

DR. GRIDLOCK

Americans say 'Yes, we can' to funding public transit

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Barack Obama, who owns a Ford Escape hybrid, may be the first African-American elected president, but he will not be the first U.S. president to drive a car powered - at least partly - by electricity.

That honour goes to William Taft, who served from 1909 to 1913 and was the first U.S. president to own a car at all. According to U.S. car-insurer Hagerty Insurance, he pattered around in a model called a Baker Electric. Car enthusiast and late-night talk-show host Jay Leno has one in his collection, and the model was sold as a popular option for women of the era because it was quiet and didn't smell of gasoline. Odd how the concept didn't catch on.

Still, Mr. Obama - pictured riding a bike with his family on the streets of Chicago during the campaign - is expected to spearhead more progressive urban transportation policies. While it would be interesting if any of Mr. Obama's moves influenced trends here, Washington has long spent more on public transit than Ottawa and even the Bush administration has offered millions to U.S. cities that agree to use pricing mechanisms, such as tolls, to reduce traffic.

More interesting, and understandably left out of election coverage, was the fact that not only did Americans say "Yes we can" to Mr. Obama on Nov. 4, they voted in several state and local referendums on their ballots to actually *increase* taxes and put the resulting billions into public transit. And this in the supposedly tax-hating, car-loving United States, as the economy sinks.

Print Edition - Section Front



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Meanwhile, here in allegedly forward-thinking Toronto, the provincial agency Metrolinx comes up with a \$50-billion transportation plan after promising to explore tolls or dedicated sales taxes to pay for it - but then announces that any such discussions should be put off until 2013.

According to an analysis released after the election by the American Road and Transportation Builders Association, an industry lobby group, U.S. voters approved \$71-billion (U.S.) in new revenue for transportation infrastructure in ballot measures on election night. Of 32 ballot measures in 17 states that asked for new or increased taxes or bond issues, 25 passed, among them a \$9.9-billion bond issue to help build a 340-kilometre-an-hour bullet train from Los Angeles to San Francisco.

While Kansas City said no to a light-rail line and St. Louis decided against a transit-expansion measure, voters in Los Angeles County approved a landmark half-percentage-point sales-tax hike meant to help build \$40-billion worth of subways and light-rail lines over the next 30 years, just scraping past a two-thirds vote threshold with 67.22 per cent.

In the Seattle area, voters approved a similar sales-tax hike to launch a \$22.8-billion expansion of the region's light-rail and bus system, and said no to a shortsighted plan to open up carpool lanes to regular traffic in an attempt to ease congestion.

Paul Bedford, the former chief planner of the city of Toronto and a board member of Metrolinx, says L.A.'s example should send a signal to Torontonians that we can afford to be bolder.

"Why did they do that, in the car capital of the Earth, in a place where so many people are losing their homes?" Mr. Bedford said in an interview. "Because congestion had gotten so ridiculous that people said, 'We've got to do this.'"

Mr. Bedford says Toronto needs to play catch-up, at least by starting a debate on these radical ideas like new tolls or taxes.

"I understand the politicians don't want to touch any of those ideas in the current economic environment," Mr. Bedford said.

"All I've been saying is, let's not wait five years to start talking about it."

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