Salvaging rapid transit: rail to the rescue

by Jeff Lowe

The recent vote by which Winnipeg city council repudiated bus-based "rapid transit" (BRT) for the second time since 1990 illustrated the pitfalls of political calculations muscling aside technical and popular ones in the forging of a transit plan.

Yet to be achieved in any form, rapid transit has been an item of public and political discussion for fifty years in Winnipeg. Though monies have recently materialized, a lack of ongoing and formal funding assistance for urban transit infrastructure from senior-level governments had posed an unyielding obstacle to getting construction of a system of some sort off the ground.

Determined to break the logjam, in December 1983 ardent Winnipeg champion and legendary "rainmaker" Lloyd Axworthy believed he'd succeeded in delivering the sought-after largesse.

Axworthy was able to secure millions in grants from the federal Ministries of Transportation and, Regional Industrial Expansion (over both of which, he then presided as a cabinet minister in the Trudeau government of 1980-84) - to be put toward the construction of the Southwest Rapid Transit Corridor. He likewise persuaded the Ministries of Urban Affairs and Highways & Transportation of the Manitoba government of the day to ante up for the ride.

As a piece of political dealmaking, the "Canada/Manitoba Memorandum of Understanding on Urban Bus Industrial Development" was a work of rare artfulness and finesse.

It was premised on utilizing the corridor as a "demonstration project" for "innovative bus-propulsion technologies" (such as flywheels and, storage batteries).

(Conventional, rail-based forms of rapid transit - constituting proven, mature technology - hence could not qualify).

The terms of the deal as announced, were received with great pleasure by Winnipeg's two major bus-manufacturing firms and the unions representing their plant workforces - who could anticipate major contracts coming their way which normally, would have been destined for the railcar-manufacturing sector.

In theory, that meant that the project as conceived would generate not only capital-construction but, vehicle-fabrication work for Winnipeg - augmenting the local return on public expenditure.

Mr. Axworthy was convinced he'd hit a home run.

— despite claims by BRT proponents that bus corridors can readily be converted to light-rail lines, why is there not a single example of that ever having been done?

— contrary to what is alleged, busways are more expensive to build and operate than an equivalent light-rail line - because of the need for lengthier station platforms and, bypass lanes at stations; because multiple buses (each with a bus-driver) are needed to transport the same number of passengers that can be accomodated by a single train; because buses only enjoy a useful lifespan averaging 8-12 years (versus 25-40 for railcars); and because of the intensive efforts needed to keep bus roadways free of ice and snow

— busways do nothing to make the transit system more user-friendly by cutting down on the complexity of overall network and route structure: you will still need to know which bus to take (and, at which boarding position you must be queued up to board it); whereas with rail rapid transit, you usually need only climb on the first train headed in the direction you want to go

— busways amount to the transit equivalent of "Hamburger Helper" - in that they seek to milk additional (and likely, ephemeral) efficiencies out of the existing, all-bus system (by merely aiming to cycle the bulk of buses which presently travel on Pembina Highway through their trips more quickly through shifting them onto a parallel, bus-only roadway a few blocks away) - rather than "growing" the system in terms of its diversity, capacity, versatility or reach; where's the sense in making such a major investment in exchange for such a negligible return?

— in order for busways (or any other variant of rapid transit) to have a sufficient impact to make them worthwhile, there's a minimum,"critical-mass" amount that would need to be put in place at the outset; inasmuch however as it's only proposed to initially build the middle segment, buses for the present will have to negotiate detours onto and off of Donald Street and Pembina Highway at either end of the (truncated) corridor; this threatens to nullify any savings in running time that might be reaped

— BRT fans hugely oversell the notion that the setup acts to preserve "one-seat rides"; that's false - since most passengers arriving from areas outside the BRT corridor will still need to change buses; as well as, having to transfer to bus routes that intersect the corridor at intermediate points along its length

— knowing that busway service can be scaled back simply by withholding buses from a corridorway, developers will be wary of undertaking sizable investment ventures in its vicinity; whereas because rail rapid transit entails a more substantive, irrevocable public commitment (in the form of its dedicated vehicular fleet), they can do so with confidence

— the smooth ride, comfortable seating, expansive dimensions and, inherent dependability of rail vehicles are crucial in attracting the patronage of the segment of the population traditionally most resistant to considering taking mass transit: car owners