

Ottawa's LRT in the Context of 15 Years of Road and Transit Investment

Ottawa's Proposed LRT will Cost 50% More than Total Road and Transit Infrastructure Spending over the Last 15 Years.

Recent City Council debates have shed fresh perspective on how disproportionate Ottawa's spending is for the proposed North-South LRT project. According to an Ottawa staff report prepared for Councilor Rob Jellett in August, "the city and former regional government spent \$675 million on new roads and [public] transit infrastructure since 1991.¹" That is \$675 million for every new road, every road repair, every lane expansion, every new bus lane, every new park & ride, everywhere in the entire city, every year, for 15 years of tremendous growth and expansion. During these same 15 years many would argue that commuter congestion has increased, road quality decreased, while public transit service levels and customer experience have diminished. Year after year, all of these services have been compromised because 'money was tight.'

Whatever one might say about this \$675 million figure, whether it was enough or not, whether it was well spent or not, one thing it does provide is an interesting point of reference to put the City's LRT project in perspective. All that spending, over all those years for all those people across the region still adds up to only 2/3rds² of the estimated one billion dollars to be spent on the proposed North-South LRT.

One of the primary reasons touted for investing in LRT was to reduce the City's road building budget. Indeed if this were true, it would be a good reason. Unfortunately the City's data demonstrates this could not be further from the truth. The proposed North-South LRT will only attract an incremental 900 cars off the road, compared to commuters that would simply otherwise take the bus.³ So, not only is the route relevant to only 2.1% of the City's commuters,⁴ while the extra investment in LRT technology will only attract an extra 1 out of every 315 Ottawa-area peak hour commuters out of their cars (0.3%).⁵ This is the slim relevance, the marginal contribution that will result from spending one billion dollars on the proposed LRT.

Meanwhile, as the City plans 50% growth in overall commuters, it would seem to be an inescapable conclusion that either much more road capacity will have to be built after all, or the citizens of Ottawa must face the prospect of a crippling increase in gridlock.

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¹ East/west Spat Looms Over Council Spending, Jake Rupert, Ottawa Citizen, Tuesday, August 22, 2006.

² The City officially claims the LRT project will cost \$778 million (memo Mr. Chartrand to Mayor and Council June 19, 2006), however credible full-cost estimates range from \$933 million to over \$1 billion. \$675 million is 2/3rds of \$1 billion (alternatively \$1 billion is 50% more than \$675 million).

³ Ibid, page 2. The North-South LRT will service 1,090 net new peak hour riders. If the cars carry an average 1.3 passengers (Ottawa's historical average) then this should take 838 cars off the road. For simplicity purposes, this number has been conservatively rounded up to 900 cars.

⁴ Ridership 101, page 1, <http://ottawalrt.blogspot.com/>, July 2006. The North-South LRT will service 7,320 peak hour riders, representing 2.1% of all peak hour motorized commuters in Ottawa in 2021 (344,000)

⁵ Ibid, page 2. The North-South LRT will service 1,090 net new peak hour riders, representing 0.3% of all peak hour motorized commuters in Ottawa in 2021 (344,000) or 1 in 315