

The View from '56

Thoughts on the Short-Term Future of Transportation Planning

by Gordon Price

A FEW YEARS AGO, the Ford Expedition assembling plant in Wayne, Mich., made more money in after-tax profits than the combined budgets of all municipalities in British Columbia. The number of SUVs sold in North America has roughly doubled since 1996, now totaling about four million a year. These vehicles are classified as light trucks (in order to drive through various legislative loopholes), and their percentage of the market approaches that of passenger cars.

If you want to know the future of transportation in North America, start here. This is where most of the money has gone, and where people's expectations reside—in big cars on big roads. The future, apparently, is like 1956, only more so.

I choose 1956 for a reason. That was the year U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act that funded the biggest public-works project in human history. The interstate freeway system—over 40,000 miles of superbly engineered roads criss-crossing the continent many times over—changed everything in its path, from cities and regions to popular culture. They were called “freeways” for a reason: no tolls, no stoplights, no limits.

Four transportation assumptions

Canada had a more modest program to build the Trans-Canada Highway. Yet, given the success of car culture, both countries have imbedded in the collective consciousness a set of assumptions that are reinforced countless times a day through advertising. These assumptions will continue to shape transportation policy and funding priorities.

First assumption: *As we buy more cars, government will build more roads.* It doesn't matter who builds the roads (even if they're tolled) as long as there's the expectation of more and more asphalt.

Second assumption: When it comes to the purchase and use of vehicles, *there's always room for one more.* No one goes

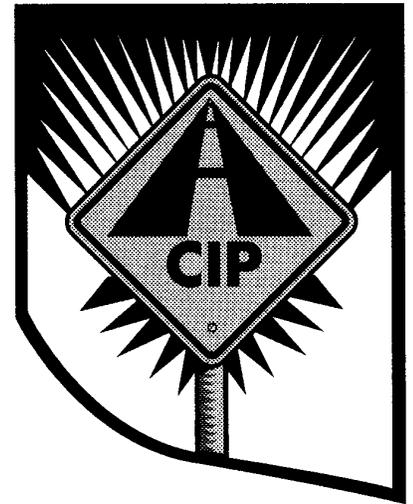
into an auto showroom wondering if there's space out there for one more car, nor would it be acceptable for government to say, “Hold on, we're full up.” With no upper limit, presumed capacity is effectively infinite. You'll rarely get a planner or engineer to tell you what the ultimate capacity of a road system should be; their job is to translate infinity into reality.

Third assumption: As every auto advertisement tells us, *the car should never be constrained by other cars.* The image of the open road is iconic; free-flowing traffic is assumed to be the natural state of affairs, if only our tax dollars were used effectively for their intended purpose (back to the first assumption).

Fourth assumption: *The next trip is free.* In other words, the marginal cost of the next trip is practically zero—at least as far as out-of-pocket expense is concerned. Save for the few places where parking is priced or roads are tolled, no loonies need be spent to drive somewhere, regardless of the amount owed on the car or expenses incurred. The next trip seems to be free—and we love free. Honest, apparent pricing of the car—what is often called transportation demand management—may work, but politicians call it suicide. It would be like putting the GST on each car trip, and it would not be well received.

The not-so-free freeway

So important is the concept of “free”—again, as in “freeway”—that we do not even attempt to calculate the value of an increasingly scarce commodity that is vital to the economic functioning of our urban regions. That commodity is road space. We spend millions to build it and then dispose of it as though it had no price. The real cost, of course, is measured in time—in congestion—but that is seen as the problem, not as the inevitable consequence of market failure and flawed assumptions.



Further, we are betting that we will have all the cheap fuel we need to power all those internal-combustion engines on all those free roads, despite current geopolitical uncertainties. Those who have predicted an imminent end to the Oil Age have not been treated kindly by history. Gas today remains cheaper in real dollars than it was in 1956—cheaper per litre than bottled water. So it's not surprising that we assume high-BTU, portable, ubiquitous, fluid fuel will remain abundant, even if the Americans have to spend more on a military presence in the Middle East than the value of the oil exported.

In one of those delightful coincidences that mark real life, a man did indeed predict the end of the Oil Age, or at least the beginning of the end, in the same year as Eisenhower was launching the interstate freeway system. He was M. King Hubbert, a petroleum geologist working for Shell Oil in Houston. Using a combination of science and good guesswork, Hubbert predicted domestic U.S. oil production would peak in the mid-seventies—not a message Shell wanted to hear. Debate raged on this prediction until 1970, for that was the year in which U.S. domestic



oil production did indeed peak. Using similar techniques, Hubbert's disciples predict world-wide oil production will peak sometime this decade, regardless of new discoveries. (The U.S. government thinks it may come a few decades later—still overnight in historical terms.) Then things will get interesting.

The beginning of the end?

Of course, most of us are technological optimists at heart: If oil becomes too expensive or scarce, we expect to switch to fuel cells, or whatever. But the problem is not *if* but *how*—and, more important, how fast and at what price. Since we have been kidding ourselves for so long about the real price of the car, we are in no mood to accommodate a sudden shift in reality, nor are we ready to grasp the economic ripple effects of fluctuating oil prices.

But what are the odds, after all, that something catastrophic *won't* happen to the status quo of cheap roads, cheap fuel and cheap car trips? Ignoring the obvious fact that history is full of surprises, we proceed as though nothing extraordinary will happen in the life of our transportation plans, save for the introduction of new funding mechanisms, variations on existing technologies, and, oh yes, a bike-way here or there.

From a planning (and political) point of view, one can never plan for apocalypse. Imagine: "Our plan calls for a catastrophic series of events during the life of the plan, the consequences of which will be ruinous for the status quo. Assume, therefore, that after this point most of the assumptions on which the plan is based are wrong." Can't be done.

The best bet, then, is to look around for examples of what would work if conditions did indeed change rapidly and the automobile could not remain the centre of our transportation universe. Then, when leaders are desperately searching for options in the face of sudden change, you're ready to go. Fortunately, there are a few places that look like they could handle not only the disruptions of the future but also the conditions of the present. One of them began—guess when—in 1956.

Desirable density

Urban critic Lewis Mumford once said the U.S. Congress had no idea what it was doing when it approved the interstates. (Even Eisenhower was shocked when he saw the actual construction of a freeway through Washington, D.C.) The same, I expect, was true of Vancouver city council in 1956, when it passed the first zoning and development bylaw and unleashed the forces of technology, modernism and money to transform the decaying street-car neighbourhoods that surrounded the downtown core. If anyone had showed them what the West End would look like at the end of the high-rise boom in the 1960s, they would have been stunned.

About 40,000 people now live in a single square mile, in a high-density neighbourhood that many have confused with an overcrowded one. In fact, it works pretty well for the dominant income group—lower-middle-income renters—who can afford higher-than-average rents because their transportation costs are proportionately lower. The West End still functions rather like the turn-of-the-century community it was: a grid of narrow streets with trolley lines and limited parking, where services are never more than three blocks away, and where feet function as the dominant mode of transportation.

This combination of density and transportation choice is not that unusual. Most urban populations have lived this way for most of human history. We stopped building dense, mixed-use communities around 1956, when planning and engineering tried to accommodate the infinite needs of the car, which itself facilitated the sprawl that the automobile needed. Vancouver, with its confined geography, absence of freeways, reasonable transit, limited parking and thirty years of traffic calming, has made a policy of constraining the car and has coincidentally turned out to be one of the most livable cities in the world. Actually, this is not a coincidence at all.

High-density communities aren't for everyone. And, no, they can't be built overnight. But it turns out that people will switch from car dependence to transportation choice faster than we reasonably expected. Recent figures show that as people substitute walking trips for car trips, there is now less vehicle movement downtown than there was five years ago,

even though the population has increased by thousands. In other words, congestion can decrease as density increases—but only if there are constraints on the car, alternatives that work, and good land use planning and urban design.

There may even be a density level that must be reached before the benefits of dense development become apparent. And people will still drive their SUVs, even in the West End. They love their cars, even though they're going to have a difficult time answering their grandchildren's questions. ("Traffic congestion was awful, you were hostages to oil, the world was getting warmer—and you went out and bought the biggest gas-guzzler you could afford!? What were you thinking?")

I wouldn't stop people from buying SUVs. But I wouldn't be planning for them.

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