Edmonton Trolley Coalition Bulletin



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Editor: Robert R. Clark, retired supervisor of transit planning

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Where do we go from here?

At the March 16th Meeting of Council's Transportation and Public Works Committee, city administrators put forward a proposal to hold public hearings on the future of the trolley system on April 8th, along with a recommendation that the city discontinue all trolley service permanently this summer. After hearing concerns from the Edmonton Transit System Advisory Board, the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues, the Edmonton Trolley Coalition and an Inglewood resident, Council's committee decided to defer the hearings until late June. One of the main concerns presented was the apparent haste to rush into an irreversible decision on an important issue; other concerns surrounded the controversial consultants report which administration had used to support its recommendation.

In the interim, administration has been directed to consult with citizens. Consultation is now planned to take place at two public meetings, by telephone, as well as though on-board surveys of transit riders. It is hoped the consultation process will be objective in its method as well as in any information provided to citizens. Objectivity and balance were two problems identified in the consultants study. A Council decision is expected in June or July.

ETC Editorial

Administrators claim huge savings if trolleys are abandoned, but . . .

Do the 'savings' really add up?

Trolleybuses provide clean and quiet transit service to 46 neighborhoods in the city core and West End. Last July, city managers announced they were "looking at eliminating" trolleys to "save" between \$1 and \$1.5 million per year on the cost of maintaining overhead lines. On January 26, 2004, a consultants report quoted the cost of converting to an all-diesel fleet at \$369 million to 2010, and keeping trolleys as part of the transit system at \$389 million over the same period. The difference between the two scenarios was 5% or \$20 million over 6 years, and this *included a brand new fleet of low floor trolleybuses* plus upgrades to the overhead lines. The new trolleys would be a capital investment with a life of around 20 years. On March 11th, administration released its recommendation to cease all trolleybus operation this summer. By stretching out the time frame to 10 years (2013) and adding incidental costs like training and roadway maintenance, they tout a 'savings' of \$60 million by abandoning trolleys immediately. Of course, one can make the cost totals for any undertaking grow by adding more years into the equation as was done here; this would also be true of diesel bus investments.

With the limited analyses presented by both the consultants and administration, citing dollars 'saved' seems a lot like black magic. Saving money need not necessarily mean abandoning trolleys. The various possibilities for continuing with trolleys have not been investigated at all. For instance, what efficiencies could be attained on the trolley system by such practices as "interlining" (joining two routes at the terminus to reduce the number of vehicles required to

provide the same level of service) or by reducing layovers and improving schedules? How many new trolleybuses would actually be required to serve a more efficient and perhaps slightly reconfigured trolley system? Perhaps as few as 35—that's \$12.6 million less than the 49 new trolleys the consultants said the city needed. And what about operating cost savings that could be achieved with higher system utilization or even trolley expansion? One cannot claim \$60 million would be 'saved' by scrapping the trolley system if there are scenarios for keeping trolleys that would cost less than this figure. Why not put some reasonable alternatives to trolley abandonment on the table for Council's consideration?

Quoting huge 'savings' certainly has 'shock value'. But put into context, the figures lose a lot of their punch. Transit's annual operating budget currently stands at about \$122 million. Their capital budget has seen annual investments over the past three years of \$32 to \$49 million. With new diesel purchases averaging 50 units per year since 1998, a significant investment is going into new *diesel* buses. The \$60 million claimed savings with administration's trolley elimination plan averages out to \$6 million per year. \$6 million is only 3.5% of the total annual expenditure on transit. Even *if* the 10-year total outlay required *were* \$60 million, is this 3.5% really too much to ask for a long-term investment that would retain quality of life benefits to 46 core communities and our growing downtown?

Administration's report doesn't reveal the detail of its calculations, so it is difficult to identify what assumptions have been made. One wonders if the 'savings' calculations considered inevitable oil price hikes. Coal for electricity is an abundant local commodity and trolley electricity prices are negotiated on contract, but oil prices rise according to world trends. If, as Canada's Environment Minister predicts, the price of crude oil almost triples in the near future, operating diesel buses will no longer be cheap. Busy transit routes, like those served by trolleys, are high fuel consumers when operated by diesels. If diesel prices double in 6 - 8 years, being able to operate at least some of the transit system on electricity is bound to bring fuel cost savings that will add up over time. Investments in trolley expansion could become increasingly viable in the years ahead. But if the City pulls the plug on trolleybuses now, what strategies will it employ to manage rising diesel costs within the means of future budgets? Service cuts?

And let's not forget about Epcor, our city-owned utility. How much of the so-called 'savings' represent lost business? Buying electricity and overhead line maintenance services from Epcor benefits us locally. Last year, Epcor returned \$110 million in dividends to the City. The benefits just aren't the same by buying more diesel fuel from oil companies.

After much hype about diesel buses getting 'cleaner', the trolley elimination and 'savings' plan reveals the ultimate irony: high polluting diesel buses that have been on the road for 25-30 years will be rehabilitated to help ETS meet its vehicle requirements to 2010. In recent years, Council has heard that the city doesn't have enough buses to meet growing service demands. But administration's trolley report indicates the city now has so many buses that new low floor diesels can be supplied on trolley routes, and there are even funds for rehab work to return 30-year old 'smokers' to the streets. Meanwhile, the minor overhauls that would make zero emission trolley buses last until 2010 are designated "unfunded". How much has been spent on diesel buses in recent years to put the city in a position to claim savings by eliminating trolleys, thereby doing away with 8% of the transit fleet?

Somehow, the 'savings' in ditching our clean and quiet electric trolleys just don't add up!

Environment Minister predicts Dramatic Oil Price Hikes

In an address to 60 people assembled at the University of Alberta March 18th, Federal Environment Minister David Anderson warned of dramatic increases in oil prices. "I fully expect the price of a barrel of oil to be \$100 or more in the not-too-distant future", said the Minister. With current prices hovering around \$38 per barrel, this would represent almost a tripling of current rates.

Price hikes will not only have repercussions at the pumps for motorists, but for bulk buyers of gasoline and diesel fuel such as fleet operators, public transit and the trucking industry. Anderson's prediction is in-line with those of leading economists, scientists and geologists who have stated that world oil production will soon slide into a state of decline, forcing prices rapidly upward. The impending crisis will be much more severe than what we experienced in the early 1970's according to Dr. David Goodstein of Caltech University. Goodstein says that the rise in worldwide oil demand over the past three decades is the main reason why the crisis will be much more severe this time.

There are signs that Anderson's prediction is already on its way to reality. A March 19th news announcement revealed that Shell Oil, a leading world oil producer, has continued to overestimate its oil and gas reserves. The company was forced to downgrade its oil reserve estimates by 250 million barrels, as well as reclassify another 220 million barrels it had earlier classified as reserves. This is the second time since January of this year that

Shell has announced a major drop in its reserve estimates. It is becoming clear there are less conventional oil sources out there to be tapped than oil companies are willing to admit.

This news comes as Syncrude Canada announced massive cost overruns in its efforts to increase production from the Alberta oil sands. The operator announced cost overruns of 93% on an expansion project originally estimated to cost \$4.1 billion. Last year's operating results were a disappointment, admitted Marcel Coutu, Syncrude's new Chair. While the oil sands may represent a significant oil supply, the process of extraction is clearly not going to come cheap.

Current events in the oil industry should cast doubt on the wisdom of the recent administrative rush to scrap Edmonton's electric trolley system for a bus fleet completely dependent on petroleum fuels. In the complete absence of any developed and proven alternatives to diesel but electricity, the cost effectiveness of being able to expand Edmonton's electric trolleybus system in the future is bound to become apparent. In fact, in a recent letter to the *Edmonton Journal*, Dr. John Bakker, professor emeritus of civil engineering at the U of A, suggested the time to start electrifying public transit is *now*.

Provincial Government Announces Clean Up of Coal Fired Power Plants

On March 10th, the Alberta Provincial Government announced plans for a long-term management framework to reduce emissions associated with coal fired electricity generation in the province. The framework is aimed at substantial reductions in sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, particle matter and mercury emissions, according to Environment Minister Lorne Taylor. It also aims at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the primary one being carbon dioxide. Taylor says according to the principles in the management framework, new coal fired power plants will be "as clean as natural gas". In addition, power producers will get bonus points for taking early action to reduce emissions. These credits can be earned by investing in green energy sources, reducing emissions with new technologies or by closing older, more polluting plants early.

New technologies such as advanced emission controls, high efficiency turbines and combined heat and power technology, all contribute to higher generation efficiencies with less emissions and may comprise some of the methods selected by power producers to meet the challenges. Federal guidelines require greenhouse gas emissions to be reduced by six percent over 1990 levels in the 2008-2012 period. The provincial government has not yet established specific reduction targets.

A consultants report on Edmonton's trolleybus system asserted that diesel buses produced after 2007 would be cleaner than power plants, and predicted this would hold true until after 2020. Aside from the fact that the report ignored the refinery and transportation emissions associated with diesel fuel, the provincial government's new emissions framework appears to cast serious doubt on the report's long term predictions. While it may be argued the report's analysis was faulty in the first place, one thing is now for certain--it has most certainly already become outdated.

Philadelphia seeks new Trolleybuses

The South-Eastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) has issued a request for expressions of interest from manufacturers in an order for up to 50 new electric trolleybuses. The trolleybuses are to have off-wire capability in order to enable SEPTA to extend service on one of its routes beyond the existing wires. SEPTA operates five trolleybus routes in Philadelphia in addition to rail based services and a large diesel bus system. The transit authority recently upgraded its Frankford garage with entirely new overhead wiring, and completed the rewiring of two major streets. This work was completed during a temporary suspension of trolleybus services; SEPTA reports electric service is due to resume soon.

Mobility Challenged greet new Boston Trolleybuses with Cheer

The arrival of new low floor trolleybuses this May will mean improved access for persons with mobility challenges in Boston's Cambridge neighborhood, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority announced March 7th. The MBTA, known locally as the "T", has purchased 28 of the new low floor trolleybuses with kneeling feature from Neoplan U.S.A., and has



the option to buy 28 more. Boston operates electric trolleybuses on four routes that serve the Cambridge-Watertown area.

The previous generation of trolleybuses were high floor vehicles, and were not equipped with wheelchair lifts, making them inaccessible to wheelchair users. "The message [now] is come along with us," said Michael H. Mulhern, MBTA's General Manager of the new low floor service. Mulhern is confident the new trolleybuses will literally transform bus service on these routes, bringing more riders back to the system. He praised the dependability of the new vehicles and the smooth ride. Apparently, drivers are also eager to take training on the new trolleybuses.

Philip Beaulieu, past Chairman of the MBTA's Access Advisory Committee, applauded the low floor trolleybus initiative. "It's going to be so nice when these new vehicles come along. I'll be able to go out to the bus stop and just go do it . . ."

The Dayton Story

Dayton is a city of about 170,000 people in the Ohio heartland. At one time, there were five different private companies that provided its transit service, all using trolleybuses. Those five companies eventually merged into City Transit, operated by Bill Owen. Owen was regarded by many as a visionary. In the 1960's, when many cities were building massive freeways and converting electric bus fleets to diesel to the detriment of public health and urban liveability. Owen's sense of community motivated him to retain and expand Dayton's trolleybus system. When he retired in 1972, a regional transit authority called the Miami Valley Regional Transit Authority was formed. Seeking to lower the costs associated with acquiring City Transit, MVRTA's trustees pressed for an all-diesel system. Not wishing to see his city degraded, Owen led a public battle that pressured the trustees to retain electric trolleybuses. Seeing the repercussions of the energy crisis of the '70's. Dayton had made the right move in the eyes of other North American cities.



In the late 1980's, Dayton's trolley fleet was aging. The MVRTA trustees sought bids on a new trolley fleet. When bids came in around \$500,000 per bus, the trustees again set their sights on diesels. A consultant was hired, bringing forward a study that recommended scrapping the trolleybus system. Concern among Daytonians prompted the founding of a coalition called *Save Our Trolleys*. An examination of the study found serious flaws. In particular, a noted trolleybus expert was misquoted. Save Our Trolleys brought the expert to Dayton to refute the bogus study before the board of trustees. A second study was commissioned, and this time with the opposite result. It recommended Dayton keep and expand its trolleybus system.

The message, however, did not seem to hit home. In 1991, the MVRTA's Executive Director began to dismember the system and sell off new substation equipment still in manufacture. When these doings were brought to public attention, the trustees swiftly replaced the Executive Director with one who was committed to ensuring a future for trolleybuses in Dayton. A contract for 54 new accessible trolleybuses was awarded to ETI/Skoda in December 1994. On August 20, 2000, the last of four major extensions to the trolleybus system was completed. Today, the Greater Dayton Regional Transit Authority proudly provides electric service on a number of its mainline routes.

How can Edmontonians support the retention of trolleybuses?

Call or write directly to your City Councillor or the Mayor's Office; Contact the Citizens Action Centre at 496-8200, by fax at 496-8210 or by electronic mail at cacentre@edmonton.ca

Speak to City Council: At public hearings in June.

For further information on how to speak to Council or for details of the public hearings, please call the City Clerk's Office at 496-8178 or contact them by e-mail at: civic.agencies@edmonton.ca

Contributors to this Issue: R. Clark, D. Galt, M. Parsons.

Sources: Government of Alberta; Edmonton Journal (March 12, March 18, March 22); Boston.Com News (March 7); South-Eastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority; H I Hylton,

P.E., former MVRTA ETB Acquisition Program Manager.

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