



The Mess that Is King Edward Avenue – and How to Fix it

by Barbara Myers

The Théâtre de la Nouvelle Scène played host on May 31 to some 100 citizens who are deeply concerned about the deplorable state of King Edward Avenue, once the most beautiful thoroughfare in Ottawa. Now it's a six-lane highway and truck route through the heart of the city, as well as a lay-by site for Société de Transport de l'Outaouais (STO) buses. King Edward Avenue's dangerous mix of safety and pollution issues grows every year. Local residents organized a discussion forum, invited elected representatives, the new chairman of the National Capital Commission, the Mayor of Ottawa, even the Premier of Ontario, as well as the media, and ended up virtually talking to themselves. Two elected representatives, Rideau-Vanier city councillor Georges Bédard and Ottawa-Vanier Liberal MP Mauril Bélanger, turned up to listen and take questions.

Bédard told the audience: "We have to live with the situation we have, and try to modify it." He said the city has budgeted \$2.2 million for repairs and that the intent is to make King Edward Avenue more pleasant for residents. "These problems will only be addressed by a new bridge."

Bélanger said two new bridges would be better than one, so that there can be a ring road. He stressed it was important that plans for a new bridge designate it as a truck route.

Since a new bridge may still be decades away, the forum pressed for full speed

ahead on choosing a site, but focused more on mitigating actions that can improve the street now and in the short term. The audience supported proposals made by the King Edward Avenue Committee of the Lowertown Community Association:

Reduce lanes. Since construction started some months ago on "renewing" King Edward Avenue – essentially to smooth out curves for trucks, but with a few trees thrown in – traffic has been reduced from six lanes to four, without seeming to stall motor vehicles passing through. Make it four lanes permanently. Reopen the Prince of Wales Bridge for rail freight traffic. Consider adding a bicycle lane to King Edward Avenue.

Remove the STO bus lay-by. Hundreds of buses line King Edward, with some spillage onto George and York streets, every weekday during rush hour. While they wait, they let their diesel engines idle, releasing pollutants that affect the health of residents and contribute to city smog, moving northeast on prevailing winds. The buses are even idling beside homes and a child-care centre. Gatineau buses should lay-by in Gatineau, or at the very least, away from where people live – and people live all along King Edward and its side streets.

Restrict the flow of trucks. Consider regulating, with certain hours for northbound traffic, other times for southbound traffic.

LEFT The corner of King Edward Avenue and Rideau Street Circa 1938 and RIGHT present day.

Improve Safety. Create the promised crosswalk at the corner of Cathcart Street. Review emergency planning for possible spillage of hazardous materials. King Edward Avenue is the main route for transportation of flammable, corrosive and explosive substances. The sharp turn on the truck route from King Edward Avenue on to Rideau Street is fraught with potential for accidents.

Measure Air Quality. The new study of air quality in the National Capital Region should include King Edward Avenue because it is unique as both an urban highway and a transit bus lay-by. Previous models estimated levels of certain pollutants exceeded standards even in 1991: no actual measurements have ever been taken in the area. Ontario Medical Association studies find that air pollution causes 290 to 340 premature deaths each year in Ottawa.

In response to these recommendations, and similar questions and concerns from the audience, Bédard said he is championing the reduction to four lanes and the Cathcart Street crosswalk. No one seems to know what to do about the STO buses. Bélanger said he would support use of federal land under the bridge exit if the STO agrees to this proposal. He also bet a bottle of scotch that a new bridge would be open 15 years from now.