

Ring-road scheme is just a ruse to allow more urban sprawl

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What is to be made of the ring-road scheme making the political rounds in Ottawa and Queen's Park?

Area residents might be tempted to dismiss the ring-road rumblings out of hand. After all, everything said to date ranges in substance between vague and vacuous. And the notion has the familiar appearance of another misdirected megaproject financed by ordinary taxpayers to benefit land speculators, developers, real estate agents, road builders, consultants and lawyers.

Regrettably, however, just because the scheme seems too absurd to think about, much less approve, that is no guarantee that politicians will reject it. Recall such politician-approved messes as Merivale Road, St. Joseph Boulevard, Bronson Avenue, Terry Fox Drive, the neighbourhood-splitting Champlain and Macdonald-Cartier bridges, and the car-based, sprawling developments of Barrhaven, Cumberland, Kanata, Stittsville and much of Nepean and Orleans.

Area residents would be unwise, therefore, to underestimate the political clout of ring-road promoters, and their ability to pull strings in the search for development. The following observations may be of use to readers who wish to counter the promoters by telling their elected representatives to reject the ring-road initiative.

- First, the proposed ring will have little to no impact on existing congestion levels. Indeed, by its promotion of urban sprawl, the road would likely create even higher congestion levels within four to five years of completion.

In principle, ring roads move through traffic around a metropolitan area. In Ottawa's case, the amount of through traffic involving cars is a piddling proportion of the volume on either the 400 series of highways (416, 417) or the arterial roads.

As for through traffic involving trucks, this part of the problem would largely be solved if long-haul rigs were taken off Ontario's highways and put on railway cars for 90 to 95 per cent of trip distances. It is reasonable to expect such an enlightened development within the next several years, so truck traffic is a red herring in the ring-road sales pitch.

In terms of alternatives to the ring road, or to the 416/417 expansions to deal with perceived traffic congestion within metropolitan Ottawa, the intelligent short- and long-term solution is a high-performance transit network of light-rail and bus. However, to prevent yet more sprawl into Ottawa's nether regions, the rail-bus initiative must include stipulations of mixed-use developments throughout Ottawa, increased densities along the rail-bus arteries, and a major reduction in the amount of land used for parking lots.

- Second, while ring-road initiatives may be presented as addressing traffic issues, that is frequently a ruse. Rather, the hidden purpose is to open up new land for development. That is why they have so many interchanges, and why they quickly become congested themselves, usually within four to five years after the ribbon-cutting ceremony and after the politicians have moved on to other issues.

In Ottawa's case, that clearly appears to be what is behind the ring-road notion, since there is no through-traffic problem to speak of, and the road would bring only minimal change to the within-Ottawa traffic problem that lasts an hour during each of the morning and afternoon peaks.

- Third, Ottawa is in an uphill struggle to maintain its existing road and sidewalk infrastructures. Indeed, elements of Ottawa's road-repair and sidewalk-maintenance programs are already in a failed state. Infrastructure operating costs will increase, forever, by adding a ring road to the inventory of roadway the City of Ottawa will need to maintain, repair, clean and clear.

- Fourth, Ottawa's transportation master plan clearly states the need for and intent of the city's policies, plans and programs to increase walking, cycling and transit trips, and to reduce trips by car. The Official Plan contains similar statements among its planning goals, objectives and principles.

There is no City of Ottawa rationale for any municipal politician to speak on behalf of ring-road promoters. To make statements as if there is such a basis is a misrepresentation of significant ethical proportions.

- Fifth, ring roads encourage sprawl, which means more car trips, more burning of fossil fuels, more ozone-depleting emissions, and more global warming. However, and despite overwhelming evidence of the need to act, no government in Canada, federal or provincial, has shown the wits or the will to rein in the car-driven excesses to which so many cities, including Ottawa, are falling captive.

Which brings us to the citizens of Ottawa, and the opportunity they have to do the right thing for this city, the environment, and their own tax burdens. The ring-road scheme, and the proposed widenings of highways 416 and 417 and arterial roads, are not elements of good social, economic or environmental policy, all the more so in view of the array of benefits offered by effective light-rail, bus, cycling and walking alternatives.

I would therefore urge citizens to contact their councillors, the mayor, MPPs and MPs in order to get the ring-road scheme rejected. As history shows, this kind of decision is far too important to be left to the devices of politicians and self-serving development interests.

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