

A Legacy of Missed Opportunity: The Hamilton Rapid Transit Plans That Could Have Been

History shows that today's LRT opportunity for Hamilton could once again pass us by, as so many previous opportunities did. But with leadership, this once-in-a-generation opportunity need not be squandered again.

By Karl Andrus
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Generational Trend of Missed Opportunity

Before the local Hamilton municipal government procured the Hamilton Street Railway (HSR) in 1960, the City commissioned a study of the HSR, public transit and future trends.¹ This launched what has turned into a generational trend of missed opportunity for Rapid Transit in Hamilton.

The experts behind that report predicted correctly, "If the downtown core of Hamilton is to continue to prosper, the use of automobiles will have to be restricted in the not too distant future. This in turn will require that transit facilities be greatly augmented."²

They envisioned a vibrant downtown with little to no traffic in the centre core fed by a "subway or some form of rapid transit."³ They predicted a need by the 1980s, when they imagined the population exploding to half a million citizens (we are estimated to currently sit at over 560,000), for a Rapid Transit line running east and west through the lower part of the city from Highway 102 (Cootes Drive) to Highway 20 (Queenston Road and Centennial Parkway).⁵

It also recommended north-south rapid transit routes. "In addition, two north-south routes, in the vicinity of James and Ottawa Streets, from Burlington Street up the Mountain to Mohawk Road would be required."⁶

The cost for this system to taxpayers if started when recommended would have been about \$298,100,000 (\$2,441,439,000 in 2016 dollars for Subway)⁷ or \$75,100,000 (\$579,150,000 in 2016 for light rail transit or elevated monorail).⁸

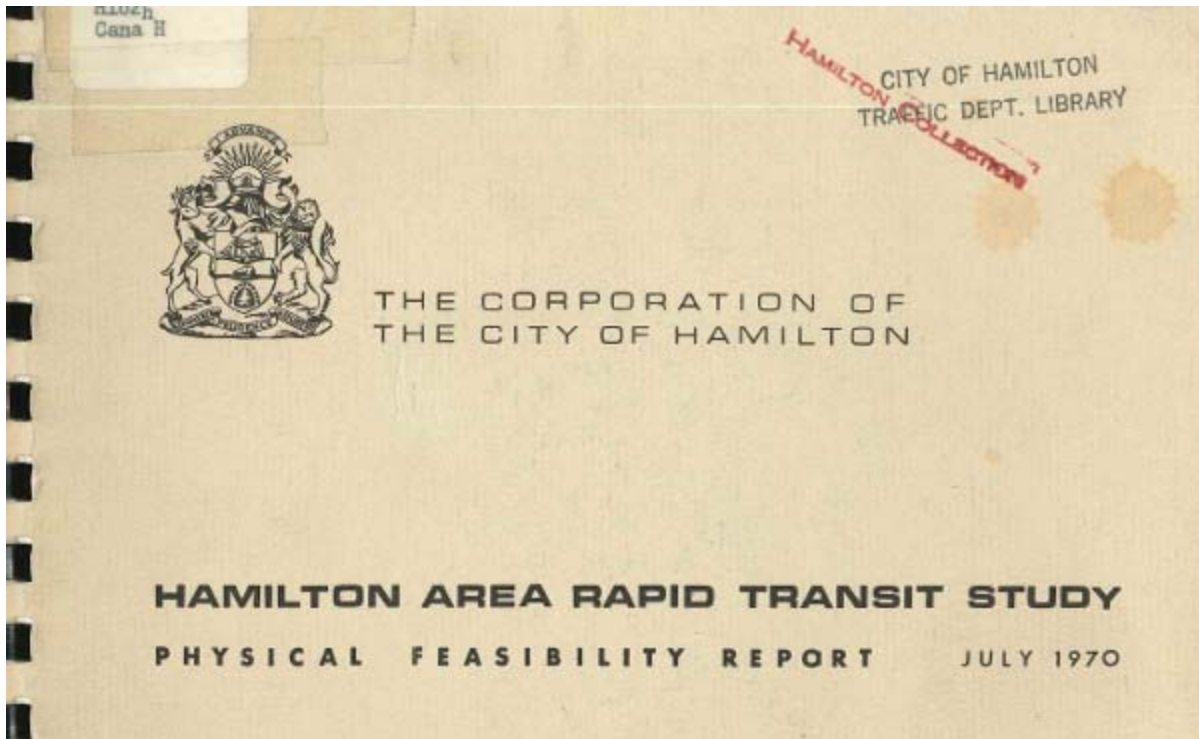
The owner of the HSR, Mr. Farwell wrote an open letter to the city during the consideration to buy the system. He warned, "The railway, in the future, as in the past, will be confronted with many problems inherent in a growing city. Examples of these are expansions into new areas, traffic congestion, enlargement of the one-way street system and... rapid transit."⁹

Years of Conversations

Conversations around this idea continued for years. The Spectator archives bristle with articles about traffic needs¹⁰ and congestion throughout the 1960s and '70s.

However, civic planners did not give much thought to using transit routes as tools to draft development patterns.¹¹ No real funding or leadership came forward from the local governments to address the growing need.

1968 saw the outlay of \$200,000 (\$1,352,000 in 2016 dollars) for a Feasibility Study Needed for a Rapid Transit Plan.¹² This was to make a proper bid to become the site of Canada's first experiments in some new form of mass transit.¹³ This, like other studies, was to show the best routes for a new system and how many passengers could be expected in future.¹⁴



Rapid Transit study from July 1970

In 1970, yet another study was commissioned for \$27,166 (\$170,059.16 in 2016 dollars).¹⁵ On February 25, 1970, Alderman Bill Powell sarcastically summarized the apathy to Rapid Transit studies by saying, "If we could get ten cents on the dollar for all the studies we've done and not carried out, we could solve a lot of our financial problems."¹⁶

In March 1970, the Hamilton Planning Board study argued again that "a Rapid Transit system was needed, and suggested eight possible alternate routes."

Momentum for Rapid Transit seemed to be growing. The Province under Conservative Premier Bill Davis looked to Hamilton for a test site and in October 1971, responding to the city's request, promised funding of \$238 million (\$1,447,040,000 in 2016 dollars) for a Linear Induction Motor (LIM) system - a kind of future electric elevated train.¹⁷

A design by Krauss Maffei AG of Munich to be implemented by the North American Express Monorail Corporation was considered.¹⁸ The tentative plans called for 17.3 miles (28 km) of

rapid transit, linking Mohawk Road at Upper James with Burlington Street through downtown. Another line was to run from Mount Albion Road to Highway 2 and Main Street in the West.¹⁹

Familiar Objections

The local Governments and a small number of critics resisted the funding offer and focused on requests for a subway system or electric train system instead. Some in the city thought the money would be better spent on a better bus system or the Dial-A-Bus program, a concept of personalized pickup and delivery.

Robert Clark of Foundation Engineering CO., called rapid transit systems and people-movers "airy-fairy nonsense." He rebuked the province's offer to build Rapid Transit, with demands for an electric rail system. He pitched this deflecting project, much like Toronto's streetcar system, for \$200 million (or \$1,160,000,000 in 2016 dollars), 75 percent to be paid for by subsidies from the Ontario Government and the other 25 percent from local dollars.²⁰

Critics also said the costs of a space-aged train were too hefty for the city, and that the system was ugly and would lower property values. Others pressured the government for 100 percent funding.²¹

Arguments about cultivating demand first, pursuing other alternatives, and raising privacy concerns of citizens near the line stirred in more confusion of the city's need.

The reports for Rapid Transit continued to pile up in city archives, and the revised proposal was for a scaled-back monorail system. In 1973, phase 1 of the proposed monorail would cover a 6.5 mile (10.5 km) route connecting the mountain, downtown and east end industrial area. Funded by the Regional, Provincial and Federal governments, the cost would be \$37.4 Million (or \$181,390,000 in 2016 dollars).

Phase 2 would have connected the Airport to Stelco, perhaps with equal cost. Dreamers even imagined the line extending out as far as the Stelco Nanticoke complex.

Delaying acceptance of the Province's offer, local governments sank more money into studying the issue further. In October, 1975, they spent \$209,000 (or \$1,212,200 in 2016 dollars) on studies.²² Ironically, that year local politicians and public servants attend the Canadian Roads and Transportation Association (founded as the Canadian Good Roads Association, which up to 1970 was basically concerned with the improvement of the country's road network) four-day convention.²³

Through 1973-77, the debate raged and several alternative plans were touted. The monorail proposal continued unbuilt, as did all of the alternative proposals, touted by opponents, despite a Provincial offer to pay 75 percent of *any* transit plan.²⁴

New Proposal

In 1978, the Urban Transportation Development Corporation (UTDC), an Ontario Crown Corporation (eventually owned by Bombardier²⁵), pitched a space-age blend of subway train and streetcar, closer in design to modern LRT, that might meet with Hamilton's ever-switching rapid transit plans. The system was later installed in Scarborough as RT and Vancouver as SkyTrain and is still running to this day.



Vancouver Skytrain at Rupert Station (Image Credit: [Wikipedia](#))

The UTDC proposed an Intermediate Capacity Transit System for Hamilton, believing that Hamilton was the perfect fit for this system. UTDC President Kirt Foley said in October 1978, "We didn't want to produce a solution looking for a problem. We studied more than a dozen potential applications to be sure we could meet all their needs with our product."²⁶

Mr. Foley said UTDC had been looking at Hamilton for several reasons. The city had an effective downtown plan, it offered a good model for conversion from buses to rapid transit, and had the escarpment with grades that posed a serious challenge for conventional trains with rotary motors and steel wheels.²⁷

The original plan, for around \$111 million (\$285,270,000 in 2016 dollars) seemed an answer to all Hamilton's concerns. Funding was to be provided 45 percent from the Province, 45 percent from the Federal Government and 10 percent from the local government.²⁸ The plan for phase 1

was to run the line from Gore Park to the Mountain with a stop included at the TH&B station for out-of-town connections.

A major regional study from 1976 concluded that a corridor from the Jackson Square area to the central Mountain, possibly the area near to the New Lime Ridge Mall, was the highest priority at that time for rapid transit, so this route was chosen for Phase 1.²⁹

The government of Ontario provided the first \$3.5 million (\$10,982,000 in 2016 dollars) to study the routes and provide a detailed plan for the system. They also considered alternative routes to propose to council.³⁰

Office space was secured and staff hired, and a UDTC subsidiary was retained along with consulting firms to perform the urban design traffic engineering, structural design, architecture, environmental assessment, public participation and route planning. (At the same time Hamilton was studying the proposal, Vancouver approved a much-larger version of the same system.)

The alignment of the system was left to a survey of Hamilton residents, with various proposals for entry into the downtown core. Open houses were launched and the public was engaged for consultation. Councillors issued statements about their excitement for the potential of the project and the system.³¹

Opposition Forming

At first, everyone was excited to see movement on the decades-old need for Rapid Transit, but dissent began with a single regional council member, Flamborough Mayor Betty Ward, openly questioning aspects of the requested system and proposing various what-if and why-not scenarios.³²

An opposition group was formed called Coalition on \$ensible Transit (CO\$T) from six Hamilton groups.³³ Interestingly, one of those groups was the Durand Neighbourhood Association. Mary Kippen, chair of the group, boldly claimed, "Our aim is delay implementation of a rapid transit system - hopefully forever."³⁴

Polls showed strong support for the line region-wide at 61 percent and even in the city proper at 59 percent.³⁵ Support for the line came from suburbs and outlying towns.³⁶

The social impact study from the last major Rapid Transit debate noted, "It is interesting...that a geographical split on the issue occurs between the 'inner' wards (3, 4 and 7) which tend to be 'opposed' and the outer wards (1, 2, 5, 6 and 8) which tend to be 'in favour'."³⁷ Ward 8 supported the project by 59 percent, Ancaster 72 percent and Dundas 64 percent. They saw the benefits in terms of jobs, lower congestion rates, and reduced tax burden through urban densification.

Misinformation and Fear-Based Arguments

But a co-ordinated campaign by a small minority of citizens and government representatives managed to shift the public message and doom Hamilton to another 35 years of debate on Rapid

Transit. The death of a thousand stings began. The strongest opposition was driven by those in the Primary Impact Area, who were firmly against the Rapid Transit at 81 percent.³⁸

The arguments they raised when surveyed about why they opposed the line indicate how terrible a job the pro-LRT voices and the UDTC did in communicating the benefits. Fears included concerns about costs, despite the project only costing the area 10 percent of the total or \$14 a year for ten years based on a \$5000 home.³⁹ Others worried that the line might bring waves of crime and graffiti to their neighbourhoods.⁴⁰

A letter writing and petition campaign was started. This forced the region to set aside a whole day of council to consider the 78 written and oral arguments against the system from concerned citizens and groups in the area.⁴¹ They laid out the tried-and-true gambit of anti-Rapid Transit arguments: the reports are wrong or biased,⁴² buses are good enough, too much cost in tax dollars, what about subways, it will look ugly, and my taxes will go up.⁴³

Questions that were raised included: *Will it bring urban crime to my neighbourhood?* and *Why aren't we using other technology?*⁴⁴ People were led to believe they would be thrown out of their homes, costs would spiral out of control⁴⁵ (despite the Province's assurance it would cover any overage and pay for the system's operation until ridership levels met projections),⁴⁶ and that construction or the system itself would transform the downtown into a wasteland.⁴⁷

Hamilton Mayor Bill Powell called it a rapid transit "system from nowhere to nowhere."⁴⁸ Those opposed to Rapid Transit disingenuously fanned the flames. Even legitimate concerns were coached into NO voices rather than informed YES voices contributing concerns to the process.⁴⁹

A project that would have brought Hamilton into the future was doomed by misinformation and naysayers. On December 15, 1981, the region voted down the proposed system. The Ontario Government withdrew the funding for Rapid Transit and nothing appeared to take its place.

The Federal Rapid Transit dollars shifted to Vancouver, which even took our cast-off equipment, and the Province's focus changed to GO Transit expansion.

Decline of Public Transit

In 1982, Economic groups like the Task Force on Economic Recovery requested a "Second look ...for rapid transit."⁵⁰ Their "Hamilton Can Work Better" campaign called for the development of new high-rise residential homes in the city's core areas.⁵¹ They believed development would help promote a thriving commercial sector and provide homes for the expected influx of employees in the new offices buildings being built downtown. Rapid transit was viewed as the cornerstone of this new development.⁵²

Doug McCaw, a commercial realtor and task force member, went so far as to criticize the "philosophy that prevails among certain well-organized minority interest groups that in essence amounts to: 'We've got our home, the heck with anyone else.'⁵³

Yet the neglect of public transit continued, with transit funding and ridership falling steadily throughout the 1980s. Deferred maintenance and a lack of investment resulted in the removal of the last electric trolley bus infrastructure in December 1992,⁵⁴ replacing the electric vehicles with polluting diesel buses.



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Electric trolley bus on Main Street at the Delta (Image Credit: [Transit Toronto](#))

In the 2000s, citing environment and smog concerns,⁵⁵ the City began procuring hybrid diesel-electric buses⁵⁶ at \$553,285-\$822,634⁵⁷ each (\$664,968-\$988,686.52 in 2016 dollars).

For decades, funding increases to the HSR have not kept pace with inflation.⁵⁸ In 1986, the year the Rapid Transit system to the mountain would have opened, the HSR budget was \$40.57 million⁵⁹ (\$79,055,000 in 2016 dollars) with 31,482,000 annual ridership.⁶⁰ By 2005, the HSR budget had only grown to \$55.84 million (\$64,496,000 in 2016 dollars) - a decline in inflation-adjusted funding.

Neglect of investment and lack of council leadership in public transit and Rapid Transit opportunity saw ridership fall to 20.9 million in 2005.⁶¹

As other transit systems around the world have seen a continued investment in Rapid Transit and growth in ridership, Hamilton continues to lag behind. Unlike Hamilton, other medium-to-large cities allocate their Federal Gas tax funds into investments in public transit. Rather than a system people might choose over a car, the HSR is left to wither, becoming a system viewed as used only by those who have no alternative.

By 2011, ridership was only up 3.4 percent, despite other regions like Waterloo seeing a 47.2 percent increase and Brampton a 68.6 percent increase.⁶² Even car-loving St. Catharines saw a 17.4 percent ridership increase from 2006-2011.⁶³

Meanwhile, the anti-rapid transit predictions of the downtown core decaying into a wasteland did indeed become true. However, the unbuilt rapid transit system itself can hardly be blamed. (Today, due to the dedication of active citizens, members of our arts community and forward-thinking city officials, the downtown is undergoing a renaissance.)

New Opportunity

In 2006, on the assumption that Provincial funding would not be forthcoming, the City proposed upgrading the B-Line express bus into some form of bus rapid transit. However, in 2007 the Province announced the MoveOntario 2020 initiative, promising light rail transit lines in Hamilton and establishing Metrolinx to coordinate regional rapid transit in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area.

In 2008, Council established a Rapid Transit office and directed staff to undertake a rapid transit feasibility study. That led to a proposed network of five rapid transit lines across the city using the existing B and A express bus lines as a start (the network is called "B.L.A.S.T.") and the development of the Rapid Ready LRT plan for the B-Line.

Council voted to accept using Rapid Transit for the first part of the BLAST network. Votes continued in agreement with this plan through 2007-2012 as the city passed motion after motion favouring Rapid Transit.

In February 2013, Council approved asking the Government of Ontario to fund a full B-Line LRT at a cost of \$875,183,183.61 (in 2016 dollars),⁶⁴ as long as the Province agreed to cover 100 percent of the capital cost.⁶⁵

In May 2015, the Ontario Government committed to full capital funding⁶⁶ of a hybrid plan to build most of the east west B-Line (from McMaster University to Queenston Traffic Circle) and a small part of the A-Line (on James Street from King to the West Harbour GO Station and the waterfront).

The federal government has now also committed to \$120 billion in infrastructure funding over ten years, with a focus on socially and environmentally sustainable transportation projects like rapid transit.⁶⁷

Vocal Minority Opposition

Throughout the recent history of this city's opportunities to grow Rapid Transit, the various proposals are constantly opposed by a vocal minority and a silent, unengaged citizenry. How much longer are we going to put off investing in our future? Why can we not learn from the past?

The longer we delay investing in tomorrow, the more it will end up costing us when we finally do! If only previous generations of council had the forethought to invest in the future of our city - imagine what the city would look like if they had acted. Imagine what it will look like 20 years from now if we exercise leadership and invest today!

This once-in-a-generation opportunity need not be squandered again. Let your councillors know that you will not tolerate disingenuous questions and attention-seeking rhetoric. Ask them to take a clear stand on this amazing opportunity. Demand they show leadership and lead, and stop pretending to "ask tough questions".

History has shown that this opportunity could once again pass us by. The sage experts who penned the study on procuring the HSR for the city in 1960 wisely said: "One price that must be paid by any city dweller for the privilege of living in an urban community is some restriction on his individual freedom of action for the general advantage of all residents. This has been the case since the dawn of civilization."⁶⁸ Except in Hamilton.

Notes

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4. Statistics Canada actually estimates the CMA population for the area at 771,700
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6. Ibid.
7. 19 total miles of subway 11 miles from Cootes to Centennial Parkway 4 and 4 for the up the mountain spur lines. Cost based on Young subway 7.4 km (4.6m) for 67 million in 1954 for the 12-station line built using the "cut and cover" (All Rolling stock, stations etc using cut and cover method of ~14 million a mile with 5 million for tunneling). ~\$298,100,000 in 1960 or 2,441,439,000 in 2016 Dollars. All 2016 dollar estimates are listed for discussion and could be out by +/- 20 million dollars depending on calculations used. The amounts themselves are designed to stir conversation about lost opportunity and not the minutiae of infrastructure

inflation calculation. <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/toronto-subway/> lists cost of subway line

8. 19 total miles of elevated monorail/light rail surface same distance at \$3.5 million a mile (high end cost estimated in Hamilton Spectator Article, A Modern Marvel, Aug 17th, 1962) + 5 million for tunnels up the mountain 71.4M in 1960= \$579,150,000 in 2016 Dollars Inflation calculated from <http://inflationcalculator.ca/> based on CPI release from Statistics Canada. Tunnel estimates based on Hamilton Area Rapid Transit Study, July 1970 based on Tunneling done in Thinly Bedded Limestone at Naticoke, Ontario for Ontario Hydro Electric Commission

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