

Improving The Quality Of Urban Life Through Transportation Linkage

PARKING IS A KEY TO SUCCESSFUL TRANSPORTATION LINKAGE

By John Revell, AICP

Many of Canada's cities are seeking to find creative new ways to improve the quality of life for their residents and visitors. While there are many different challenges facing our cities today, many of the most significant revolve around transportation. Effective transportation planning can affect the quality of life in numerous ways, including making it easier to get in and out of a city, improving the quality of the air we breathe, and even supporting the businesses upon which residents and visitors rely.

Unfortunately for many cities, the approaches that served them so well are no longer sufficient. Traditionally, most urban transportation plans were built around sustaining growth. As municipalities expanded into surrounding areas, transportation systems, including roadways and mass transit networks, were added to improve connections between city centers and more remote areas. While these efforts were sometimes haphazard, they were generally successful.

Today, however, Canada's cities face new transportation challenges. Most significantly, many city centres have become choked with traffic generated by commuters, residents, and visitors. Commute times have increased exponentially, and it has become less convenient to get in and out of cities. The situation has caused many residents and businesses to flee urban areas in favor of less congested locales.

As a result, many city planners are casting about for new, creative ways to reduce congestion.

THE PROMISE OF TRANSPORTATION LINKAGE

For many cities, the answer can be found in developing transportation plans around transportation linkage. The idea of transportation linkage is to replace the all too common haphazard placement of transportation resources with a carefully planned urban transportation chain. Each mode of urban transportation—pedestrian, bicycle access, automobile roadways, buses, and subway—is connected and serves as a link in the transportation chain. Planners create an urban grid in which neighborhoods or networks are connected by a variety of different transportation resources. When completed successfully, transportation linkage can help create pleasant, walkable cities that are convenient and easy to visit.



Walkability is an important goal in the development of a linkage program. Planners must understand pedestrian behaviors when deciding where to locate public transportation resources and parking facilities for drivers. As a rule, people are willing to walk anywhere from 350 to 650 feet, which is roughly the equivalent of four to six city blocks. Therefore, planners should generally try to locate some mode of transportation within that distance.

Of course every city is different, and pedestrian behavior is impacted by unique circumstances such as the mix of land-use types, weather, and the nature of their trip. For instance, people are often willing to walk longer distances in more dense environments, such as downtown areas in larger cities like Toronto or Montreal, because there is more to look at while they are walking. It is much more fun to peruse storefronts and other points of interest than to have to look at empty lots and parking lots while you walk. Therefore, every city must develop a linkage plan around its own unique challenges and characteristics.

When it comes to the development of transportation resources, Canada's cities are well known for innovation. For instance, while many cities across the globe have subway systems, few can boast entire underground communities combining retail and subway services like Montreal's or Toronto's. And while municipal buses are common pretty much everywhere, many Canadian cities take full advantage of the environmentally-friendly potential of buses by utilizing vehicles that run on electricity, natural gas, or other alternative fuels. Some, like Windsor, also include bicycle carriers to make them truly multi-modal.

However, few Canadian cities are following the lead of European communities that provide free bicycles for pedestrians to use. In those cities, people can access the bikes in one of dozens of racks located throughout the city, and can leave them in any other rack when they are finished with the bikes.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARKING TO TRANSPORTATION LINKAGE

Yet, as creative as many city planners, one area in which they often come up short is parking. Some engineers and planners miss the natural link between parking and transportation, and as a result they don't take a strategic approach to parking.

One of the primary goals of linkage is to encourage people to walk or use public transportation. If an excess of parking is provided downtown, people are more likely to drive their cars into city centers. People will often drive as

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a matter of habit to parking structures that are close to their ultimate destinations, even if traffic congestion makes the trip longer and less convenient than relying on public transportation. That's why parking must be planned and managed in such a way that it helps change drivers' habits.

First, parking must be treated as the anchor of any linkage program. Convenient and affordable parking should be offered at the outskirts of city neighborhoods, and it should provide convenient access to public transportation. Many cities are taking this concept a step further by developing multi-modal parking structures in which bus and subway service is actually located. With these facilities, drivers need only park their vehicles and get into an elevator to reach public transportation.

Obviously, cities can't eliminate parking from city centers. Some people are unable to use public transportation because of disabilities or other factors. Others may just be making a quick stop to buy something at a local store. These people should be accommodated with convenient downtown parking. However, planners should take the necessary steps, such as pricing anchor parking more competitively than downtown parking, to encourage long-term parkers to use facilities located on the outskirts of the neighborhood or municipality and take public transportation or walk to their ultimate destination.

A VITAL STEP IN CREATING MORE LIVABLE CITIES

The challenges facing 21st Century municipal planners are much different from those of the past. No longer are we merely adapting to the evolving demographics and non-stop growth of the past. Instead, the most important thing is to find ways to improve the quality of life for people who live in and visit our cities. We must reduce the congestion that is choking our downtowns, make our cities more pleasant and walkable, and reduce the smog and pollution that is all too common.

Transportation linkage can play an important role in achieving these goals. By developing city-wide programs that link parking, public transportation, and pedestrian wayfinding, we can reduce traffic in our cities, make it more convenient for people to reach their ultimate destinations, and even provide a cleaner and healthier environment. ■

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