

COMMUTER CUT – Follow-up

There has been a lot of feedback since the first posting – some of it very thoughtful. There were two related issues—use of the rail cut, and use of the south end port lands. Contributors typically focused on one or the other.

SOUTH END PORT LANDS

Some comments recognized the possibilities for the lands, and noted that many famous harbours around the world had made similar choices. Some saw the possibilities for redevelopment to complement Point Pleasant Park, the new NSCAD campus, and Pier 21. Many suggested the location as ideal for a new performing arts centre.

The local International Longshoreman's Association president fumed that hundreds of millions of dollars of activity would be lost—perhaps he did not notice, or wilfully ignored, the fact that the number of containers to be handled would not much change (never mind that container handling does not produce anything like that much economic activity).

Senior officials at the Port Corporation graciously invited me to their offices to hear the case for port expansion. There is an argument that the advent of larger ships will somewhat improve Halifax's prospects for traffic to and from Europe, and that adding a berth is important to attracting them. But the widening of the Panama Canal will move Halifax from first to last port of call for some of the Asian trade that currently travels via the Suez Canal. I heard no persuasive argument why that 45% traffic would not be at risk after 2014.

Nevertheless, the Port is planning to spend \$37,000,000 on extending the Halterm Pier southward a further 80 meters, further despoiling the vista from Point Pleasant Park. Why does it make sense for a facility running at 25% of capacity to expand?

RAIL CUT

Not surprisingly there were a number of comments from the hundred or so adjacent homeowners. Some argued that commuters from outside the peninsula knew that they were facing long commutes when they bought, so they should not expect improvements that discomfited existing peninsula residents. Of course on this logic, no bridges would have been built across the harbour, and we would still be going to and from Truro via old Route 2.

Others from outside the peninsula saw the benefit in terms of commute times, including many from well outside Halifax. Within the peninsula, people liked the reduction in truck traffic (I should have emphasized that the 500 trips cited were one way trips) and reduced pressure on existing routes.

Many people – including the Ecology Action Centre – argued instead for commuter rail. This is, on the surface, an attractive idea. It would require no amendment to the existing rail cut profile. But it would require new tracks and new trains, and new stations in suburbia with lots of parking. The biggest problem is the terminus at the Via Rail station. Most travellers would need a three-part trip to get to their destination—to the suburban station, on the train, from the south end to downtown. Commuters will avoid travel options that are slower than taking a car. There may be a valid case for commuter rail but I have been unable to discern it.

WHAT NEXT?

The original posting did not argue that this was a “shovel-ready” project. What it did ask was that a study should be done of the question. To add a bit of detail to that recommendation:

1. Port officials advocate strongly for the prospects for container traffic, and they do it well. It is not their role to balance those prospects against other possible uses for our harbour front lands. For the past decade, actual traffic has fallen well short of forecasts, and none of their current forecasts would exceed present capacity. The future prospects should be evaluated by an independent expert, with particular focus on the likely impact of the Panama Canal widening.
2. The possible high level costs, usage, and benefits of a commuter rail alternative should be included in the study.
3. In the meantime, a hold should be put on the Halterm extension. It is probably not needed and is certainly not urgent. It is hoped that others will add their voices to this call.

COMMUTER CUT

It takes too long to get to the urban core of Halifax from outside the peninsula. Many commuters report travel times of forty-five minutes to as much as an hour and a half, much too high for a city of less than 400,000 people.

There is a great opportunity to better use our south end port lands and the rail cut that accesses them.

The rail cut from downtown to Bayers Road can be converted to vehicular use, plus adjacent space for active transportation. It is assumed that this would require little adjustment to the current profile of the rail cut, in which case, the proposal would cost much less to implement than the combined truck and rail proposal considered in early 2009. Public transit vehicles would of course have priority access. Commuters using this route could expect substantial savings in travel time and the existing routes would be less congested. Greenhouse gas emissions would be correspondingly reduced.



This would substantially reduce travel times for people coming into the downtown area for work, study, entertainment, or health care. It can dramatically improve Halifax's attractiveness as a place to live or visit.

The south end terminal lands and associated rail yards could become an extension of the downtown core, building on recent exciting additions such as the Farmer's Market and the new NSCAD campus. With over 100 acres of space, there is opportunity for enhanced public spaces as well as low rise mixed-use developments. Truck traffic along the waterfront would be dramatically reduced.

In spite of energetic marketing and a dedicated workforce, our container ports have seen market share shrink as quickly as the market has grown. More recently volumes have reduced below the level seen in 2000. The Fairview Cove facility can easily handle today's traffic volumes as well as reasonable growth for many years into the future, so the impact on port jobs of consolidating container handling there should be small.

Government should immediately commission a proper evaluation of the proposal. In the meantime please join the conversation.

Halifax is fortunate to have a very attractive urban core. There are substantial green areas remaining from the original Halifax Common. The downtown business area is compact and well populated with historical sites, restaurants, and entertainment and cultural venues. The harbor provides a wonderful backdrop.

But getting in and out is often difficult, not only for commuters but also for those coming in from the suburbs or further away for business, health care, sports events, or concerts. The travel times by car or bus are unacceptable for a city of less than 400,000 people. Bicycle riders are even worse off—there are no acceptably safe routes into downtown from outside the peninsula.

The situation is likely to deteriorate as the city continues to grow. Part of the response must be to increase use of transit, and to create employment clusters outside of the urban core and closer to where many people live—for example, the business cluster that will develop around the RIM office in Bedford West. But the ability to quickly get in and out of downtown will always be important.

In March of 2009, a study was released which examined the cost and benefit of using the rail cut to divert truck traffic (and perhaps some transit and emergency vehicles) on a roadway to be constructed adjacent to the rail lines. This involved substantial demolition and removal of rock so the cost was very high—over \$200,000,000 for each of the variations considered. Given that there are only 500 trucks a day that would use the service, the benefits to commuters using city streets were negligible. Unsurprisingly the idea was rejected.

The report's authors were asked to address the wrong question. The right question is this: What would the costs and benefits be of using the rail cut for vehicles (including bicycles) instead of trains? Interestingly the benefits to transportation are only half the story.

PORT OF HALIFAX







A principal reason for Halifax's founding and subsequent growth has been its harbor – important for both military and trade purposes. It is also a major part of what makes Halifax so attractive.

The port is a major employer, providing more than 4,000 direct jobs in several locations including the south end container terminal operated by Halterm, the cruise ship docks, auto port, oil and gypsum terminals, Richmond terminals, and the Fairview Cove container terminal operated by Ceres.



Apart from cruise ships (for which the rail link is not relevant) the primary activity at the South End location takes place at the Halterm container terminal. For many years staff at the port has worked hard to increase traffic but the results have been disappointing. The combined market share of Halterm and Ceres among east coast ports has consistently dropped and the actual number of containers in 2009 was less than were handled in 2000. Part of the challenge is that most of the containers are destined for remote inland destinations such as Chicago, and it is cheaper for shippers to use locations that involve more sea travel and less rail. The local market does not provide much of a base volume. The amount of container traffic at the two terminals combined is only enough to fill one train per day.

Containerized Cargo (TEUs)

2004		525, 553
2005		550, 462
2006		530, 772
2007		490, 072
2008		387, 347
2009		344, 811

Some believe that the advent of post-Panamax ships will provide a special opportunity for Halifax. But the prospect of a widened Panama Canal and deeper dredging in New York and other east coast ports make this advantage likely to be transitory.

According to the Port's website (www.portofhalifax.ca): "Halifax has capacity to more than triple its current container volume. With minimal expansion

and efficiency upgrades, Halifax could handle 2.5 million TEUS.” Given that volumes in recent years have been less than 500,000 TEU’s, it appears that the Fairview Cove site can easily handle all of today’s traffic volume and still have room for expansion. So there should be little job loss resulting from consolidation of the container facilities.

The Opportunity to Enhance our Capital City

We need to think of the area currently occupied by the container terminal and associated rail yards as part of our harbor, without necessarily being part of the port. Together they represent over one hundred acres of opportunity. There are already exciting developments in the area—a new NSCAD campus, Farmer’s Market, Pier 21, expanded cruise ship facilities and the Cunard Center. These can represent the beginning of an extraordinary transformation. One can imagine a much more attractive transition from Point Pleasant Park to the sea, with additional public spaces, especially for the arts, and ocean access for recreational purposes. Low rise mixed use developments in the rail yard area and adjacent space would be consistent with the neighborhood. Knocking down the little used grain elevators (admittedly a daunting proposition) would open a whole new feeling for the nearby apartment dwellers. Moving Via Rail further out—say to where the rail cut meets Bayers Road or closer to Fairview Cove—would create additional land development opportunity.

Of course the commercial interests of Halterm, CN, and other affected port users need to be understood and their legal rights respected. For CN this might actually prove to be a win, with profits from land sales and fewer tracks to maintain. Halterm will have rights under its lease from the port corporation.

IMPACT ON TRAVEL TIMES

The proposal to be studied should include three elements:

- a. Two-way vehicle traffic. Assuming that this could be achieved with minimal need for additional blasting and removal of rock the cost should be dramatically less than was shown for the March 2009 truck and rail study. Buses and emergency vehicles would have priority, as perhaps would vehicles with more than one passenger. It may make sense to exclude trucks but in any event, most of the heavy truck traffic would cease with the relocation of the container handling.

Access to the road should be provided at only two locations. Incoming “On” access might be provided at the bottom of the Bicentennial Highway and below Roosevelt Drive. “Off” could be behind Sears and at Bayers Road.

An evaluation should be made of using both lanes for traffic coming in during the morning peak and going out during the afternoon peak.

- b. An adjacent bike path commencing in the vicinity of the rotary and continuing to the bottom of Francklyn Street. Typically this would be at normal grade rather than in the cut. For the most part, the necessary space is available but occasional cantilevering may be required. Frequent on and off opportunities—for example at the universities—can be easily provided. Biking to work or just for exercise is a great outdoor activity. This is important to attracting and retaining young entrepreneurs and professionals.
- c. Adjacent walking space (shared with the bike path) following the concept proposed by The Halifax Urban Greenway Association, at least from south street to Francklyn street.

There would be a substantial saving of time for anyone needing to come into the urban core under this proposal, whether for work, study, health care, or entertainment. And the pressure on other routes would be reduced.

IMPACT ON ADJACENT RESIDENCES

A good sense for which existing homes are impacted can be had by looking at Google maps – “Map of Halifax”.

It will be seen that substantial sections of the tracks are within park areas or back on to institutional buildings. Many of the adjacent houses have a street between them and the tracks. Nevertheless, there are close to one hundred homes that may experience some ongoing impact of the change. Efforts to minimize could include:

- a. Relatively low speed limits—say 50 km/hr. It should seem like a street, not a highway.
- b. Perhaps prohibiting trucks above a certain size.
- c. The greenway and bike paths should be designed to provide buffering for residences.
- d. In some cases residences should be provided with security fencing between them and the paths.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

Some might argue that facilitating automobile traffic is a step in the wrong direction. But the reality is that the many downtown jobs associated with universities, hospitals, offices, military, and associated services will always be there.

This will help greenhouse gas emissions by making bike travel possible, reducing transit times, favoring high occupancy vehicles, and eliminating container-bearing truck traffic.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION...

This narrative has not benefited from any new engineering or financial study. It proposes a question to be properly addressed both by professionals doing the calculations and by interested citizens contributing ideas.

Comments of all kinds are welcome. Here are some questions on which we would particularly like to hear:

1. Do you commute from outside the peninsula? From where (first three digits of postal code would be great)? How long does it take? How much time might this idea save you?
2. Do you like the idea? Is it worth it for government to do the study?
3. If a decision was made to discontinue use of the land for a container terminal and rail yards, what kind of uses would you favor for the land that became available?
4. The Dartmouth downtown area has many of the same advantages as the urban core but it has not had its fair share of development. A contributing factor is the rail yards between it and the harbor which perform a necessary function in support of the refinery and auto port. Is there another way that support can be provided? Are there other obstacles to more active development of Dartmouth downtown?
5. Are there other ideas to reduce travel times, especially for commuters from the Dartmouth side?