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Mr. Merv Tweed

Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

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• (1705)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Merv Tweed (Brandon—Souris, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to meeting number 11 of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. As our orders of the day, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we have the study of the national public transit strategy.

Joining us today from the Université du Québec à Montréal, we have Florence Junca-Adenot, director, Forum URBA 2015.

We apologize for our tardiness. We had votes going on.

I think what I'll do is have you make your presentation, and we'll just keep an eye on the clock as to how much time we have to get through questions. Please begin.

[Translation]

Mrs. Florence Junca-Adenot (Director, Forum URBA 2015, Université du Québec à Montréal): Thank you.

Thank you for inviting me.

I was asked to talk about public transit issues, the Canadian government's role and funding. I will try to do that in 10 minutes.

In my opinion, the key challenge in the area of transportation is implementing in Canadian cities what we call sustainable urban mobility—mainly involving public transit—in order to create conditions that will help improve the economic welfare of cities and provinces.

So why broaden the issue to include transport? Because that involves developing urban environments and transport modes that support the efficient movement of people and goods. That approach also involves making effective environmental choices, in terms of non-renewable resources, that will lead to a better quality of life for Canadians and an enhanced environment more attractive to companies and investors. This kind of a debate is now taking place not only in Canadian cities, but also around the world. This is what success in cities depends on in the 21st century.

Public transit is at the heart of urban issues. It is one of the key solutions to the five foremost urban challenges over the next few years. I will use the example of the Montreal region as a test case because that is the one I am most familiar with. However, we could use the same analysis for other Canadian cities simply by changing the figures.

The first issue is related to the economy. Economic development goes through the big cities, which compete with each other to attract

investments and investors, find market niches and survive. The current cost of urban congestion is very alarming. The Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal assessed the costs related to the loss of working hours at \$1.4 billion a year. The Association du camionnage du Québec, Quebec's trucking association, estimated that freight transportation efficiency had decreased by 30% in the Montreal region in September 2011.

In addition to the costs of congestion are those of public transit, which, inversely, helps companies and individuals save money. The dependency on oil, which is expensive, encourages the development of public transit. In Quebec, only \$18 billion is spent on oil. Nevertheless, that amount will increase with the rise in the price of oil, despite all possible efforts to enhance energy efficiency. All Canadian provinces, and not only Quebec, must develop the industrial market of advanced transportation, which includes public transit. That is an area where we can succeed and develop very significant industrial approaches. Therefore, in terms of the economy, everything favours the development of public transit.

The second issue concerns the environment. I am stating the obvious by saying that greenhouse gases are produced by the ground transportation people use. In Quebec, ground transportation accounts for 43% of greenhouse gases; in urban centres, that figure can be as high as 50% or 60%. Therefore, the fight against climate change and the prevention of health problems, diseases and accidents are not only beneficial to the environment. They are also beneficial to the economic life and the quality of urban life we need to attract people and build healthy cities.

The third issue is demographic in nature. We are going through a period of demographic stability and population aging that virtually all major Canadian cities are experiencing. Let's just say that this phenomenon is rather prominent in the Montreal region. Such a backdrop will contribute to a rise in different housing needs. People will want smaller homes that are closer to services. There will be a significant increase in public and specialized transit needs. Cities will have to be reconstructed so that services are set up in areas close to people. At the same time, there will be fewer taxpayers to fund those increased services. We have to give some thought to this kind of a phenomenon and find the appropriate solutions. Public transit is part of the solution. I will share some figures that are always a little bit frightening: in five years' time, people over the age of 50 will outnumber people under 30 in Quebec and in the Montreal region. We have to think about the consequences in the future.

The fourth issue is related to transportation, of course. Tackling congestion means increasing accessibility to workplaces, educational institutions and service points; facilitating freight transportation means sustaining economic vitality. What does that mean?

• (1710)

That means rethinking road and highway strategies in urban environments, decreasing the number of cars in cities and developing public transit services. The Montreal region has set a very ambitious target of increasing the use of public transport services by 40% by the year 2020 and increasing modal shares by five points. It's also important to promote active transportation, such as walking and cycling, as well as carpooling. The use of clean energy for public and individual transit must also be encouraged, in particular by going ahead with electrification and moving freight transportation forward. Not much is being said about freight transportation, but that takes place in cities as well. More transshipment centres should be planned, intermodality should be promoted, and trucks should be replaced with trains and smaller trucks.

Last but not least is the fifth issue, which also puts public transit at the heart of the strategies. I am talking about development. We cannot work on public transit if we do not work on city development strategy. Rurbanization is the biggest waste—and I did just say “waste”—of public funds and municipal services. It is the biggest contributor to urban congestion. It increases and prolongs car travel. It never ends, and it cancels out the progress achieved through public transit.

So, we need public transit, but also different developmental planning. We need to recreate human-scale multifunctional communities, based on the TOD principles. Quality living environments must be made available in order to keep families and seniors in cities; retain immigrants and the population; attract investors and companies; and preserve blue, green and agricultural spaces we will need in the coming years.

Those five issues make it necessary to develop public transit.

I am now getting to the role of the Government of Canada. We must adopt integrated courses of action. We must work both on revising land-use planning rules based on the TOD models, and on increasing the available public and active ecological transport services. We must also change the way cars are used by limiting their circulation in urban centres and focus on the funding of public transit on a regional basis, thereby strengthening solidarity and involving all three levels of government.

In the Montreal region alone, \$23 billion will be needed over the next few years to achieve that 40% increase in the use of public transit. Half of that amount will go into just replacing public transit infrastructure, such as old subways, trains, stations, terminals, and so on, and, of course, into applying efficiency measures.

Against that backdrop, the Government of Canada has a role to play in ground transportation. I have outlined six potential components of that role.

First, the government must develop a national public transit policy, coupled with a controlled urban planning policy and an urban road policy promoting the growth of accessible public transit in cities.

Second, the government must provide more funding for renewing and developing public transit infrastructure.

Five years ago, the government made a good decision by imposing a federal excise tax on fuel to the tune of 10¢ a litre, half of which goes back to the provinces to fund municipal infrastructure—especially its repairs and upgrades—and public transit infrastructure. That effort was extremely important for public transit and had very good results. Perhaps the government should also distribute the second half of that tax to the provinces for municipal infrastructure, while keeping its sights set on public transit.

Therefore, the government must develop an infrastructure program. Major infrastructural elements such as subways and trains are now replacing highways and roads in urban areas. The government must create a new three-part program for infrastructure to replace the Building Canada Plan. The fact of the matter is that all Canadian cities are faced with the same problems when it comes to renewing their infrastructure.

Third, the government must work on a rapid intercity network and on airport transport services.

The fourth measure or policy element the government could adopt is a cohesive strategy for renewing and funding federal transportation infrastructure. Such infrastructure exists in a number of Canadian cities. Some of it is in the Montreal region. The Champlain Bridge is not the only example of such infrastructure.

• (1715)

Fourth, the government must work on freight transportation by renewing practices through incentive mechanisms. That will not take care of itself.

Finally, the government must promote research and knowledge acquisition regarding sustainable public transit technologies, their industrialization, strategic approaches, and data and information sharing.

That wraps up my presentation. I went over the 10 minutes. I will gladly answer your questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: You did very well. Thank you.

Mr. Nicholls.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you for allowing this meeting to continue.

I want to thank our witness, Ms. Junca-Adenot.

I have been lucky enough to attend your seminars for years as part of the Forum URBA 2015. I think that forum makes it possible to share global best practices.

We in the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities are questioning our governance model. We want to find examples of effective public transit strategies that have been implemented elsewhere in the world. I would like us to benefit from your expertise on public transit systems in other countries. Could you share with us some similar strategies developed abroad?

Mrs. Florence Junca-Adenot: I will give you some examples. You have seen that I integrate issues on city planning, urban design options, road transportation and public transit. In other words, we are shooting ourselves in the foot by looking into just one area.

I want to share the example of Portland, Oregon. That is one of the most extraordinary cities where, 25 years ago, the urban development and public transit development models were completely overhauled on a regional scale, after the city hit rock bottom. It was no longer livable and was on the brink of bankruptcy. That's when an integrated strategy was developed. Portland is now one of the most attractive, appealing, vibrant and economically prosperous cities in the United States.

It is easier to compare ourselves to cities from our culture than to European cities because we are closer. So, I will share the example of Arlington county, in suburban Washington. Some 25 or 30 years ago, a number of suburban communities adjoining Washington were in trouble. Stores and companies were closing, and the population was leaving. People from the region met and decided to convince the American government and the state government—no small thing, considering that we are talking about Washington—to build a five-station subway line and transform the whole sector into multi-functional communities. The communities would be fairly densely populated around the subway stations, as per the TOD model. Now, everyone wants to live in Arlington in those areas. The rate of public and active transit use is as high as 62%. People are happy. It's beautiful; it's thriving; and it works well.

Europe provides us with some well-known examples of northern cities, such as Stockholm and Copenhagen. Lyons is Montreal's sister city, with which we share a lot of information. The region of Lyons is remarkable for its placement of industrial centres, its heavy public transit services, and its closely located parks and services. It works well.

I could go on, but I want to allow other people to ask questions.

• (1720)

Mr. Jamie Nicholls: Thank you.

[English]

How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

Three minutes? Okay.

[Translation]

You suggested that the remaining 5¢ from the excise tax be redistributed. I think that is a very good idea. The federal government is currently giving 5¢ of the collected 10¢ to the provinces, but it would be good to redistribute the other 5¢.

I have a question about funding mechanisms. Are there any other places in the world where various levels of government work together to provide the required funding to promote public transit systems?

Mrs. Florence Junca-Adenot: There are many models and sources. So, we have to keep in mind every country's political structures. We should be careful with comparisons, as organizational structures are not the same everywhere. Canada is a special case. We have to live with our way of doing things.

The usual sources are gas taxes and registration levies. There are also taxes on the upper road system, in other words, tolls on the upper road system. We have to be careful about inner city cordon tolls, as that does not apply everywhere. In China, there are some policies on that. I know that a study was conducted for the federal government, more specifically, for Transport Canada. Some countries, like China, are starting to use what is referred to as property value capture. That means that the increased land value of real estate developments around public transit hubs is used to fund public transit. A study conducted by someone in Victoria was published two years ago. It is available on Transport Canada's website.

There are other available methods, but they do not really have to do with the central government. Those initiatives are usually local. In some places, such as Portland and France, a tax on wages was authorized to fund all public transit infrastructure. The government must authorize something like that.

There's a whole range of models. The carbon exchange, among other measures, should be established over the next few years. That should generate resources that could be reallocated to directly fund public transit infrastructure in urban areas through green funds.

• (1725)

The Chair: Mr. Coderre, go ahead.

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Thank you for joining us today.

Where national transportation strategy is concerned, are we talking about a funding or a cultural problem? As the head of AMT, you had to deal with Yves Ryan, who was the mayor of my city at the time. Therefore, you know that there are certain realities related to development. We may sometimes feel that all we have to do is impose some sort of a tax. I just want to make it clear that I am not asking this question out of self-interest. As a federal MP, I am wondering whether the role of the Canadian government, as part of this national strategy, is not to focus more on promoting research and development and on facilitating cooperation rather than on advancing operations. When it comes to municipalities, operations are a provincial responsibility. Consequently, there may be no risk of overlap.

In addition, we can now no longer separate the reality of current infrastructure from that of future infrastructure without taking into account the money we will have to invest into transportation equipment, among other things. Am I to understand from your remarks that we should set up an additional dedicated fund to resolve the issue of infrastructure and equipment, for instance?

You may begin by answering those questions. I will have more later.

Mrs. Florence Junca-Adenot: The answer is complicated.

Hon. Denis Coderre: I know.

Mrs. Florence Junca-Adenot: It is primarily a matter of culture and awareness. Elected officials and decision-makers at all levels must also have a solid understanding of what is currently happening in urban environments. It is also a matter of strategy or tactics. We want to move forward, develop economically, be competitive and attract businesses. Understanding the dynamics involved is important. To that I would add—and this goes for all major Canadian cities—a role with a strong focus on disseminating information, and stimulating knowledge sharing and good practices throughout major cities. All that is related to the first level.

At the second level, it wouldn't be a bad idea to have integrated policies. At some point, we had a department of urban affairs, which I worked with. That department handled transportation issues. It provided people with policies to guide them. It was an additional element, but, at the same time, it provided people with ideas. I'm not saying that another department should be created—quite the contrary—but we could have some policies with a number of shared objectives, whereby cities would consider things in a similar way.

That would require funding. You talked about dedicated funds. I believe in dedicated funds. They are a lot more effective. I believe in dedicated funds with performance indicators and set targets. If we make a mistake, we can readjust. That may be the most effective approach.

Hon. Denis Coderre: You talked about demographics earlier. We are facing two major challenges. The first is that, by 2025, 70% or 75% of the population will probably be living in cities.

Mrs. Florence Junca-Adenot: Yes.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Second, I am among those who believe that the future of a given country will depend on cities. In other words, people will no longer identify with a country or a region, but rather with major cities, technocities and hubs such as London, Montreal, Toronto, and so on.

Consequently, shouldn't a national strategy include a change in policy, so as to make that relationship with major cities possible? Montreal, Vancouver and Toronto are cities that facilitate the integration of immigrants; that much is clear. You are aware of the reality of the figures. You talked about developmental planning, but that's not a federal responsibility. Therefore, should we not reshape the country's future through the cities, without involving the Constitution? We should work with all three levels of government to come up with a new deal. In any case, that national strategy will become one of the priorities for the very future of this country.

Wouldn't your cultural shift basically depend on that kind of cooperation from the outset in order to establish this strategy?

• (1730)

Mrs. Florence Junca-Adenot: By ignoring the prerogatives of the provinces—

Hon. Denis Coderre: Exactly.

Mrs. Florence Junca-Adenot:—and those of Quebec; I feel that everything you just said is correct. There is some competition. Currently taking shape are strong, almost autonomous, major cities that will play a considerable role in the economy and exchange.

Unfortunately, the regions and the countryside are losing some of their population. That's not only happening here; it's happening everywhere.

Therefore, we have to help this new configuration develop. That would probably mean eventually taking into consideration—as part of federal-provincial discussions—that type of development we can do nothing about, as it is currently happening.

In 2025, 70% or 75% of our population will be living in cities. I don't mean to frighten you, but in 2010, 81% of people were living in cities in industrial areas. Globally, it is projected that, within 5 to 10 years, 60% of people will be living in cities, major cities, and large urban settings.

Hon. Denis Coderre: What's interesting about you is that you have practical experience and have been part of the decision-making process. You have had very real experience with matters concerning both prevention and planning in transportation.

Briefly, how do you explain the fact that we are still struggling with this congestion problem? Is it because we have too many cooks in the kitchen, too many decision-makers? Is the willingness to work together towards the same objective lacking?

I don't want to put you on the spot, but is the problem political or structural?

Mrs. Florence Junca-Adenot: I will start with the easier part.

The main problem is our inability to control rurbanization. Between 1996 and today, the use of public transit has increased by about 20% to 25% in the Montreal region, depending on the area. However, the number of cars has increased more rapidly, leading to this congestion. Not to mention road work that must be done because infrastructure is aging. That will contribute to the congestion over the next 10 to 15 years. That's the easier answer.

Here's my second answer. There are indeed many people—for instance, mayors and MPs—in the same geographic area who must make decisions at the same time, based on similar thinking. When I started working for AMT, in 1996, there were 105 mayors and towns in my region. When planning is being done, the most important thing is to rally people. All those people must be brought aboard so as to share a certain number of goals. We must make them realize that public transit is a win/win situation, for them and society. Energy and work are needed to bring them on board in order to work together. Generally speaking, people are intelligent and they do come aboard.

From 1982 to 1996, that was the situation in public transit. We worked towards that goal, simply by redeveloping services and using common sense. At first, there was no need for big investments: our focus was on park-and-ride lots, reserved lanes and the reintroduction of suburban trains. That's the second element of the answer.

In terms of structure, there are too many transit authorities and organizations. The same goes for all major Canadian cities. Their numbers should be reduced. There are not just advantages to merging; there are sometimes many drawbacks.

What we need to do is find the governance mode that makes people work together around shared objectives, with set targets and indicators. That's the stick. The carrot is the promise of money if that approach works.

If we take all that into consideration, we will be able to change course by influencing the three levels of government.

• (1735)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

At this point, I'm going to have to end our meeting.

Thank you very much for attending, and I appreciate your patience at our committee.

Ms. Florence Junca-Adenot: Thank you.

The Chair: For members of the committee, on Wednesday we will have a motion in front of us, but I think that's going to be resolved beforehand. We have witnesses called, and I'll expect to see everybody then.

Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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