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WATERLOO REGION

Gentrification and the LRT: Waterloo Region's experience yields lessons for Phase 2, study says

By **Catherine Thompson** Record Reporter

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WATERLOO REGION — Affordable housing should have been a central strategy as Waterloo Region planned and built its light rail transit, according to a planning presentation that's headed to an international competition in Oxford this summer.

University of Waterloo planning students Kaitlin Webber, who is working on her master's degree, and Emma McDougall, working on her PhD, teamed up with Carleton University doctoral student Sam Petrie to study the growing issue of gentrification along the Ion transit line.

They used systems mapping — a way of understanding complex problems and identifying possible solutions, and their work was a winner in the Canadian finals for a global competition called Map the System hosted by Oxford University. They'll compete against teams from institutions across the world in a virtual competition in June.

The Region of Waterloo brought in light rail not only as a way to improve access to transit, but mainly as a way to curb urban sprawl, by encouraging compact development along the Ion line.

The students conclude the region met those goals with flying colours, with at least \$3 billion in denser development springing up along the transit line.

But all that renewal and revitalization has made it more expensive to live close to Ion, and for businesses that rely on affordable store frontage.

Just 37 per cent of home and condo sales along the LRT were affordable in 2018, a sharp drop from about half of all sales a few years earlier. And renters near the LRT pay a premium of at least 7.5 per cent more than they'd pay for the same unit elsewhere in Kitchener-Waterloo.

"A large portion of the population can't afford to live in the most desirable areas," that are well served by transit, McDougall said.

The region did several things right, they say: the region and the cities of Kitchener and Waterloo have "substantial" land holdings along the LRT route, which can be used for affordable housing. Local municipalities also proactively changed planning and zoning to encourage higher densities, and the region has produced yearly reports tracking changes along the LRT, including affordability changes.

But affordability should have been a central strategy from the start, when the region approved the LRT in 2011, the students argue. Having affordability front and centre would have ensured policies addressed it from the beginning, they say.

The region should also have consulted directly with lower-income people, and the groups that support them, from the start. "There's no better expert in community planning than the people who live there themselves," Webber said.

Development along the LRT actually didn't eliminate much low-density housing, notes Rod Regier, the region's commissioner of planning.

Almost all the new highrises were built on vacant land or low-density commercial sites.

And rising housing costs aren't all due to the LRT, he added. A booming economy, low interest rates and an influx of people moving here all contributed.

Coun. Tom Galloway, agrees with the students that affordable housing should go on regionally owned land. He is keen to see it built at the Charles Street bus terminal next to Victoria Park and the planned transit hub at King and Victoria streets, and to see higher density housing on affordable housing projects the region now owns.

The LRT may have contributed to gentrification, "but it's also part of the solution," because it allows people to live in less expensive areas with easy access to downtown cores, Galloway says. "We can create affordable housing further afield and link people with the LRT, which allows you to be downtown in five or 10 minutes."

The region's experience with the Ion provides valuable lessons, the students say, both for the region as it looks to expand the LRT into Cambridge, and for other cities that are looking to invest in higher-level transit.



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