

Missed Connection – City of Ottawa Transit and Housing Policies

After a ten year delay, the City of Ottawa is completing the first phase of its east - west Light Rail Transit (LRT) system and is seeking funding for subsequent phases. Unfortunately, the City has failed to leverage this transit investment to advance its housing and other social infrastructure mandates.

The first leg of the LRT runs from Tunney's Pasture to Blair Road and includes 13 stations. Rightly anticipating land development pressure close to these stations, Council approved transit-oriented development (TOD) plans which set the stage for intensified land development around the stations.

When rapid transit is created, property values around stations significantly increase in anticipation of increased density opportunities. And while Ottawa's TOD Plan makes reference to this increased density, it is silent about prioritizing affordable housing or other public benefits as a condition of granting this additional density. It is also silent about making use of the air space it owns along the LRT and above the stations.

New rapid transit is an important City-building opportunity and our Council has missed the opportunity to use the investment to advance its strategic mandates.

Affordable Housing and Transit Policy in Metro Vancouver

Let's look to a region that has connected the dots between its social infrastructure, housing and transit policies. Metro Vancouver, the Vancouver area regional government is approximately the same geographic size as Ottawa. Recognizing a diverse housing supply is critical for economic and social prosperity, the transit and affordable housing policies calls for the region's municipalities through its plans, policies and programs to:

- Grant additional residential density in exchange for affordable housing within transit corridors,
- Set market and affordable rental targets including preserving existing affordable housing in transit corridors,
- Create transit station area planning policies that accommodate a mix of land uses and housing types and tenures. This includes purchasing and holding sites and air space parcels for new non-profit rental housing.

Cambie Corridor Plan

Vancouver's Cambie Corridor Plan is a good example of how the City of Vancouver is connecting the dots between its policies and practices, linking transportation infrastructure to urban and social infrastructure planning. The line runs through downtown Vancouver along Cambie Street to the City of Richmond and the airport. The premise of the Cambie Corridor Plan is that increased density is appropriate and that this density should be accompanied by increased social amenities.

Whereas Ottawa has taken a station-by-station planning approach, the Cambie Corridor Plan attempts to coordinate land use, infrastructure, services and public amenities along the entire corridor. The light rail was seen as an opportunity to address Vancouver Council's high-level priorities relating to affordable housing, social resilience, environmental sustainability and a strong economy.

The Cambie Corridor planning principles include:

- Land uses that optimize the investment in transit,
- Walkable and cycleable corridor of neighbourhoods linked to public transit,
- Job space and diversity,
- Density and community activity focused at transit stations,
- A range of housing choices, tenures and affordability.

With respect to affordable housing, the Plan targets:

- 20% affordable housing on all new large sites,
- Preserving rental housing,
- Family housing,
- Density bonus zoning and inclusionary zoning for affordable rental units,

Vancouver's approach demonstrates how a municipality committed to using its resources to maximize the benefits of development can achieve multiple social, economic and sustainability objectives. There is no reason why the City of Ottawa can't take a similar approach to its transit and urban planning practices. It has many of the same planning tools available to Vancouver; it just fails to see social infrastructure objectives as an integral part of the city's growth. Unfortunately, this failure has resulted in underfunding social infrastructure and failure to leverage city resources to create public amenities such as affordable housing. Here are some examples:

- A recent [analysis](#) of City budget trends indicates that since 2010, and despite an overall increase in City spending, spending on social programs has lagged behind other budget items.
- The sale of City multi-unit residential and mixed-use [properties](#) includes a family housing site on [Randall Avenue](#) despite the fact that over half of all shelter clients were members of a homeless family in 2016. The sale contradicts Council's own [Housing First](#) policy for surplus city lands.
- The Western Parkway was chosen as the route of the proposed western arm of the new LRT because it is the cheapest and fastest way to get commuters to and from the city. Rather than locating the LRT along a corridor which can support high density (such as Carling Avenue), it will run along the on the periphery of a low density neighbourhood at the edge of the urban area. The City is so committed to this strategy that when the NCC refused to allow the LRT to run along the Parkway, the City agreed to pay to [tunnel](#) the line below parkland - where no one lives!
- Concurrent with investment in LRT, the City is undermining its rapid transit strategies by funding the ['strategic widening'](#) of Ottawa's east- west 417 expressway.

In Ontario, municipalities have jurisdictional responsibility for affordable housing. As such, they should use all the tools they have to address their housing needs. When Ottawa creates new transit stations, parking garages, libraries and fire halls etc. it should co-locate affordable housing and other social facilities. It needs to use inclusionary zoning, density bonusing and other planning tools to encourage developers to create these badly needed public benefits in large new neighbourhood projects. In anticipation of increased land prices around transit stations, the City should have proactively purchased land in anticipation of a demand for new social amenities.

There is one exception to this dreary scenario. Spurred on by the Ward Councillor, Ottawa Community Housing has purchased three hectares of federal land on Gladstone Ave between Preston and the O-Train corridor. The new community is expected to include a transit station, affordable and market housing, a school, commercial and retail spaces, as well as greenspace. This is the kind of city-building that Council has been unable or unwilling to make happen elsewhere along the new LRT.

Conclusion; Making the Connections

Ottawa will soon be unveiling sleek new rail coaches but the commuting time between its transit and social infrastructure policies and practices is slower than the old #2 at rush hour.

About 57,000 households in Ottawa-Gatineau are in need of affordable housing and for many, transit is a necessity. Just as rapid transit is critical physical infrastructure, adequate, affordable housing is essential social infrastructure and the lack of it has a profound impact on the economic viability of the city.

Ottawa's city-building strategies need radical change. Council's failure to make the connection between its policies and practices results in lost opportunities to build the critical social infrastructure needed to shape the future of our city.

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