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## LIGHT RAIL TRANSIT RIDERSHIP PROJECTIONS

HALLIE COTNAM (Host): Well, Ottawa's biggest and costliest construction project ever will soon start chugging along. But how many people will be riding the rails when Ottawa's north-south track is built? It's a question city councillors kept asking in the weeks and months leading up to the vote on light rail, but it turns out they only got part of the answer. CBC reporter Alistair Steele has been crunching the numbers and he joins me this morning. Good morning Alistair.

ALISTAIR STEELE (Reporter): Good morning Hallie.

COTNAM: So, what was the number councillors were given when they asked about how many people would end up riding the rails?

STEELE: Well Hallie, councillors and the public for that matter, have been told all along that by the time the north-south line is up and running more than 43,000 passengers are going to use it every day and that by 2021 that number is going to rise to more than 62,000. Pretty impressive. Those numbers are contained in a ridership study that was prepared for the city by the respected IBI Group. And it's a study that was requested by the federal government before it signed off on its contribution to the project. The numbers were later included in the environmental assessment for the project and they've been repeated and published in numerous documents, including this brochure that I picked up at a recent open house. But Hallie, the study contains another number. It's a number that's a lot harder to find, but it's a number that is, in many ways, more pertinent for anybody who's, you know, trying to assess the potential value of this project.

COTNAM: Okay. Well, what number is that?

STEELE: Well, it's a number for what transit planners like to call net new riders. Essentially what that means is passengers who would choose to drive to and from work if the option of light rail didn't exist. And the study found that by 2021 the net new riders for the north-south line is going to be only 1,090.

COTNAM: That's it? What about the 62,000 that you quoted?

STEELE: Well Hallie, what the researchers at IBI discovered is that the vast majority of the passengers will be people who would otherwise be riding buses, that in fact of that very large number, 62,000, barely 1,000 will be what they call net new riders.

COTNAM: What did councillors think of that?

STEELE: Well, the question could be how many knew about it. None of the councillors I was able to reach yesterday – and remember, many of them are on summer holiday – had ever heard that number 1,090. Here's part of my conversation with Councillor Maria McRae, who was out and about in her ward when I reached

her. McRae's reaction I'd say was typical. I began by asking here how many net new riders she thought would be riding the rails when the system is finished?

MARIA MCRAE (Ottawa City Councillor): I don't have that stuff in front of me now. But what I can tell you is what I think the ridership number should be and not net new riders, but the number of people using that system should be about 43,000. That's not an answer to your question. I realize that. But my understanding of how many people will be taking it would be 43,000 and I don't have the stuff in front of me, how it separates out, who is currently taking a bus, who will move from the express buses and all that kind of stuff.

STEELE: Do you recall hearing at any point that the net new riders will total only 1,090?

MCRAE: Never. Absolutely never. That was never something that was ever brought forward. So, no.

STEELE: Does that surprise you?

MCRAE: Well, I'd have to confirm it and talk to staff about that before I would comment on that. So, I'd have to check with Réjean Chartrand and confirm all this stuff.

COTNAM: That sounds like at least Maria McRae anyway, didn't know about the ridership projections when she voted on the plan. Is that typical of the other councillors?

STEELE: Well, it means that at least some of them or most of them, judging by, you know, my conversations yesterday appear to have had only part of the picture when they cast their votes last Wednesday. You know, that while they may have had the ridership numbers, they didn't realize how many of those light rail passengers were really just hopping off the bus and onto the train. Hallie, I

wanted to talk to LRT project manager Rejean Chartrand about this as well. His answer to me was, was pretty intriguing. He explained that without light rail transit the only way to service the booming communities of Riverside South And Barrhaven and Ottawa's southern suburbs would be to triple-lane all the roads leading from those neighbourhoods to the downtown core in order to accommodate the added bus traffic that they would need. Now, that's a proposition that's impractical. It's even impossible for a variety of reasons, you know, not least of which is the problem of acquiring all the land that the city would need to do that. So, what Chartrand is really saying Hallie is that councillors had no choice.

RÉJEAN CHRATRAN (LRT Project Manager): I think what the message was from the council, my take on this anyway, was that council recognized that a road-based option to service Riverside South, growing to 50,000 people, was clearly not feasible and not a realistic option. In practice you, you would never build that system. I mean, can we agree on this? I mean otherwise, you know, you know, in practice it clearly does not work.

COTNAM: So, he's suggesting that, that after all of that debate light rail was the only way to go anyway?

STEELE: Yeah. But, what it also means is that light rail is not the transit cure-all that it was sold to councillors as. In Ottawa 16 or 17 per cent of commuters make it to work on public transit while the rest drive. The target, according to the city's transportation master plan, is to get that up to 30 per cent, which is actually quite ambitious for a North American city. Last month, when the details of this project were unveiled, city staff told councillors that rejecting the plan would mean failing to meet that target. In fact, using the

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city's own numbers, most of those commuters who will be using light rail are already on the bus. And so the 1,090 new riders aren't going to make a dent. So the claim that rejecting light rail meant missing that major transit target was patently false.

COTNAM: Were councillors duped in this Alistair?

STEELE: There's at least one person who thinks so. Steve Fanjoy was a member of the advisory committee appointed by council to provide guidance on the light rail project. That same advisory committee was almost completely ignored, by the way, when they reported back with their recommendations a month or so ago. Steve Fanjoy is also the one who, who found this ridership study Hallie. He said it was very deep within what he calls the Byzantine array of directories on the city's website. And he tried to get the information to councillors before the vote last week. I asked him what he thought of the way it all ended up?

STEVE FANJOY (LRT Advisory Committee Member): It represents a very weak contribution to achieving, I think, a noble goal. And I don't think, I don't think that gap was clearly understood in the debate around LRT. There was a lot of debate around specific details and there was a lot of debate around platitudes. But in terms of the numbers, in terms of getting commuters out of cars and into public transit and what this particular project was going to achieve, that seemed to have been missed from the debate.

COTNAM: Alistair, is there a sense that this net new riders number, this 1,090, that this statistic was somehow hidden purposefully?

STEELE: Well, this number was within the ridership study and staff say that the ridership study was background and therefore was not released to, to committee or to council because background documents rarely are. However, it was available. You just had to know where to look. But the thing that I find interesting is that some of the numbers from that ridership study were plastered everywhere. They were trumpeted. Others clearly weren't mentioned and I think that's the interesting question here.

COTNAM: So, what happens now that councillors have this new information, that's it's part of our everyday conversation now?

STEELE: Well, yeah, Hallie I mean really, this decision has been made and it's not going to be reversed. As we've said before, this train ain't going to stop. You know, the other interesting thing is that a number of councillors say they don't believe the ridership figures anyway. And you know, we have to remember that these are just projections. In the City of Houston, for example, where a similar light rail line is already running, ridership turned out to be far greater than anticipated, you know, to the pleasant surprise of planners there. But after all is said and done, there are lingering questions even after this big potentially billion-dollar decision has been made.

COTNAM: Very interesting. Thanks very much Alistair.

STEELE: You're welcome.

COTNAM: CBC reporter Alistair Steele.

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## **GORD HUNTER COMMENTS ON LRT**

STU MILLS (Anchor): Critics of Ottawa's light rail project say confusion among city councillors over ridership projections proves the plan deserves another look. Council approved the project last week and construction is scheduled to go ahead in the fall, but it now appears crucial figures dealing with the number of people expected to ride light rail were left out of the debate. The figures from a ridership study released last year show that by 2021 more than sixty thousand commuters will be using light rail, but the study also shows that all but about a thousand of them are passengers who would have been using the bus anyway.

Gord Hunter was one of seven city councillors who voted against the light rail project last week. He says he understood the ridership picture, but he believes that councillors who voted for the project weren't so well informed.

GORD HUNTER (Ottawa City Councilor): Close to one billion dollars on construction and twenty one million dollars on operating costs for five million dollars new revenue. That is shocking enough, but for one to four thousand, five thousand new riders, it's incomprehensible that anyone would see any value in that construction.

MILLS: Mayoral candidate Alex Munter meanwhile is using the controversy over the ridership figures to renew his call for a complete audit of the project.

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