PLANNING FOR REAL OR FOR SHOW? AN ANALYSIS OF THE COMPLETION OF MONTREAL'S TRANSPORTATION PLANS

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Québec's transportation ministry has proposed over the decades three different transportation plans in 1979, 1988 and 2000. However, like many transportation planning documents à round the world, their publication doses not necessarily imply completion. The purpose of this study is to investigate if the transportations plans are being completed as proposed or not. Furthermore, it is important to note that we are not looking at all investments in public and individual transportation, only those that are presented in the three transportation plans.

Our research question was fairly simple: Does the government of Quebec actually follow-thru with the projects proposed in the transportation plans it proposes for Montreal?

Our methodology was fairly simple in its conception, but tedious in its completion. We started by going over the 1979 transportation plan and identified all of the projects. For each project, we then proceeded to extract the data for each project to be included in our database. The variables were:

- Name of project
- Location (on or off the Island of Montreal)
- Mode (Mass transit or automobile)
- Budget
- Completed as proposed (yes or no)
- Completed as a variant of original project (yes/no)
- Completed within the 10 year mandate of the plan (yes/no)

The 1979 data was then compiled into an SPSS database for analysis. The task was more complex however for the 1988 and 2000 transportation plans. Many projects of the 1979 transportation plan were not completed. Many of these projects were therefor proposed once again in either or both of the 1988 and/or 2000 plans. And once again, projects proposed in the 1988 plan that were not completed might have been re-proposed in the 2000 plan. However, we quickly discovered that many of the projects had evolved over time. Some simply had new names, but others had morphed into new creatures. For example, a former regional rail line might have morphed into a commuter rail project or a subway line; a highway might have a new proposed route. The meticulous task of linking the various projects together throughout their evolution was nevertheless a fascinating exercise in understanding the history of Montreal's transportation planning. Since the projects had evolved, we had to add further variables to take these changes into consideration. Finally, some projects were completed within the timeframe of the transportation plan but not in the proposed form.

Once the data was finally compiled, we then proceeded to produce summary tables of the different fields. We then continued with a series of cross-tabulations in order to analyze the data in function of a few binary variables, such as mass-transit versus automobile, on or off the Island of Montreal and was the project completed or not.

Our initial results are presented here in function of four different research sub-questions.

1- Do projects get built during the lifespan of the transportation plan?

From the results we obtained by compiling the completion or not of the different projects listed in the three transportation plans, most projects do not seem to be completed during the 10 year lifespan of the plan.

In the 1979 transportation plan, less than 50% of the mass transit projects were built and a little bit more than 1/8 of the road projects were built.

The 80s is an important decade for the development of the metro system in Montreal. Between 1979 and 1988, the orange line (line 2) sees 13 new stations being added and the blue line is built and launched. However, the vast number of mass transit projects that were planned in this plan reduces the percentage of completed results. Most of the mass transit projects are linked to the Réseau express métropolitain (Metropolitan Express Network or MER in English), a proposed regional train network linking suburbs to the city of Montreal and linking the two airports, the Dorval on the island and the Mirabel airport, completed in 1975 and located 39 km north of Montreal . None of the proposed regional network projects were completed during that period.

Between 1985 and 1995, no new major highway projects in the whole province of Quebec were completed and those highway projects are key numbers in the roads data collected. However, a few sections of the already-existing highways were built like the extension of the Highway 720 and Highway 19 but those stretches were only about 2 kilometers long.

In the 1988 plan, less than 1/8 of the road projects are not completed in the 10 year delay and just over a quarter of the mass transit projects are finished. One of the main reasons of the mixed results of this plan is the poor economic context in the beginning of the 90s due to a recession that reduced provincial and federal budgets for transportation projects.

In the 2000 plan, about 15% of the mass transit projects were completed and a bit less than a quarter of the road projects. Once again, an economic crisis (2008) reduced the number of projects being completed.

Looking back at the achievement in the 10 year period of the projects of the three plans, there is an increase in the percentage of road projects completed but there is a decrease in the percentage of mass transportation projects completed.

2- Do projects that are not built during the lifespan of the transportation plan get built later?

This question gives another perspective in the discussion about transportation projects completions. Indeed, the figures that were collected are suggesting that transportation projects are completed after the 10 year period of each plan so these projects aren't totally dismissed after the end of the 10 year period.

The mass transportation projects listed in the 1979 transportation plan are more than 85% completed and the roads' projects are more than 50% achieved.
The numbers for the 1988 projects are even more spectacular for the individual transportation projects because 75% of them have been completed 15 years after the 1999 deadline when the completion rate was about 15%. Public transportation projects have yet to receive the same results because a little bit more than 50% of them have been completed which is a small increase from the 27-28% completion rate in 1999.

The 2000 transportation plan completion rate gives us interesting figures for the individual transportation projects because the numbers increase from a completion rate of 25% in 2010 to about 80% in 2015, a

sharp rise due to an increase of public spending in infrastructure projects by the provincial government in the late 2000s and the beginning of 2010s.

In sum, the vast majority of projects took more time to be completed than the programmed 10 year period. The figures obtained show the persistence of some transportation projects that are completed few decades after they have been first envisioned.

3- Are individual transportation projects more likely to be built that mass transit?

Give priority to a particular mode of transportation constrain urban development into a particular type. The development and the rapidly-expanding self-sufficiency of these suburbs in the last decades suggest a more rapid growth of individual transportation projects than mass transportation projects. The data collected does not suggest otherwise even though the mass transportation projects of the 1979 transportation plan have been completed at a much higher degree than the individual transportation projects.

The 1988 plan had planned a two to one ratio of public infrastructure investment going to mass transportation compared to road projects. For the public transit projects, the completion rate is a little more than 50%, more than 25 years after the plan and it is at more than 75% for the individual transportation projects, a difference that could be explained by the growth of suburbs in the last few decades.

In the 2000 plan, the ratio of public transportation investment versus individual transportation investment is still at 2 to 1. Again, the two completion rates results are very interesting. For mass transit, less than a third of projects were completed whereas individual transportation projects were completed for more than 85%.

The financing structure of public transportation in Quebec is supported in a large part by cities and municipalities whereas highways are exclusively funded by the provincial government. In the context of the reduction of cities' public spending, there has been less money for cities to fund public transportation therefore reducing the numbers of projects set in motion and completed.

4- Does geography play a role in projects being completed?

Montreal being located on an island is the playing field of a growing numbers of motorists coming from the off-island suburbs to work daily in the downtown area or in the industrial zones located close to the Dorval airport or the port. The location of projects is crucial to understand the development of transportation infrastructure in the Montreal region.

The projects listed in the 1979 plan for mass transit were supposed to be located 60% on the island and 40% off the island whereas 45% of the individual transportation projects were supposed to be located on the island and 55% of them off-island. In 1989, all the completed island-based projects are for mass transportation and all the off-island completed projects are for individual transportation. More than 35 years later, off-island projects account for more than half of the mass transit projects but individual transportation projects are still 100% located off-island.

In the 1988 plan, off-island projects accounted for 55% of the mass transit ones and about 80% of the car-oriented projects. In 2016, the off-islands projects account for about 85% of the completed mass transportation projects and 80% of the individual transportation ones.
The 2000 plan also provides us with interesting data regarding the completion of public transportation projects. No public transportation project has been completed on the island since 2000 even though about 45% of the projects listed on the plan were supposed to be located on the island.

It looks like geography does play a role in the location of completed projects because public transportation projects have, for the past 15 years, only located off-islands mainly due to the rapid growth of the suburbs and the rising demand for quick public transportation towards the downtown area to cope with traffic congestion on the different bridges linking the island to its off-island suburbs. The development of car-based projects off-island also had the objective to reduce car and trucks passing through the island to cross the region thus reducing congestion on the island. Moreover, there have been constant debates about the potential location of transit projects on the island due to the necessity of deserving many densely-populated neighbourhoods, each government and public administration having different agendas about it.

Conclusion

Our research seems to show that projects that are proposed in the transportation plans do eventually get done, just not necessarily during the lifetime of the plan. Over the last decades, investments seemed to be skewed to favour projects off the island of Montreal, no matter if they are mass-transit or highway. This indicates either a greater willingness to complete projects off the island of Montreal, or better governance mechanisms that permit these projects to actually get the go-ahead. This however, will be tackled in later research.