

Why are my taxes subsidizing people who want to leave town?

More to the Story

By Ben Bennett

Downtown parking is back in the news again, thanks to plans to build a \$13 million multi-storey garage. Council gave it almost unanimous support.

I wasn't at the meeting, but reading the news coverage, I kept asking myself, where is the part about someone asking why we are spending so much money to make it easier for people to leave our city?

I'm the first guy to jump on the bandwagon for better train connections to Toronto and points west. We need to reduce the number of cars on the road and better transit is one way to do that.

I am more than happy to see my provincial tax dollars allocated to the cause and I look forward to seeing great things as Queen's Park allocates the billions it plans to spend to make it happen. (The \$400 million it has earmarked for the Highway 7 freeway nonsense would cover the cost of upgrading the rail lines from K-W to Toronto, so that's a good start.)

But, I am sorry, I am not in favour of my municipal tax dollars being used to build ugly concrete structures so that the folks who are taking the train can park their cars in a prime downtown location all day.

I can perhaps see the logic of spending money to attract people to come downtown – albeit with several reservations - but I don't see the logic of spending money to help them leave.

If most of the good folks who have decided not to drive to the GTA still get into their cars every morning and drive to the station, we need to find out why. I suspect the big issue is convenience. If the bus routes currently in use don't work for them, let's improve transit. What if we spent half of what we plan to shell out on a parking garage on increasing bus frequency and the other half on bike infrastructure? The whole city would benefit from that.

Would that be any crazier than building something that benefits just 350 people – one quarter of one per cent of our population? I don't think so.

Like so many things municipal, I am sure there are other issues that tie in to these decisions, but I would really like to see some hard facts about who is parking downtown, exactly where they are parking, and why.

If people that work downtown are using prime parking spots all day long then address that, don't enable it. I would like to see some alternatives discussed. I would like to see some creativity applied to these issues. Building more garages is like building more highways; it just prolongs the problem.

Whether it's for commuters or for alternative parking when the Baker Street construction starts, it appears we are prepared to spend what amounts to about \$40,000 per space to make life more convenient for one car driver. So what else could we do with this kind of cash?

If we assume the amortized construction cost and maintenance of each parking spot equates to about \$5,000 a year, that's about \$100 a week per car. Even if the parking charges were \$13 per day, the spaces would all need to be fully used seven days a week just to break even – and you would still have tied up a whole bunch of valuable downtown real estate that would do nothing to add to our architectural heritage.

For that kind of dough we could arrange daily pick-up and delivery to every commuter's house, provide an income for several cab drivers and leave the prime downtown spaces for something useful.

Or, how about this? You could finally find a use for the abandoned Imico site in the Ward. Let the commuters park there and run a shuttle in every morning and night. For those folks who have mobility issues, give them a cab pass.

The more I think about it the more concerned I become about how some of these decisions are made. This column may be cheeky, but I am seriously trying to make a point about the ridiculous cost of these things, and why we shouldn't be so ready to say yes when presented with easy, albeit expensive engineering solutions to every challenge we face.

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at www.bbc.guelph.org.)