**Minutes of Joint GREN/TRITAG Meeting on Light Rail Transit (LRT)**

January 18, 2011 at Whole-Lotta-Gelatta, Waterloo

GREN Chair John Jackson and TRITAG Chair Tim Mollison opened the meeting by summarizing the aims of each group. TRITAG (Tri-city Transit Action Group) aims to promote public transit, walking and cycling in Waterloo Region.

U of W transit expert Jeff Casello was the guest speaker, presenting his reasons why LRT is the right option for Waterloo Region. Here are his main points:

LRT versus expanded bus system:

* The Region is growing even faster than expected: will be ½ more persons for every person in the Region within the next 15-20 years
* Many will live and work along the main corridor---partly because the province’s *Places to Grow* initiative requires that 40% of the new growth must be along the corridor.
* Development/intensification along the corridor (a virtue of LRT but not bus) is cheaper and more efficient than subdivision development on the edges because infrastructure is already in place (hydro, water).
* Higher density in the core will also mean more walking, biking and shorter car trips, which means lower living expenses for people in the core.
* LRT is a better option than buses because it’s faster (has a dedicated lane), more energy efficient (uses 100th the energy of buses, as the energy produced in braking feeds back), and has easier scalability (can expand by adding cars but no additional drivers needed, a big savings in labour costs), and rail cars last much longer than buses. Thus LRT operating costs will grow more slowly than that of an expanding bus system.
* The LRT is not in a vacuum but part of a comprehensive transit plan —the Region is planning 8 new I-Express bus routes to link to the core

Money issues:

* Of the $800 million projected capital cost, the province has pledged 300 million and the feds 1/3 of the total. That leaves $225 million for the Region to make up.
* Some campaigners during the municipal used an estimated 9%-10% property tax hike to pay for LRT as an argument against it. But with growth, these taxes will go up anyway to pay for roads and other infrastructure.
* 30% of the $800 million is the cost of relocating utilities from under the tracks—and we will soon need to pay for new utilities anyway, even without LRT.
* Without LRT, we will need many more roads and wider ones. Building and maintaining roads is very expensive too. But roads don’t “scale.” More and wider roads attract more traffic, and make biking and walking more difficult.
* Ballpark average for LRT is $25-30 million per kilometer, and buses are $20 million.
* Note that this proposal is a design/build/operate contract, so any cost overruns will be the contractor’s problem—not the taxpayer’s.
* Jeff expects Region will soon announce a scaled-down plan at cost of about $500 million.

LRT a good fit for this Region:

* The Region’s Official Plan forces development inward rather than outward.
* Our housing inventory is enough for another 20 years—so no big pressure to expand.
* ROP land use planning protects moraine and water.
* The demographics are right—large population of young people who walk, bike, don’t own cars, want to live in core. Also seniors who want to retire to core.
* People are environmentally aware here.

His comments in response to questions:

* What type of LRT is planned? Electrical, with overhead power lines; tracks can be laid in the pavement or on concrete ties above road, lowering cost of replacing utilities; Bombardier cars; off-the-shelf technology; wheelchair ramps/elevators/low floors will make cars accessible.
* What’s the power source? Won’t be gas or oil, since these are used generally only for peak demand; LRT does not have a huge energy demand; LRT in Calgary is mostly wind powered.
* Reliability and predictability are more important to most people than pure speed---people want a predictable commute. LRT prevents unpredictability of traffic jams.
* Connecting K-W and Cambridge by rail adds huge costs of crossing the river and the 401. Not worth it, especially since this part of corridor not an area for intensification. Cambridge could have its own LRT, though.
* Biking is much safer next to trains, which can’t veer off course like cars.
* LRT good for the suburbs, since people move further out when road traffic increases and then clog suburban roads to commute in.
* Agrees that the Region hasn’t done a good job of messaging—lacks resources to do it. Region needs to cost the LRT alternatives so people can see the efficiencies of LRT.

Strategy to get the pro-LRT message out:

* Speak at all Council meeting where it’s discussed.
* Go to Regional open houses and express support. Many people go with closed minds, with idea of huge tax increases coming with LRT.
* Tritag has a flyer with tax-related math and a map.
* Remove issue of social justice from the discussion so transit idea resonates with middle class (Will be transit discounts for those who need them.)
* Write letters to the editor/call in to local radio and TV shows.
* Call all Regional councilors and express support for LRT.
* Meet with transit committees.

Further information:

* Region’s website is full of information on LRT.
* Jeff’s power point will be on GREN and TRITAG websites.
* Jeff happy to respond to emails.

Minutes by Susan Bryant