

## Councillors urged to build rail to east, south first

### Construction scenario skirts controversy over parkway route

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City transit planners say it could take three years to sort out the objections to commuter rail along the Ottawa River Parkway, so council should first consider going ahead with rail service east to Blair Station and south to Riverside South.

The city unveiled four construction scenarios yesterday for the ambitious new rapid-transit plan, which is now expected to cost \$4.7 billion over the next 25 years. Each lays out a different sequence of projects to achieve the same final result.

For the first phase of the project, over the next 10 years, two of the scenarios run rail east and west. They are problematic because of concerns from the National Capital Commission and many residents about a train corridor running along the Ottawa River.

Deputy city manager Nancy Schepers stressed that the NCC is working with the city and the commission simply wants all of the options explored. She is hopeful that the city can convince the commission and the public that a sleek, quiet new commuter train running along the river will be much more attractive than the current sight of 250 diesel buses an hour barreling down the parkway during rush hour. But she says that consultation process cannot be rushed without risking the project.

The effect of the delay, however, will be that the east-west service will be difficult to build within the next decade, leaving the city to build its downtown tunnel and then go east and likely south.

That revives a big debate at Ottawa City Hall: Should commuter rail be built north and south when most of the commuters in the city are going east and west?

The east-and-south scenario, known as "scenario three," got the quick endorsement of some influential city council members yesterday, including Mayor Larry O'Brien, transit committee chairman Alex Cullen, planning and environment committee chairman Peter Hume and River Councillor Maria McRae.

Mr. Hume said building from the east at Blair Station to Bayview Station, then south to Greenboro and Riverside South is the surest way to get commuter rail started in Ottawa in the next 10 years. The city estimates it will have 147 million transit trips taken a year in 2018 if the east-south system is built. This year there are expected to be 100



CREDIT: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen

City officials hope the prospect of quiet commuter trains travelling along the Ottawa River Parkway presents a better option for the NCC than the 250 diesel buses per hour that currently run the route.

million transit trips.

Mr. Cullen said commuter rail to the south will stimulate urban development and bring transit riders onto the trains.

Mr. O'Brien said the southern part of the city, where new communities are growing, doesn't have the road system that the west has and people living in the south need public transit to get downtown and beyond.

He said a commuter rail service to the east will be a "building tool" for the east's economic development, which has lagged behind the west side of the city.

Ms. McRae, who represents a ward that would be served by the southern rail service, said it makes sense to use all of the preparatory work that was completed for the aborted north-south commuter rail plan championed by former mayor Bob Chiarelli.

That project was cancelled, but the studies and engineering work remain valid for the city's much more comprehensive long-term plan, which includes a tunnel downtown and commuter rail in all directions.

Ms. McRae said she is confident the federal and provincial governments will help pay for the east-south project over the next 10 years. She noted that two Ontario cabinet ministers, Jim Bradley and George Smitherman, recently seemed impressed with the city's new transit plan.

The city is keen to get access to the joint federal-provincial Building Canada Fund -- which closes in 2014 -- and will be able to get its application in more quickly with the east-south project.

West-side councillors, however, questioned the sense of the proposed construction phasing immediately after Ms. Schepers made the scenarios public and had pointed out the problems with trying to build to the west in the first 10 years.

Kanata South Councillor Peggy Feltmate said it doesn't make sense to move away from the construction scenarios that have the highest possible transit ridership. She said building rail to the Riverside South town centre assures very low ridership for the train. Riverside South is planned to have 40,000 residents and several developments are under way, but the area has a population of about 7,000 now.

"They've brought back the train that we turned down," said Kanata North Councillor Marianne Wilkinson. "But we're growing like crazy in Kanata and Stittsville."

And "there's nothing for Barrhaven," said its councillor, Jan Harder. The rapidly growing southwestern suburb desperately needs better transit service, she said, but the plan only offers buses for her ward.

The 25-year transit plan detailed yesterday is \$700 million more expensive than previously reported because of some new elements.

There will be a new stretch of bus Transitway from Blair Station to Hurdman Station. This would be built early, would handle east-side commuters while the existing eastern Transitway is turned into a rail line, and would eventually get people in and out of the health sciences campus in the Alta Vista neighbourhood, where the General campus of The Ottawa Hospital is located.

Part of the 25-year plan is a rail service along Carling Avenue, perhaps a streetcar service, to take advantage of the wide corridor the city has there in an area with a dense population and a lot of commuters. There would also be bus transit lanes along

Baseline, Heron and Walkley roads.

The extra \$700 million also covers a link into the town centre at Riverside South and technology and new roadway that gives transit vehicles the priority in traffic.

Over the next 10 years, "scenario three" would see 34 kilometres of commuter rail line and 30 kilometres of bus Transitway built. The cost of all that work is estimated at \$2.5 billion.

City treasurer Marian Simulik sent councillors a memo yesterday saying that the plan is affordable if the federal and provincial governments agree to long-term financing of one-third each. The city's annual spending on the plan would be about \$110 million.

The city is consulting the public on the four 10-year construction scenarios until the end of the month with several open houses listed on the city's website, [www.ottawa.ca](http://www.ottawa.ca), which also has information on all the possible construction plans. The issue will then go to city committees and finally city council on Nov. 26.

That council vote will be critically important to the future of the transit plan. The city needs a solid majority of councillors to support the project to get the financial help it needs from the federal and provincial governments.

If west-side councillors Eli El-Chantiry, Shad Qadri, Peggy Feltmate and Marianne Wilkinson vote against it, joining four councillors who voted against the overall plan in May, there could still be a good majority supporting the project: 16 councillors out of 24 (counting the mayor).

"You can expect jockeying. That's the nature of the beast. But I expect the bulk of council will be behind it," said Mr. Cullen. "We have to choose something."

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