

'Detours' can be better than original direction

By Stephen Cohlmeier

THE demise of the new transit system took a lot of people by surprise; our new mayor threw us a lemon; but here we are.

The mayor has stated that \$7 million of the moneys originally slated for the transit corridor will now be dedicated to improvements to the city's transit system.

This is a paltry sum compared to the original tri-level government commitment, but it is still real money.

Which got me thinking about possible ways to make lemonade.

Winnipeg grew up around and along its original ox-cart routes. These routes roughly parallel the banks of our rivers, and 200 years later remain our primary arteries for movement and commerce. (For those who do not know of these routes, look at a map of Winnipeg, and trace the lines of Portage Avenue, Main Street, Henderson Highway, St. Mary's Road and Pembina Highway.)

These arteries — and a few others which link our city together — are the funnels for nearly all movement around the city; and these funnels provide access to the networks of streets between the arteries.

Mass transit

Those who have lived in or visited cities with effective mass transit know that where there is really good bus and subway service it is used by all strata of the population, and is the preferred way to move around the city.

The defining characteristic of successful systems is that service is remarkably frequent at nearly any time of day or night. Wait times of five to seven minutes are the norm, and it is this frequency which allows users to simply show up at the bus stop or the subway station with confidence that a bus or train will soon be there.

Winnipeg Transit has a commitment to provide service within a reasonable walking distance of any home in the city.

With the thousands of miles of streets in Winnipeg, this commitment to provide local access results in hundreds of thousands of bus-miles driven every year through lower-density suburbs.

Winnipeg Transit estimates that nearly 50 per cent of its bus-miles are through these areas. Even with this commitment to broadly-based service, wait times between buses in these areas are often between 45 and 90 minutes during the periods of best service.

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It has been estimated by Winnipeg Transit that if service to the capillaries — or smaller residential streets — were discontinued, and if all of those bus-miles were assigned to the city's main arteries, transit could provide five to seven minute wait times for bus users along those arteries for 14-16 hours per day.

The impact on ease-of-use and ridership would be immense, and within its current budgets, our transit system could easily provide a level of service comparable to that found in other great cities of the world.

So what about all of the people in the lower-density areas? Would they be left high and dry?

Dr. Barry Prentice, director of the Transport Institute of the University of Manitoba, has an appealing answer to this concern.

Dr. Prentice argues that private enterprise has the ability to serve the low-density routes.

Routes

Private businesses could obtain licences either for specified routes or zones of the city, and could provide service on a relatively frequent basis in smaller buses, holding 8-12 passengers.

These jitneys succeeded in many markets around the world. Many of these markets have economic and development patterns similar to those found in Winnipeg. There is no reason to believe that this solution would not work here.

Jitney routes could connect to (heated!) transit stations on the arteries and provide an integrated, high-quality service throughout Winnipeg.

This proposition is not far-out, and is eminently doable.

The city could use the \$7 million slated for transit improvement to realize a first phase of this system. The cost and risk would be modest, and the benefits of success could be significant.

One of the nice things about detours is that they can prove more rewarding than the original direction — and the lemonade could be better than what we planned before.

Stephen Cohlmeier is a Winnipeg architect