

HOW THE CITY OF OTTAWA FAILED KING EDWARD AVENUE



ABOUT ECOLOGY OTTAWA

About Ecology Ottawa

Ecology Ottawa is a volunteer organization that wants to make Ottawa the green capital of Canada. We believe that Ottawans want sustainable communities and care about issues such as public transit, pollution, greenspace, global warming, renewable energy, waste disposal and recycling. We also promote citizen participation in decisions that shape Ottawa's environment. Launched in December 2006, we currently have more than 1000 people signed up for our Ecology Ottawa Updates, a bi-weekly electronic newsletter. Our activities are carried out by a core group of about 30 volunteers. For more information, or to sign up for our Updates visit: www.ecologyottawa.ca

About the King Edward Avenue Task Force

The King Edward Avenue Task Force is a local grassroots group. It was formed by Lowertown residents in 1986. About 8-10 people attend its regular monthly meetings. After 2002, the group merged with the Lowertown Community Association. In 2007, outrage and disappointment at the lack of progress with the King Edward renewal project led to the reactivation of the group. The group is currently implementing a campaign to deal with most of the unresolved problems on the avenue. For more information see: www.lowertown-basseville.ca/index/KingEdward.htm

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KING EDWARD AVENUE: AN URBAN CASE STUDY

Background

King Edward Avenue is a prime example of the harmful effects poor city planning can cause a community. What was once (prior to the 1960s) a notable boulevard of enormous American elm trees, supporting a greener, quieter and more liveable place for the downtown community of Lowertown, has become a major traffic corridor, denuded of trees and increasingly rundown. One of those dead zones found in too many cities where the priority is facilitating vehicle movement to the detriment of pedestrians, local residents and businesses.

What has been the result? The intersections of St. Patrick and Murray at King Edward have grown more and more ghettoized. There were three large empty lots in the vicinity of these two intersections for many years, although one has finally been developed; there are also approximately 5 abandoned buildings. The Murray and St. Patrick street intersections along with the one at Rideau Street have appeared on the city's top 20 list of dangerous intersections. In recent years, several pedestrians have been hit; tragically some have been killed by the large tractor trailers. Meanwhile, each day buses from the Gatineau use the length of the street as a lay-by, providing a constant source of both fumes and noise. Vibrations are another problem, caused by large trucks choosing this route between Quebec and Ontario.

Attempts to address the situation

Beginning in the 1980s, a group called the King Edward Avenue Task Force formed to address the negative impact the state of King Edward Avenue was having on Lowertown. While trucks were and continue to be the main concern, beautification of the street was also pursued. Many people over the past 20 years have worked long hours and been quite dedicated to improving the situation on King Edward. The group came to know the issues surrounding King Edward in quite an intimate way, flagging both the obvious and less obvious concerns.

In 1999, after an Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) battle with the city over the official plan, an order was brought down. This order included: 1) the complete removal of trucks from King Edward once a bridge was built in the east end of the city; and, 2) the immediate introduction of the improvement project. This was a great step forward from the Lowertown community's perspective, given that neither the city nor its councillor supported either of these measures at the time. It was also considered a great achievement, given the almost 20 years that residents had put into pursuing this issue.

The environmental assessment for the improvement of King Edward Avenue began in 2000 and ended in 2002. As the assessment began to progress, it became quite clear that the consultant, Delcan Corporation, was not interested in the improvement of King Edward Avenue as much as its renewal.

At the time, the consultant explained to the task force in accordance with the project's terms of reference that this was not a beautification project, but a 'renewal' of street infrastructure. As such, many things that were promised in a community improvement plan, prior to the assessment, were never followed through. For example, the original improvement plan called for the creation of a T-intersection to replace the off-ramps from the Macdonald-Cartier

Bridge connecting to King Edward; this would have provided access to Sussex Avenue and considerably reduced traffic speeds in the area. Delcan opted to focus on minimizing the impact to traffic flow and, as such, removed the T-intersection from the plan. The King Edward Avenue Task Force pushed for the inclusion of a T-intersection or a roundabout, but this request was not accommodated.

Another major recommendation made by the King Edward Avenue Task Force was the reduction of traffic lanes on the avenue from six to four. Although included in its assessment, the consultant failed to make a strong case for this option, feeling that this would lead to an excessive amount of traffic, and that residents would just have to wait for a bridge to be constructed in the east end. Delcan did not appear interested in the task force's assessment that reducing lanes on the avenue could in fact lead to a net decrease in traffic, or other options such as increased capacity available to commuters on buses.

On 17 July 2002, the King Edward Avenue Renewal project was brought before the Transportation Committee. Residents of the community wanted to go further than what was being proposed by Delcan, and there was a concerted effort to push for an immediate reduction to four lanes. The majority of councillors were not swayed by this option, but agreed to the following motion:

That the four lane option for King Edward Avenue be reviewed for the feasibility of implementation when each of the:

- a. Transportation Master Plan
- b. Rapid Transit Expansion Study
- c. East End Interprovincial Bridge Study
- d. Implementation of CN-CP proposal to twin freight lines between Ottawa and Toronto to carry inter-city truck traffic.

are brought forward to the Transportation and Transit Committee.

The King Edward Avenue Task Force, Action Sandy Hill and Rideau Street BIA also supported this motion.

The entire political process with regards to King Edward was quite disappointing to many. There was a sense that it took a mountain to move an inch regarding any kind of relief for the community. Nevertheless, there was some hope for the street given this motion voted on by councillors. In 2006, four years after the motion was passed, its status was reviewed. The first two milestones had come and gone. The directive given by the Transportation Committee had not been followed.

However, in the summer of 2006 an amazing opportunity presented itself. An announcement was made that King Edward Avenue would be reduced from six to four lanes for approximately one year. Finally, there was going to be an opportunity to test the four-lane option in practice.

The Four-Lane Option

King Edward Avenue has been operating with four lanes for the past year. The predictions of excessive traffic were clearly wrong; there have been no reports in the media of traffic chaos on either the Quebec or Ontario sides of the Macdonald-Cartier Bridge. What is required now is a small traffic study to prove what has been observed.

The reduction of the street to four lanes has positive benefits for the residents of Lowertown, who have lived with worsening conditions around this street since the 1960s. The possibility that motorists and truckers will be inconvenienced is a fair consideration, but the fact that residents have been inconvenienced for more than 40 years is also worth noting. Traffic engineers will tell you four lanes are not enough, and probably that six lanes are not enough. However, this is not really a traffic engineering decision, but a policy one on how to address causal factors like urban sprawl and commuter choices, and respect the needs and rights of downtown communities.

Given the changing political 'climate' of the times, the four-lane option is also appropriate in terms of larger goals. Global warming is (generally) an accepted fact. Poor planning by most municipalities, including the City of Ottawa, has contributed to people's dependence on the automobile. Why is this? Our cities have been allowed to sprawl in unsustainable ways that both force and allow people to use their cars by default. Alternative transportation options are insufficient or unattractive (in terms of money, time and convenience) to large segments of the population. A further complication results from the fact that the centres of older cities, like Ottawa, were not built to accommodate an infinite number of vehicles. Roads can only be widened so much and do nothing to improve the quality of life in downtown communities.

Permanently reducing King Edward Avenue to four lanes is sending a clear message. It is stating that the city will no longer sacrifice the quality of life in densely populated and environmentally sustainable areas such as downtown Ottawa to support commuters who choose, for a variety of reasons, to live in suburban developments. There will still be traffic and some congestion, with trucks travelling down King Edward Avenue for some years to come. What the community is asking for is a reasonable accommodation to a longstanding problem in Lowertown the four-lane option for King Edward Avenue is the most equitable solution at this time.

The following is a list of arguments both for and against the four-lane option for King Edward Avenue:

Some points in favour of four lanes

- Creates a large green space
- Provides a buffer zone between the community and the cars and trucks
- Reduces noise
- Reduces vibrations
- Creates a spectacular entrance to the city of Ottawa and considerably enhances the street environment
- Shortens the distance for pedestrians to cross the street
- Slows down excessive speeders
- Re-establishes historic conditions
- Encourages commuters to use alternative modes of transportation, such as buses
- Provides some relief to the longstanding issue of large trucks and poor living conditions on King Edward Avenue
- Less costly to build four lanes now, then building six lanes and replacing with four in years to come
- Encourages people to live on King Edward and downtown
- Helps revitalize the community
- Only four lanes come on and off of the MacDonald-Cartier Bridge and connect with King Edward Avenue
- Encourages development of empty lots and investment in existing properties
- Reduces air pollution due to a net decrease in cars and increase in green space

Arguments against four lanes – Counter-arguments

1. Increased congestion (based on traffic modeling)

- a. King Edward Avenue has been reduced to four lanes for the past year. There has been traffic, but neither residents nor the project managers of the construction job have observed any major congestion. In theory, four lanes may not seem a great idea, but in practice it works.
- b. The additional congestion will be during commuting hours. This congestion can be absorbed by the transit system and other alternatives available to commuters.
- c. There is a trade-off between commuters and Lowertown residents. Residents will be provided with some relief while trucks and cars continue to move along the avenue.

2. Increased pollution

- a. Given the observation that traffic has not increased considerably over the past year at a four-lane configuration, the argument that pollution will increase is fallacious. Traffic is not idling any more than it did before.
- b. The addition of trees to King Edward Avenue will counter the effects of pollution.
- c. The reduction of lanes will encourage Gatineau commuters to use the transit system available as well as other alternatives. This will also contribute to a reduction in pollution.
- d. The addition of a large number of trees will also offset the costs of cooling residences along the street.

Trees provide shade and have been proven to reduce heat in inner cities.

3. Wait for the bridge to be built and for other traffic measures

- a. Although the environmental assessment is currently underway for interprovincial crossings, there is no guarantee that a bridge will be built in the immediate future. Lowertown residents have been patiently waiting since the 1970s for a solution to this issue. It's time to move ahead.
- b. Car traffic may increase by the time a new bridge is built. The same arguments will be used to dismiss the idea of reducing lanes on King Edward Avenue in future.
- c. Transportation studies have proven that if additional capacity is added to a roadway, there is a net increase in traffic. It has also been determined that a decrease in lanes will lead to a net total reduction in traffic. This also applies to King Edward Avenue.
- d. If there was a serious interest in this recommendation, then it would have been included in both the city's official plan and transportation master plan. Since 2002, it has not been included in either of these visioning documents. This seems to imply unwillingness somewhere in the planning process to give this option serious consideration.
- e. This argument can easily be turned around and applied to commuters. Instead of asking the community of Lowertown to wait for a bridge and other traffic measures, then this statement can be put to motorists. In fact, reducing the street to four lanes would be a reasonable compromise between the traffic that some commuters will encounter and the terrible living conditions on and around King Edward Avenue.

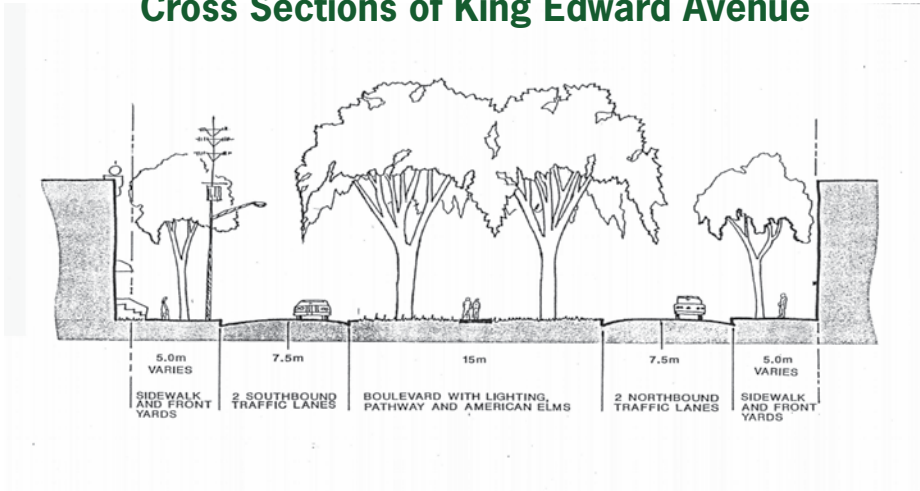
4. The four-lane option was already studied

- a. In 2002, after reviewing the King Edward renewal recommendations from Delcan, the Transportation Committee directed city staff to study the four-lane option further. This was never done.
- b. The four-lane option was studied in 2002 by Delcan Corporation, but that study was based on transportation modeling only. The avenue is currently four lanes, so the option can now be tested in practice.
- c. Delcan's 2002 assessment of the four-lane option excluded some important factors. It did not take into account the additional bus capacity available between Gatineau and Ottawa, as well as other alternatives. In addition, the impact of noise, vibration and air quality were not included in the assessment. The analysis was also premised on the idea that accommodating traffic must take priority over any other considerations, including the benefits to the community.
- d. In 2002, Delcan argued that the renewal project was not an improvement project, but concerned with the replacement of road infrastructure. This indicates that its primary goal was not the improvement of living conditions on the avenue or in the community.

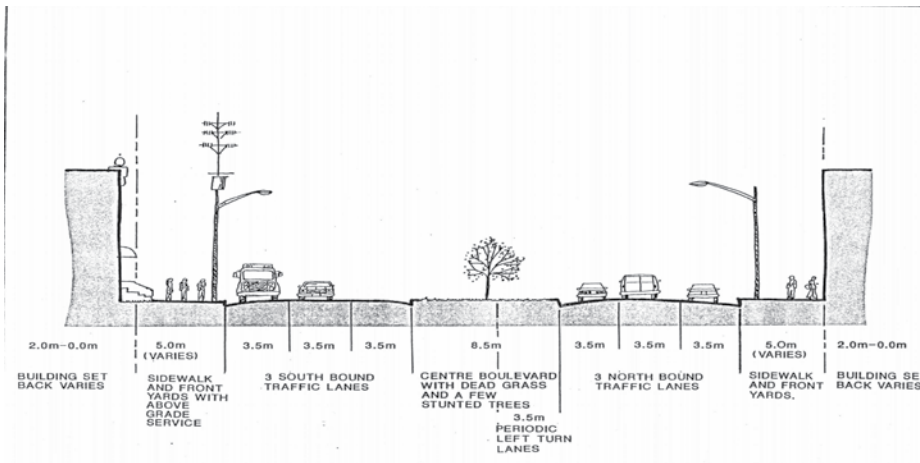
5. Commerce will stop

The majority of the trucks that use King Edward pass during non-commuting hours, and thus avoid any holdups. It is incorrect to say that commerce will be considerably affected.

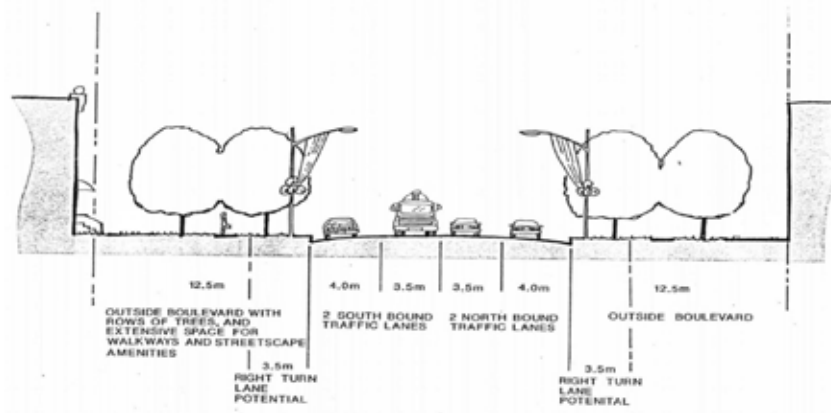
Cross Sections of King Edward Avenue



The original layout of King Edward Avenue.



The present and planned layout of King Edward Avenue.



The proposed 4-lane layout of King Edward Avenue.