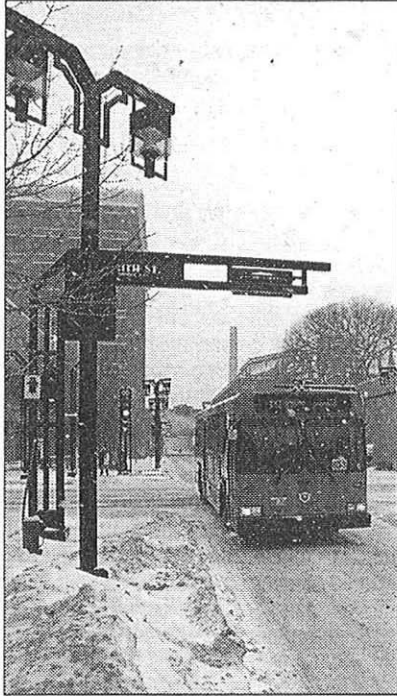


sitelines

BY STEVE COHLMAYER



Street's vitality not improved by bus corridor

SOMETIMES a compromise really isn't better than nothing. And sometimes the successful negotiators end up believing that the deal was really what they wanted in the first place.

This kind of memory is great for one's sense of self-worth, but it can be destructive, too.

We have a recent example of this process at work in our downtown. Several years ago, our city's transit department wanted to make Graham Avenue into a buses-only corridor.

But the city's planning department wanted to keep the street open to automobile traffic in order to assure the health of commerce on the street.

Following an intensive negotiation process, it was agreed that Graham west of Eaton's, where there was significant commercial development, would be open to both cars and buses, while Graham east of Eaton's would be reserved for buses because there was no commerce there anyway.

As a result of the closing of east Graham, we have reached a situation in which cars travelling east in downtown have no alternative routes between Portage and York avenues — a distance of over 1,500 feet, or nearly half a kilometre.

It is not possible to enter the Centennial Library parkade without first going north of Portage Avenue.

And the new arena will impose new loads on downtown traffic right where these issues are a problem.

The city has just started a program of signage helping drivers find their way to parking structures, but cannot get those drivers from south of Portage directly to the library parking lot. And Graham Avenue east remains one of the least attractive and underused areas in our downtown.

When challenged on this policy, the planning department's response has been that a deal was struck and that everything is fine — which may be true, but I doubt it.

Many buses-only malls all over the world have been reopened to car traffic because of the enervating effect of large areas with awkward or non-existent car movement.

The compromise really did give up something significant in our downtown by making local automobile traffic difficult, and while the lack of development on east Graham cannot be blamed on the decision to keep cars out, that decision has not helped encourage development, either.

I am, of course, not advocating the dominance of high-speed car movement.

A truism in the world of planning and urban design is that fast cars are bad, but that slow cars — with lots of stopping and starting and inning and outing and shopping — are a tremendously enlivening part of our urban scene.

This truism holds as much for Graham Avenue as it does for the streets of New York or San Francisco.

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