

Re: Henry Aubin and Trolley Buses...

Dear Editor,

Henry Aubin favours trolley buses over tramways because of their moderate price tag. ("Trolley buses are clear winner", The Gazette, Sat., Dec. 23, 2006, p.B7). But is price the only basis on which to choose a mode of transport? Saving money in the short term has led to a deteriorated public transit infrastructure that discourages ridership.

Witness the MTC's feeble increase in patronage in an age of rising oil prices. Only the AMT's commuter rail lines had a more vibrant increase. Trains are viewed as a more attractive, roomy and comfortable alternate form of transport than buses, be they diesel or electric. Call it the "snob factor", but buses are viewed as the vehicle of last resort reserved for students and the less fortunate. Perception becomes reality, and urban planners must take this into account.

The Toronto Transit Commission eliminated trolley buses more than a decade ago, but, like Calgary, it has improved its LRT system. Toronto has prospered with its streetcars. Montreal has been on a downward spiral ever since it switched to noisy, polluting buses. Is there a connection? US conservative activist Paul Weyrich suggests that a major reason for the deterioration of the downtown core in preautomotive cities can be attributed to the demise of urban rail transit. New Jersey Transit's Riverline is a prime example where light rail encourages urban renewal and Transit Oriented Development.

LRT's need not block motoring traffic. They can use reserved lanes and dormant or derelict freight rail lines like the Doney Spur in the West Island and the Lasalle Loop. Separate lanes allow increased speeds, more capacity and better service. Continuous welded rail removes the so-called "clickety-clack racket". Steel on steel is more energy efficient than rubber on pavement due to less friction. Fewer drivers are needed for LRT's than for trolley buses to carry the same passenger load as tramways' capacity is greater.

Esthetically, overhead wires can be eliminated by installing shockproof trough and shoe technology that runs parallel to the railway track. This was present on some of the lines of the defunct Washington, DC, streetcar system. LRT's and Ultra Light Vehicles can also run on batteries, hydrogen fuel cells and flywheels as well as renewable biodiesel.

Replacing existing bus lines with electric trolley buses in order to mitigate greenhouse gases is a good idea. Avoid the chromium plated option: Conventional, off-the-shelf trams are just as effective. Incremental improvements are the wiser choice. If Montrealers want to have a robust, expansive, and attractive public transit system, LRT's are the only economical means. They will attract new riders and get motorists out of their cars. In effect, they offer more bang for the buck.

Yours Sincerely,

Avrom David Shtern,
Dec. 24, 2006.