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CIVIC AFFAIRS

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COMMENT ON TRAFFIC AND PARKING

Fellow Citizens:

The rapid growth of metropolitan areas has snowballed problems of metropolitan planning. Toronto is no exception. While cramped boundaries have halted population growth in the city proper, Greater Toronto is fast expanding both in area and numbers. A 25 percent increase in our urban population since 1931 has brought a full share of attendant problems for the elected representatives, civic planners and all citizens. The rate of growth, heaviest in very recent years, seems likely to continue.

The mass use of motor vehicles has made huge cities common. Yet in the absence of adequate foresight and planning, this trend is already exacting its toll on city dwellers. Traffic is not our only headache but it presents a problem which must be tackled energetically before long.

In fact, traffic and parking is receiving much consideration. Early in July, the Toronto and York Planning Board put forward a statement stressing the urgency of coping with traffic and parking requirements. Partnered with its data on motor vehicle congestion was a strong recommendation that the public transportation facilities be expanded. One month later, the Board released a 'Transportation Plan for Metropolitan Toronto' prepared for it by Norman D. Nilson, a consulting engineer. This is now under study by officials in all thirteen metropolitan municipalities. The City Works Committee, in a spurt of fall activity, has made recommendations on several major traffic improvements--removal of the jog in the Clifton Road extension, widening of the Avenue Road bottleneck, extension of St. George Street and the Yonge Street widening.

In a brief statement, it is quite impossible to deal with all issues comprehensively, or to advance a complete blueprint for action. Nevertheless there is a place for timely comment.

Congestion

Today traffic tie-ups are a constant annoyance to all who use our city streets. Accidents are obviously more frequent where heavy traffic is jamming through narrow thoroughfares lined with parked cars. But the threat to life and limb is not our only economic loss. Motor transport made possible huge savings in the cost of moving goods and transacting other business; in our cities, congestion is wiping out a large and increasing part of these gains. As the Planning Board points out, sharply dropping property values in the central business district and excessive and costly decentralization will be the price of failure to take remedial measures.

Relief

Civic officials have been at work to aid the situation. Several major widenings are in progress and, as well, straightening of streets and throat widenings at intersections have been carried out. The T.T.C. has given financial support to construction of safety islands. The city is installing more automatic signals and erecting new street name signs. Construction of additional subways to eliminate level rail crossings is in progress. Lining ninety-three miles of main arteries where accidents have been most frequent, new overhead lighting has been installed. Material shortages prevented full installations over three-fifths of the distance and now the programme is halted to conserve power. Traffic engineering services which were split among four civic departments have been consolidated this year under the Traffic Engineering Section of the City Planning Department. An increased budget for this Section must be provided next year to make the consolidation effective. Street parking regulations have been under review and a survey of downtown parking is in progress.

Further Need

With all this activity, what is lacking from a well-rounded programme of transit betterment? For one thing, the construction of main traffic routes is proceeding in fits and starts with much doubling back on proposed plans. The western portion of the proposed lakeshore expressway came within an ace of going before the ratepayers last voting day. Since then it has received some publicity but no serious follow-up. The question to be asked now is whether it will be shelved for another year? Early this year two plans were advanced for dealing with the Avenue Road-Davenport intersection. They had the appearance of serious proposals. Yet the Planning Board has now written off both alternatives and is showing little enthusiasm for the widening scheme presently approved by City Council.

The Avenue Road congestion is proving a hard nut to crack. It is not regarded as practical from the angle of traffic flow to re-route street cars along Bathurst or other existing lines. Estimates show that it would be very costly to carve out a new street car route for use until the Yonge Street subway is completed. And short of removing the car tracks, proposals made so far are either too expensive or only partially effective. If elected representatives would

re-think the position, they might perhaps take the view that an answer for Avenue Road has not yet been found. Instead there is a rush to secure approval of a scheme, which will call for a capital expenditure, possibly with the idea that 'any answer is better than no answer before the year-end.'

It has been suggested that the coming elections may also have influenced the revival of the Yonge Street widening scheme. Be that as it may, the Toronto Planning Board has become much involved in drafting partial improvements. General preoccupation with this work has held back completion of a comprehensive blueprint. Annual elections have contributed to a short-sighted attitude on traffic planning. But even within this framework, public opinion can encourage greater foresight. Until we know where we are headed, until the major improvements are mapped out, along with priorities for construction and financing, it might be better to call a halt on such projects. Otherwise the taxpayer may have to pay for costly miscalculations.

Meanwhile, there is much traffic work of an obvious and non-controversial nature shouting for attention. For example, the condition of pavements on certain secondary streets has not been kept up to even a decent minimum standard. Last spring, the pavement on Huron Street, to give one example, was studded with pot holes. This condition forced additional local traffic onto crowded St. George Street and Spadina Road. The value of allocating more funds to this and other less spectacular works should not be overlooked.

'Fringe' Parking

It may surprise some Toronto people to learn that our city was especially mentioned at the 1948 Canadian Mayors' Conference in Halifax as one metropolitan centre on the continent operating 'fringe' parking facilities with a shuttle bus service to the downtown area. The space is maintained, at the intersection of Fleet and Yonge Streets by the Toronto Harbour Commission. Its three lots will accommodate 1,560 automobiles. The service is not entirely new. The largest lot, with a capacity of 800 cars, was one which before the war took the emergency overflow from the two adjacent parking areas then operated by the Commission. About the close of 1947, it was resurfaced at City expense and put into full service. This was the time of the civic by-law prohibiting all street parking between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. in a central downtown area. To further the plan, the T.T.C. set up a five-cent bus service looping the three lots and running north to Temperance Street. Although the complete prohibition was debated from the time it became effective and lasted just five months, the Harbour Commission has continued to operate the three lots and the T.T.C. is carrying on its bus services on a reduced schedule.

An examination of the Harbour parking area points up facts about Toronto's parking problem that have a wider application.

The Harbour Commissioners' job is management of the port and industrial development of harbour lands. While the Commissioners are aware of the City's traffic problem, they could hardly hold the land for parking if faced with an attractive offer from someone seeking an

industrial site. For City Council has taken no action to ensure the long-term use of the area for parking. Much off-street parking space in the metropolitan community is on land with a "for sale" sign and the time has come when alternative properties suitable for parking cannot always be found as present lots are taken up for other uses. The City would be advised to give immediate attention, not only to safeguarding the "fringe" lots at Fleet Street, but also to surveying the need to conserve other land now used for parking.

In spite of Toronto's "suffering acres" in the heart of the business section, the Fleet Street lots are on the average less than two-thirds filled. The cinder surface makes them not too attractive but perhaps a more important factor is that motorists will not park further from their point of call than they can help. They want proximity, mobility and low cost. They will cruise on busy streets to find space and burrow their way in. While the Harbour parking rates are moderate (20¢ per day), motorists will, if they can, use free space and the streets adjacent to these lots provide one such area. Here three-hour parking is allowed. But it has been reported, and confirmed by actual check, that automobiles are regularly long overstaying this limit without penalty. It may be that the three hour limit is not really required in this area. But breaking this regulation is important not so much in itself but as a symptom of what can and does happen elsewhere. Parking regulations which are regarded as unnecessary and irritating are not likely to be observed. Not only should just the needed controls be imposed but these must then be sold to the public as essential. Thereafter they should be rigidly enforced and normal penalties exacted for violations. The commercial firm engaged for the traffic survey shows an awareness of the value of gaining public cooperation which the traffic division of the police department might well imitate.

Parking regulations should be set up carefully, revised cautiously, enforced fairly and publicized constantly.

Broad Planning

The Wilson report on metropolitan transportation underlines the fact that transportation control and planning "cannot be limited to the individual municipality included in a metropolitan city." Unified transportation administration is the most essential change necessary for efficiency in the urban services of Greater Toronto. This is a recommendation which finds much support. There has been interest, too, and much controversy regarding the sweeping traffic proposals for the metropolis and a large area beyond. The total programme would run high in the millions.

These bold expenditures are recognized by Mr. Wilson and he suggested a method of financing which has raised sharp opposition. Motorists and transit passengers would pay the major cost--a highly debatable scheme.

At the same time, critics of the report should not overlook the associated proposal to meet capital costs on a "pay-as-you-go" plan. Where such large sums are involved, there is a real argument for requiring some capital to be provided from current public funds. This year, New York State law requires 10 percent of capital works undertaken by its municipalities to be financed on a "pay-as-you-go" basis. In 1949, the mandatory portion is to be 12 percent. The proportion of "cash down" may seem painful but it sets a realistic limit on long-term undertakings in line with what taxpayers can afford. This is a wise safeguard which might well be employed for all Toronto capital undertakings.

J G Rogers
President

Eric Hardy
Director