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Continuing With the Expansion of Light Rail Transit (LRT) in Edmonton

March 2011

Background

Since opening North America's first light rail transit (LRT) segment in April 1978, the landscape and culture of the city of Edmonton has changed significantly. When the first leg of the LRT was constructed the population of Edmonton was under 500,000 and since that time our city has become one of the largest and fastest growing cities in Canada. The current LRT North-South Line, and soon to be started North-East Line, operates primarily as a mass people mover tying together the city's established major destinations, such as professional sports facilities, downtown hubs, government centers, post secondary institutions, hospitals, performing arts centers, and high density residential areas.

The City of Edmonton recently completed the development of a series of planning documents meant to tie the planning and development of land use with transportation infrastructure to provide the framework and holistic vision for how Edmonton will develop in the foreseeable future. In response to this framework, and previous planning documents, the city has begun strategically investing in transportation infrastructure to ensure that Edmontonians remain mobile, meanwhile growth within the city and region puts considerable strain on existing infrastructure.

In response to a continuously growing region, fluctuating oil prices, and a shared vision of global stewardship, LRT becomes a popular, economic, and sustainable way for the entire region to commute and travel within the greater Edmonton area. As such it is very important that going forward Edmonton continues with the momentum that it has gained over the last several years in terms of LRT development, and continues to expand the current network beyond a one line system.

As the city prepares to plan additional legs and expansion of the LRT system, the Chamber wants to ensure that the effect these plans will have on development and business are carefully considered.

Strategic Business Planning

To ensure efficiency and smart operations the city should take a business approach to operating the system. The Chamber understands that full cost recovery is unrealistic, especially at the initial stages of development and operation. However, as LRT finds its footing it is imperative that the City optimize operational and planning models and move towards greater cost recovery over time. Such a move is important to minimize external impacts, such as increased taxation, subsidization and cuts to other programs, which may need to be considered if the LRT becomes a burden on the city's budget. As stated in the Chamber's municipal budget position, the Chamber is not opposed to the city moving towards greater user pay models where deemed appropriate.

It is a well known fact that an effective LRT network can provide significant societal benefits to Edmontonians in the form of time savings, energy savings, and other infrastructure savings. Recent studies have shown there to be a direct link made between the economy (i.e. GDP) and travel time. A study put out by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an international organization promoting policies to improve economic and social well-being, states there is approximately three percent loss to GDP as a result of traffic congestion issues alone.

The City of Edmonton needs to balance infrastructure investments and societal benefits to make sure infrastructure and transportation systems of our city and region are developed and operated with the true costs of society in mind. This is important as since connectivity, convenience and access to public transportation within a city and region are key factors affecting labour attraction and the growth and progress of any city.

Delivery and Operation

The Edmonton Chamber of Commerce knows that with any developing system, sometimes efficiencies can only be realized over time. However, to make sure that optimized solutions are being implemented and older systems are being upgraded as required, the City of Edmonton needs to continually assess alternative methods for planning, design, construction and operation of new LRT segments and operation of existing LRT segments. Examples for consideration include the operation of all public transportation services, taking advantage of design-build, design-build-finance-operate models and/or taking advantage of the set up of an independent Transportation Authority.

Other Transportation Infrastructure

Although light rail transit is an important way to get many people quickly, safely and efficiently to and from various key points around the city, it is also not the silver lining solution. Many people and especially goods can not be transported through

light rail transit and so it is important for other modes of transportation to not go unnoticed. In doing so, the city needs to take a holistic planning approach to transportation/transit and view light rail transit solution as only one piece of the pie. To succeed, the city needs to balance capital and maintenance needs of the LRT with capital and maintenance needs of other infrastructure and modes of transportation to allow for a consistent and efficient flow of goods and people. It is understandable that funding to some areas may be diminished, where demands for other transportation needs are replaced by an increasing demand for the LRT. However, decisions regarding the movement of goods and people, need to be made on sound ridership/commuting data. Since commuting to and from work is such a key part of the reason for the increased ridership in Edmonton, the city in its decision making needs to take into consideration the needs of Edmonton and area's business community as a starting point to ensure the needs of employees and employers are being well considered.

Integrated Transportation and Land Use Planning

In addition, it is important for the city to create a policy and regulatory environment that encourages business development associated with existing and future LRT corridors. What this means is in addition to monitoring and being concerned with the impact on residential housing, the city needs to also pay close attention to building an LRT system that complements current and prospective businesses. As LRT continues expanding, the city needs to consult with developers, investors and business hubs to ensure that tracks and stations are built on transit realities, while ensuring that synergies between business and the city are created throughout Edmonton and its growing region.

In addition when developing future LRT corridors, the city needs to take due care to ensure that small, medium and large businesses do not suffer from disruption in access to/from their storefronts. If local businesses can not get their employees or customers to their business sites, the city needs to consider some type of compensation to those businesses to ensure they don't suffer major damages to their operations.

Regional Connectivity

LRT is a vital part of an overarching Regional Transit Plan and as such it is imperative that the city optimize all public transportation services in Edmonton and the Capital Region and ensure that connectivity and well thought out transportation services exist for commuters. This may include reduction or an increase to certain bus services where LRT services are in place, to ensure that the appropriate commuter demands are being met. This also means ongoing analysis of ridership and close relationships with regional governments and transit authorities.

Recommendation:

That the City of Edmonton:

1. Use a staged approach to LRT expansion to minimize external impacts, such as increased taxation, excessive subsidization and/or cuts to other essential infrastructure needs;
2. Strategically target transportation infrastructure investments and the accompanying societal benefits as a way of enhancing the city's competitiveness in the global marketplace;
3. Continually assess alternative methods for planning, design, construction and operation of new LRT segments and operation of existing LRT segments;
4. Balance capital and maintenance needs of the LRT with capital and maintenance needs of other infrastructure and modes of transportation to allow for an efficient flow of goods and people based on sound ridership, commuting and goods movement data;
5. Create a policy, regulatory and zoning environment that encourages business development associated with existing and future LRT corridors to be phased from low to higher density as conditions arise;
6. Optimize all public transportation services and routes in Edmonton and the Capital Region to ensure good connectivity exists between the residential neighbourhoods and the very dispersed employment nodes and education centres in the region; and
7. Continue to support regional transit planning being done by the Capital Region Board to clearly identify and secure inter-municipal corridors and routings for future transit and LRT initiatives.