

Victoria (Canada):

City Leaders Attracted to Light Rail

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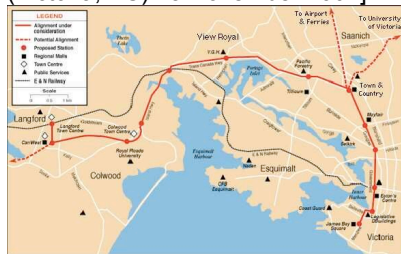
A new study suggests that the Victoria, BC capital region would gain millions of dollars in economic and social benefits by installing a light rail transit (LRT) system connecting the metro area's Western Communities (westward suburban areas) with central Victoria.

Victoria is the heart of British Columbia's Capital Regional District (CRD), located on southern Vancouver island. It is a rapidly developing urban area with attractive communities, a diverse economy, and a beautiful environment. According to Canada's 2001 census, the CRD has approximately 326,000 residents. Within 25 years the regional population is expected to grow 23%, to 400,000.

[Data source: Victoria Transport Policy Institute: Light Rail Economic Opportunity Study, Victoria, 15 Nov. 2002]

The "Light Rail Economic Opportunity Study", a report from the prestigious Victoria Policy Transport Institute, was issued on 15 November 2002. It has found support from the City of Victoria, the Canadian government, and the Victoria Real Estate Board.

[Data source: Times Colonist (Victoria, BC) 25 November 2002]



The study evaluated an 18-kilometer (11.2-mile) LRT route which would leave the western suburb of Langford, run through the closer suburb of Colwood along the Galloping Goose Trail, and continue into and through downtown Victoria into the James Bay shopping area. (See map below.)

Two distinct levels of LRT investment were examined:

- A Basic LRT plan, mainly substituting for some of the bus service in the corridor. This is

projected to have a capital cost of C\$350 million, and annual operating & maintenance (O&M) cost of C\$12 million. Ridership is projected at 15,000 rider-trips per day initially, growing to 30,000/day over 10 years.

- An LRT Plus plan, which "includes transport and land use policies to support transit, including transit-oriented development, and TDM [travel demand management] programs such as commute trip reduction and parking management programs" This alternative is projected to have a capital cost of C\$375 million, and annual O&M cost of C\$12 million. Ridership for this alternative is projected at 22,500 rider-trips per day initially, growing to 45,000/day over 10 years.



While Victoria is a smaller-sized city, the study noted that a number of factors increase the prospects for a successful and cost-effective LRT system to serve the area. These include such elements as relatively high transit ridership, strong clustering of density and development in the proposed corridor, and transit-oriented segments of the population. The report also noted that Victoria is quite similar in size to Orleans (France), which has recently installed an 18-km LRT system which has proven quite a success, increasing total transit ridership by about one-third. (See photo above.)

Among the factors which make the Victoria CRD a strong candidate for LRT, reports the study, are the



following:

- CRD residents use transit a third more than the average for comparable cities.
- The corridor proposed for LRT is "already congested and additional roadway expansion would be costly due to geographic constraints."
- The corridor already contains the majority of key regional facilities.
- The Regional Growth Strategy includes many objectives and actions to increase transit ridership and promote Smart Growth.

The VTPI study compared projected costs and benefits of installing an LRT system to highway upgrades, bus/HOV lanes plus generally increased bus service, and a road-pricing strategy alternative, all over a 20-year period. By far, the LRT alternatives emerged with the highest overall ratings.

The LRT Plus alternative scored particularly high, with net benefits (over costs) totalling C\$742 million over the 20-year study period – more than twice as much as any other alternative. Included among the benefits tabulated were motor vehicle cost savings, parking cost savings, traffic congestion benefits, roadway cost savings, and energy and emission reductions.

In terms of energy efficiency, for example, the study notes that electric rail transit has a distinct advantage. "In the U.S., buses consume about two-thirds the energy, and electric rail about a sixth of the energy per passenger-kilometer as an average automobile" the report notes.

The results of the comparative study indicate that a Victoria LRT system could be a cost-effective

investment, providing greater net benefits than highway capacity expansion, even if the LRT has higher initial project costs. This occurs because LRT-based travel would provide a wide range of additional benefits. These benefits would become even greater if LRT were to be implemented in conjunction with transportation and land use policies identified in the area's Regional Growth Strategy. These policies include more clustered, multi-modal development, commute trip reduction programs, and parking management.

The viability of an LRT system linking communities in the region has been studied and discussed for the past decade. However, the VTPI study differs from past efforts because it incorporates land use impacts and benefits and examines the ability of LRT to support the CRD Regional Growth Strategy, according to Robert Wickson, a spokesman for the study. The study also tallied environmental and social costs and benefits, which Wickson said are often overlooked in transportation planning.

[Data source: Times Colonist (Victoria, BC) 25 November 2002]

Wickson noted that LRT would be an excellent way to develop the commercial and residential areas outlined in Victoria's regional growth strategy. "This line could be a great

economic catalyst" Wickson emphasized. "Look at a map at where the streetcars used to go in Victoria and you'll see that there's still density pockets along those lines to Cook Street and Oak Bay."

He also underscored that LRT is the best way to solve the looming traffic crisis in the Western Communities (suburbs), whose population is projected to double over the next two decades. "We already have congestion in Colwood" Wickson said, adding, "how are we going to manage those extra 50,000 people coming into town every day?"

He noted that the LRT would be an opportunity for more public-private partnerships. "Can you imagine the kind of development you could get around a station? You put a major station in Tillicum, say, right where the Bingo Palace is and suddenly you have a major opportunity for business and residential densification. It's the kind of thing that encourages local business."

Much of the region's traffic flows through the suburb of Saanich, making traffic management a hot-button issue in the recent municipal election. Saanich Councillor Vic Derman said he believes the region will have to consider new transportation options. "To my mind it's inevitable" Derman said.

Victoria-area community leaders seem frustrated by the futile effort to

solve the region's mobility challenges simply by more roadbuilding, and are sifting for better solutions. "There is no appetite for things like road widening and an LRT is likely the best way to handle increased traffic in the most efficient and environmentally sound way" Derman emphasized.

Derman also noted that, while it's not difficult to convince local governments to back the project, the challenge is to persuade higher levels of government to back it. "Higher levels of government collect 21 cents per liter on gas taxes" Derman pointed out. "It would be nice to get five or six of that back."

Additional funding options addressed in the VTPI study including such measures as a parking tax, a visitors tax, a roadway fee, and value-capture revenues.

Victoria Mayor Allan Lowe told the Victoria Times Colonist reporter that the city council is always open to alternative transportation, particularly for the corridor between downtown and the Western Communities. "As traffic increases it's clear that we need to look at alternatives to car travel" Lowe underscored. "Will we have an LRT system in the next three years? I can't say I believe we will, but it's certainly prudent to start planning for it."

[Data source: Times Colonist (Victoria, BC) 25 November 2002]

For further information on the VTPI study, the public are directed to the following website:

<http://www.islandtransformations.org>.

The E-mail address is:

info@islandTransformations.org

LRP expresses appreciation to Brendan Read, Dick Faulks, and VTPI for their assistance in preparing this news report and the map. Photos: City of Victoria, LRTA.

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