

PRICE TAGS

Issue 12

November 26, 2003

The Vancouver Effect on Seattle



Tuesday, November 11, 2003

Nickels' downtown vision: Livability

Mayor wants to see more people living in the city's core in taller buildings

Among the questions Mayor Greg Nickels wants -- and expects -- to have on his plate in coming years is this: Where downtown will we put the new elementary school?

As he released the draft environmental impact statement yesterday for increasing the height and density limits for new buildings in several sectors downtown, Nickels outlined his vision for a livable, walkable city that is vibrant 24 hours a day.

For the complete story, [click here](#).

The Seattle Effect on Vancouver



November 25-December 1, 2003 Issue 735

Seattle takes transit lead as politicians steer us astray

City business **Gordon Price**

As a member of the first board of **TransLink**, I had a few moments that were a tad discouraging. Particularly when the moments went on for months. But no matter how bleak things got, I could always console myself that it was probably worse in Seattle.

Ever since the 1960s, when it came to transit, Seattle has been blowing it. Yes, it had the monorail from the 1962 World's Fair but in 1968 Seattle nixed the chance to build a regional rapid-transit system, which today would have been paid for and gone farther than Link Light Rail on which it has just commenced construction. In the meantime, Seattle freeways have filled up or threatened to fall down. The region is split and its initiative system allows charlatans to undo whatever progress the city makes.

That's why I never expected I'd be saying the following: ***In a decade Seattle may have a better integrated transportation system than Vancouver.*** (Click here to continue.)

One example I use to illustrate a lack of focus on alternative transportation for Vancouver is the proposed streetcar

Certainly one would expect that the streetcar proposal would be appealing to COPE as the anti-RAV - something local, affordable, sustainable and sensible. And yet there's no obvious champion for it. Someone like the mayor should be reminding TransLink, the province and the Olympic organizing committee at every turn that they should be putting the streetcar at the centre of their plans.

Which is precisely where it could be, joining up Canada Place, the stadiums and the athletes' village. Without dynamic political leadership, however, the streetcar will not be on the priority list, even though it's affordable at a fraction of the cost of RAV and the Sea-to-Sky expansion.



For more on the Vancouver Streetcar proposal, [click image](#).

Breaking News

FEDERAL 'SHOWCASE' award for Vancouver Region

Central Valley Greenway part of \$35M sustainable transport package to begin in 2004

As I noted in my BIV column, the innovative transportation proposals the region submitted to the Federal Government's 'Showcase' program hadn't gotten the respect they deserve. Turns out I was too precipitous in my judgment.

Today, (Nov 26, 2003) Federal Transport Minister David Collenette announced the winning submissions of the Showcase Program – and Vancouver received \$8.8 million out of the total \$35 million available. (We had asked for \$10 million.)

The joint GVTA/GVRD proposal was created in partnership with the cities of Vancouver, Burnaby, Surrey, New Westminster, Richmond, Delta, Coquitlam, along with contributions from the SFU Community Trust, VanCity Credit Union and BEST

For a detailed description of all six projects, [click here](#).

For background on the Central Valley Greenway, [click here](#).



Other projects included in the winning Vancouver Showcase proposal include:

- Transit Villages: Enhancing public realm design and access to key SkyTrain stations;
- Main Street Corridor Transit and Pedestrian Priority: transit priority measures and pedestrian realm enhancements
- TravelSmart: A residence-based marketing program, targeting households willing to try alternative transportation modes;
- Hybrid Bus Demonstration: Piloting a number of low emission, low noise diesel/electric buses in Greater Vancouver;
- Goods Movement: A study of freight and goods movement efficiencies to help reduce greenhouse gases.

Congratulations to the many people who envisioned, worked on and supported this project. When the results come in, there will be lots of respect to go around!

Back by Popular Demand

THE VANCOUVER PANORAMAS



1978



2003

Eight extraordinary panoramas that reveal how Vancouver has changed over 25 years can now be found in the form of a single slide show at the City of Vancouver's web site by clicking [here](#).



Dan Burden has personally photographed walking and bicycling conditions in over 200 cities and been instrumental in developing traffic-calming programs in scores more. In other words, Dan knows his specs. He sent the following story along as an illustration of why dumb things just keep rolling along

How Specifications Live Forever

When you see a space shuttle sitting on the launch pad, there are two big booster rockets attached to the sides of the main fuel tank. These are the solid rocket boosters, or SRBs.



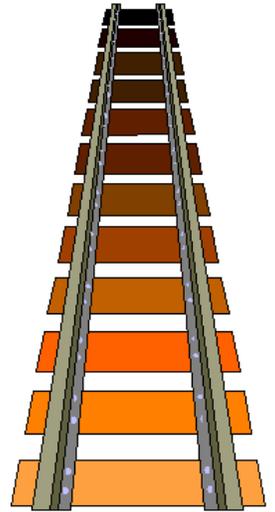
The SRBs are made by Morton Thiokol at a factory in Utah.

Originally, the engineers who designed the SRBs wanted to make them much fatter than they are. Unfortunately, the SRBs had to be shipped by train from the factory to the launch site in Florida and the railroad line runs through a tunnel in the mountains. The SRBs had to be made to fit through that tunnel.

Now, the width of that tunnel is just a little wider than the U.S. Standard Railroad Gauge (distance between the rails) of 4 feet, 8.5 inches.

That's an exceedingly odd number. Why was that gauge used?

Because US railroads were designed and built by English expatriates, and that's the way they built them in England.



And why did the English engineers build them like that?

Because the first rail lines of the 19th century were built by the same craftsmen who built the pre-railroad tramways, and that's the gauge they used.

Why did those craftsmen choose that gauge?

Because they used the same jigs and tools that were previously used for building wagons, and the wagons used that wheel spacing.

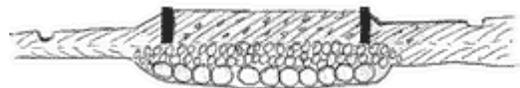
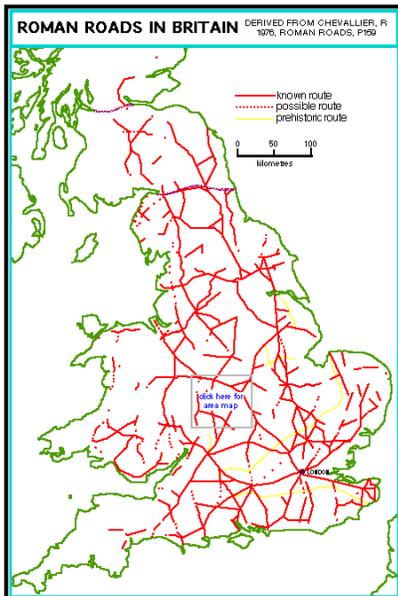


Why did the wagons use that odd wheel spacing?

Well, if the wagon makers and wheelwrights of the time tried to use any other spacing, the wheel ruts on some of the old, long distance roads would break the wagon axles. As a result, the wheel spacing of the wagons had to match the spacing of the wheel ruts worn into those ancient European roads.

So who built those ancient roads?

The first long distance roads in Europe were built by Imperial Rome for the benefit of their legions. The roads have been used ever since.



And the ruts?

The initial ruts, which everyone else had to match for fear of destroying their wagons, were first made by Roman war chariots. And since the chariots were made by Imperial Roman chariot makers, they were all alike in the matter of wheel spacing.



We now have the answer to the original question. The standard railroad gauge of 4 feet, 8.5 inches derives from the original specification for an Imperial Roman army war chariot.

Specs and bureaucracies live forever.

That's nice to know, but it still doesn't answer why the Imperial Roman war chariot designers chose to spec the chariot's wheel spacing at exactly 4 feet, 8.5 inches.

Because that was the width needed to accommodate the rear ends of two Imperial Roman war horses!

Consequently, a major design feature of what is arguably the world's most advanced transportation system was spec'd by the width of a horse's behind!

So, the next time you are handed a specification and wonder what horses' rear end came up with it, you may be exactly right.

The complete BIV column



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As a member of the first board of **TransLink**, I had a few moments that were a tad discouraging. Particularly when the moments went on for months. But no matter how bleak things got, I could always console myself that it was probably worse in Seattle.

Ever since the 1960s, when it came to transit, Seattle has been blowing it. Yes, it had the monorail from the 1962 World's Fair but in 1968 Seattle nixed the chance to build a regional rapid-transit system, which today would have been paid for and gone farther than Link Light Rail on which it has just commenced construction. In the meantime, Seattle freeways have filled up or threatened to fall down. The region is split and its initiative system allows charlatans to undo whatever progress the city makes.

That's why I never expected I'd be saying the following: ***In a decade Seattle may have a better integrated transportation system than Vancouver.*** (Click here to continue.)

Seattle, like Vancouver, has a reasonably good bus-and-trolley system. It has a tunnel underneath the downtown. It is served by ferries and regional commuter rail. It has two grand railway stations near two sports stadiums. The mayor is pushing for a streetcar to South Lake Union - possibly a Vancouver-style development with thousands of biotech jobs - and it is even building an elevated monorail line that will connect its neighbourhoods with the central core.

What could enable Seattle to surpass Vancouver, however, is the way all these different modes will be integrated. The heart of Seattle's plans - three hearts, actually - is the hubs they are planning that will focus development and allow Seattleites for the first time to think about living in the city without a car.

Vancouver has its hub, too - Waterfront Station, where SeaBus, SkyTrain and West Coast Express come together with buses and trolleys - and the city even has a task force of engineers and planners looking at opportunities that could come with the expanded convention centre and the Olympics.

But where is council, or for that matter the TransLink board? I'm frankly mystified that COPE hasn't picked this ball up and run with it all the way to the goal line. Its response to opportunities like the extension of the streetcar line, joining up the south shore of False Creek with Coal Harbour, has been tepid at best.

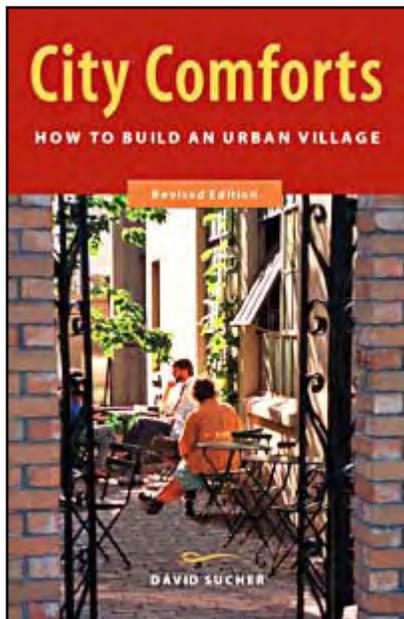
When the Olympics arrived in Sydney, Australia used the event to upgrade Circular Quay, its transit and ferry hub. The opportunity in Vancouver to use transit to showcase sustainable development to the world is being dropped in the lap of this generation of politicians, but they seem indifferent to its potential.

Certainly one would expect that the streetcar proposal would be appealing to COPE as the anti-RAV - something local, affordable, sustainable and sensible. And yet there's no obvious champion for it. Someone like the mayor should be reminding TransLink, the province and the Olympic organizing committee at every turn that they should be putting the streetcar at the centre of their plans. Which is precisely where it could be, joining up Canada Place, the stadiums and the athletes' village. Without dynamic political leadership, however, the streetcar will not be on the priority list, even though it's affordable at a fraction of the cost of RAV and the Sea-to-Sky expansion.

So far, the idea of a Waterfront hub and the streetcar remain too far below the horizon, rather like the Showcase projects being submitted to Ottawa by TransLink and the GVRD in a bid for a share of \$40 million. I bet you haven't heard of these projects either, perhaps because they're small-scale and innovative - from the Central Valley Greenway to transit villages - that try to make better use of existing infrastructure. Or perhaps it's because they don't cost hundreds of millions of dollars, so they don't get the respect they deserve.

Seattle's transportation politics have been a story of woe, an ongoing saga of missed opportunities, frustrated plans and blown budgets. But there's a new breed of bureaucrat working at the city's spanking new city hall, a newly named planning department, a new attitude to ideas and some new council members. Initiatives are flowing under a strong mayor who is leading the way to a denser downtown, with a web of transportation services.

After a long, bitter season of economic and social reverses, there's a sense in Seattle that maybe things are finally coming together for the Emerald City. It would be ironic indeed, and wholly unnecessary, if in 2010, when the world's eyes are on Vancouver, it is in Seattle where the transportation visions of today are realized.



Another positive consequence of the Seattle Effect

“David Sucher's revised edition of **City Comforts** is a really lovely book: a series of modest, down-to-earth tips about how cities and towns can turn themselves into more agreeable places. No theory, no philosophy, no criticism -- just practical observations about things that work and have shown their value, from curbs to traffic circles to awnings.”