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How do cities decide what infrastructure to build?

The federal government in Canada does no formal transportation planning or priority setting. The provincial governments focus on highways and basic access to communities. It is therefore left to municipalities to plan and implement local transportation infrastructure. Larger municipalities usually take advantage of long range modelling to help inform decisions on infrastructure. These models are based on current behaviour, land use patterns and traffic levels. The future needs are forecast by extending these patterns out based on planned land use as well as population and employment projections. Both the existing state and the plans are largely based on an historic paradigm of auto-centric transportation design and planning. This paradigm carries over into public opinion and politics which makes big projects or big changes difficult. This means that a long term vision for transportation is hindered if it does not perpetuate more of the same auto oriented planning. As a result, many projects are completed based on political support or in reaction to perceived problems that already exist.

How do these investments affect the cities we live in?

This system of auto-centric transportation design and planning leads to communities that are typified by suburban enclaves, commercial strips and big box power centres. This community form further supports the dominate use of personal vehicles for transportation. Not providing facilities or services for alternatives modes of transportation further the reliance on the personal vehicle. The result is that personal vehicle use is, without explicit intention, subsidized by infrastructure and real estate investment. By not planning or building for alternate modes we also disadvantage those with mobility impairments. This inequity will only worsen as our population ages.

Why is involved in changing?

What most people want from a transportation system is a way to get around that is affordable, safe, comfortable, and convenient. From the perspective of automobile travel this means less congestion. This can be accomplished either through more capacity in the system or less demand on the system. More capacity is best achieved through provisions for a variety of modes e.g., personal cars, transit, walking, cycling. Focusing only on roads furthers the vicious cycle of auto dependence mentioned before. Less demand on the system can be accomplished through a number of land use tools, such as mixed use policies, and demand management techniques such as car-pooling or flex time incentives.

What can people do?

At the government level, agencies can embrace a spirit of innovation and look beyond the current standards for new and alternative solutions to transportation challenges. A lot of progress can be made by attempting a change rather than assuming it is too difficult or unfamiliar. Different government levels

can also benefit from strong coordination both at the project level and at the policy level. When there are many parties involved a coordinating body may help. At the local level citizen participation in the process is a huge step that can be taken. Getting out to support good plans can help counter the outcry of NIMBY sentiments and resistance to change. This can be difficult though as people often like changes until they are directly impacted themselves.