system without congestion."

But, he insists, no city in the world has succeeded in opening the traffic floodgates into its centre without creating more congestion and making the downtown unliveable.

He scribbles some numbers on a piece of paper: In a typical year, more than 26,000 newly registered cars and trucks hit the road in the Lower Mainland. Each one takes an average of 15 feet of road space.

Park them bumper to bumper and you get a line of vehicles 75 miles -- 120 kilometres -- long, added to the mix every year.

The moral is that for practical purposes, the supply of vehicles is unlimited.

Create space for more and it will fill up immediately, creating more congestion and dirtier air.

Price points to cities all over North America that tried to keep up with demand for roadways and wound up with wastelands for city centres.

Seattle, which went that route, is now faced with a crumbling freeway system that needs huge expenditures just to keep running at present capacity.

It has no comprehensive rapid transit system, and it is beginning to see major industries -- some of Boeing's facilities, for instance -- leaving town, in part because they can't efficiently move their people and goods through the city's gridlocked road system.

"Nobody that I know of thinks you can build your way out of congestion so long as there is an unlimited number of new vehicles that can pour into your system," Price says.

The only way to build new road capacity without creating new congestion is to put a direct price on the use of the roads, he says, and that means tolls, higher gasoline taxes and other measures that only a suicidal politician would contemplate.

Why not, Price asks, continue to use "our friend" congestion to limit access to the downtown at bottlenecks like the Lions Gate, keep parking limited and high-priced enough to discourage some commuters from driving, and fiddle with traffic patterns to allow reasonable flow within the downtown, but without opening wide for unlimited numbers of vehicles?

The Board of Trade notwithstanding, that has been Vancouver's path for three decades, and Price says it has worked so well that, to everyone's surprise, the number of vehicles entering the downtown actually began to drop in the late 1990s.

At the same time, the number of pedestrian trips measured in traffic surveys rose by more than 50 per cent from 1994 to 1999.

"This urban form that we've managed to create down here works," Price argues, "better than we thought it would."

Do it right and other modes of transport -- transit, walking, cycling -- become attractive alternatives and the use of cars begins to drop, not because because drivers have been coerced out of their vehicles, but because the alternatives make more sense.

Every time a driver decides to take transit or walk to work,

congestion is actually reduced, and driving in the downtown becomes a little easier for people who still have to use their cars and trucks.

"This is serious stuff," says Price, who's leaving civic politics this fall but is hooked on urban planning and expects to stay in the field.

"This," he says, pointing at the downtown plan, "is the only way the automobile is going to be able to continue to function efficiently.

"These other systems that we've tried, where we've drawn huge resources -- trillions of dollars -- into a car-based, car-dominant system, aren't working."

Within city council, there was some haggling over details, but not about the thrust of the plan.

"Over-all, I think we agree that the Downtown Transportation Plan is a good thing," says Committee of Progressive Electors Councillor Fred Bass.

He adds: "We have to recognize that we live in a car-addicted society, and we have to experiment as a

community with doing things differently."

That, Bass says, means more consideration of alternative work schedules, compressed work weeks, integrating transit and bicycle use, car-sharing, vehicle rental services, park-and ride services, more expensive parking, gasoline taxes and vehicle-use restrictions.

Council has to work closely with TransLink to make sure commuters have real options, and pay more attention to the fact that "we live in a town that just screams for more water transportation," he says.

As well, Vancouver is deficient in "public realm" space such as a central city square, and council could experiment with declaring car-free intervals, mornings, days "maybe even longer than that," in key downtown spaces.

That might mean declaring pedestrian days, cycle days and rollerblade days, Bass suggests.

The approved plan includes 80 recommendations, ranging in scope from encouraging development of a multi-billion-dollar Richmond-Vancouver rapid-transit line to providing curb cuts that align with crosswalks at intersections.

Some recommendations may be implemented this fall, says Beasley, such as painting lines on streets to mark changes in bicycle routes.

Others may take much of the plan's 20-year life span.

Planning and engineering staff are to report back to council by January with an implementation plan.

The complete plan can be found on the city's Web site at (http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/dtp/).

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THE PLAN

Selected recommendations from Vancouver's new Downtown Transportation Plan

Roads

- Keep "major road" designations for Hastings, Georgia, Smithe, Howe, Seymour, and Main south of Prior, and consider adding Burrard and Granville.


- Maintain Granville as a transit, pedestrian and service-vehicle corridor, entertainment district and future greenway.

- Reconfigure Granville south of Smithe to improve traffic circulation, widen sidewalks and reduce so-called conflicts between the needs of traffic and those of pedestrians.

- Consider turning Pender Street between Cambie and Howe into an east-bound one-way street with a bike lane and a permanent parking and loading lane.

- Widen selected roadways.

Public Transit

- Support a rapid transit line from downtown to Richmond and the airport.

- Expand the south False Creek streetcar experiment into a viable system of streetcar routes that will eventually connect tourist destinations, transportation hubs and Stanley Park.

- Consider new and enhanced downtown-only bus routes, possibly with lower fares.

- Develop a transportation plan for False Creek Flats, including links to downtown.

- Increase transit priority on Burrard, Georgia, Granville, Hastings and Main.

- Enhance transit hubs at Waterfront, Granville Mall, Burrard and Main Street SkyTrain stations.

Pedestrians

- Develop Granville, Carrall and Helmcken/Comox streets as main north-south and east-west greenway routes through the downtown peninsula.

- Establish a network of pedestrian connector routes with high priority for maintenance and amenities. (See map)

- Provide way-finding signs, curb ramps, weather protection, wider pedestrian crossings, pedestrian shortcuts through long blocks, mid-block crossings, and "pedestrian bulges" -- building out sidewalks at wide intersections to shorten the crossing time and make crossings easier.

- Improve pedestrian connections to the waterfront.

- Widen sidewalks on Davie between Burrard and Jervis through future setbacks of new buildings.

- Pursue a comprehensive "public realm" study for the downtown.

Cyclists

- Create a network of bike lanes that connect to existing routes and key destinations. (See map)

- Provide secure bike-parking facilities, better signs, maps and bicycle education.

- Improve bike access to and across the False Creek bridges.

- Create bicycle-friendly streets throughout the downtown, and bikeways along Chilco and Cardero streets.

- Design all new streets and multi-use paths with cycling in mind.

Goods Movement

- Modify truck routes to provide more direct links across the downtown.

- Ensure there are adequate off-street loading spaces.

- Increase fees and limitations for municipal commercial plates to reduce on-street demand for loading zones.

- Maintain one-way entry to rear lanes in the central business district.

Parking supply

- Provide "adequate, but not abundant" off-street parking.

- Work with employers to encourage employees to car-pool.
- Discourage driveways across sidewalks.

- Consider renovating city-owned parkades to "animate" street frontage, and encourage private parkade owners to do the same.