

# TRANSIT NOT ONLY WAY

A report by the David Suzuki Foundation released this week denounces the provincial government for investing in roads and bridges while spending less than promised on public transit.

The assumption inherent in this complaint is that more transit infrastructure will reduce private vehicle traffic volumes and that expanding the road network is unwarranted and undesirable. The City of Vancouver has bought into the corollary proposition that increasing population density will provide the justification for expanding transit. Unfortunately, these hypotheses are not well supported by evidence.

On the matter of density, American urban planner Wendell Cox, in an article on newgeography.com, cited a 2007 study that found: “The effect of density is so small that even a relatively large-scale shift to urban densities would have a negligible impact on total vehicle travel.”

Similarly, a May 2010 article in the Journal of the American Planning Association by academics Reid Ewing and Robert Cervero concluded that one per cent higher density would yield only 0.04 per cent less vehicle travel per capita.

The obvious reason density would have a negligible impact on traffic is that more people would result not only in greater transit use but more driving.

Besides, Metro Vancouver has nowhere near the density needed to make an extensive public transit network viable. People don't need a car in New York City, where the average density is 10,823 people per square kilometre, or London with 5,100 people per sq. km, or even Toronto with 2,650 people per sq. km. Metro Vancouver has 850 inhabitants per sq. km.

If it's true that Metro Vancouver will see population growth of one million by 2040, many will likely settle in the suburbs rather than in overpriced Vancouver. Therefore road improvements, including the proposed Massey tunnel replacement, the new Port Mann Bridge, and upgrades to regional highways have been and will be necessary. Moreover, a growing population will need an increasing amount of goods, most of which will be delivered by truck. Trucks now represent about six per cent of all vehicular traffic.

There is little doubt that wider roads and bigger bridges will attract more traffic and do little to reduce traffic volumes. While traffic congestion is seen by many as negative, an economist might have a different view — that underused roads mean the network has been overbuilt.

Public transit works well in the city core where residents can both live and work. Modern highway systems are the best option for suburbanites and are essential to the trucking industry.

Investment in both is required. If that means road pricing, let's open that up for discussion.