

THE NEXT LONDON

Light rail system for London is overdue

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Even though it's buried underground and invisible from the street, Toronto's subway lines and even its subway stops are clearly outlined from the top of the CN Tower.

From that lofty vantage point, you can see the taller buildings and higher densities follow the subway lines -- and the tallest buildings are close to the actual stops.



After all, that's where the most expensive land is. Development invariably follows public transit lines and nodes.

It is time London started thinking like the big city it is rather than a small backwater that will never break its addiction to the automobile.

Can't see that far ahead? Look again.

Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge has already seen it. Those cities are well on their way to establishing a light rail system to link their downtowns. So is Hamilton.

London must start catching up.

Meanwhile, the city of Rennes, France, is one of many worldwide even further ahead in planning for the future.

A city about the size of London, Rennes will hit a population of 400,000 by 2008. It opened a high-speed subway line in 2002 that is nine kilometres long and is planning a second 12-kilometre subway line at a cost exceeding \$1 billion.

This is a community that understands itself, its potential, and its place in the world -- and is willing to commit to making it all happen. It is now one of the fastest growing cities its size in France. Young professionals are clamouring to live there.

Not surprisingly, developers are jumping in, snapping up property around these lines, especially transportation nodes, where buses and trains meet. These are obvious locations for retailing, commercial, residential centres and public squares.

By making public investments in this way, municipalities not only attract far more private investment and increase economic activity, but also have a greater influence in how and where cities develop.

London should start thinking -- now -- about a light rail system (down the centre of Wellington Road, say) and establishing transportation nodes around the city.

Never mind that cities based on the car are unsustainable, that traffic, gasoline, pollution and other costs will soon force people out of their cars. If we make public transit predictable, affordable, even sexy, we won't need to wait for the inevitable.

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