

CFRA op-ed – Wednesday March 10, 2010

By Bay Ward Councillor Alex Cullen:

Hi folks – today I want to talk to you about the City’s Rapid Transit Plan. That’s the \$2.1 billion project that seeks to convert part of the Transitway – from Tunney’s Pasture to Blair Road – to electric light rail, and includes a tunnel through the downtown.

This is going to be the single most transformational project for our city, but it also has been controversial.

A previous version of light rail transit going north-south led to the defeat of a sitting mayor in the last municipal election, and today’s plan has led one mayoral candidate to suggest pushing the “reset” button on this project.

This radio station has provided a platform for those who want to retain the bus way feature of our Transitway, instead of electric light rail. Others have questioned the need for a tunnel downtown.

Well, we could sit here and gaze at our navels forever questioning all our options, or we can decide and act.

And we must act. Our city is growing and our successful Transitway system is reaching capacity. Ottawa is expected to reach 1 million people by 2021 and already we are carrying a quarter of a million daily on our Transitway system. Our public transit system is getting clogged crossing the downtown, where 70% of the region’s jobs are. We are losing reliability and capacity today, with no ability to accommodate growth tomorrow.

The solution is a tunnel to take people quickly through the downtown, and electric light rail. Moving transit underground avoids the congestion clogging the downtown and moving to electric light rail improves both capacity and reliability, and allows our public transit system to grow. We get to carry more people by LRT more cheaply than by bus, and more comfortably too.

Can we afford this? Yes we can. We have the support from our federal and provincial funding partners to the tune of \$1.2 billion. The City is in a strong fiscal position to cover the rest of the costs, with a Triple-A credit rating and access to gas tax rebates to cover the debt payments.

There are those who doubt and would dither, but we can’t afford to dither and delay – this city must grow and meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Our time is now, Ottawa – let’s get moving!