

## **Forget electric vehicles. They are still cars and post-pandemic cities don't need them**

[By Eric Reguly, columnist, \*Globe and Mail\*, Nov 19, 2020](#)

The *Globe and Mail* [Future of Cities](#) series showed how the pandemic might reshape Canada's urban areas, probably for the better: fewer cars, more green space, a focus on community life, short travel times, the end with the obsession with single-family homes, among other goodies.

How does the electric vehicle (EV) fit into these scenarios? It shouldn't, but it does.

The hype around EVs and their offspring, self-driving e-cars, is dazzling and relentless, and anyone who thinks they should not be part of the new urban mix is treated as a Luddite dotard with a romantic attachment to a convenient, but clapped-out and highly polluting, technology – the internal combustion engine.

By now, the arguments in favour of battery-powered cars are broadly accepted as gospel. EVs have zero-emissions (not exactly true, since batteries have to be recharged and most electricity still comes from fossil fuels), so their use will clean up city air, and who can be against air that is not toxic? They are quiet and cheap to maintain, since they have far fewer moving parts than regular cars. And, for car nuts, they are rocket sleds, because they are capable of producing instant torque and lots of it. A high-end Tesla can accelerate as fast as a Ferrari.

Self-driving EVs would be even more loveable because they would come right to your door to pick up you or your kids. And they would be safer, since dependable human idiocy – like fiddling with your iPhone while you are driving, or speeding – is the cause of most traffic accidents.

Some mayors are swayed by these arguments, especially the clean-air one. The few enlightened ones, such as Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo, are not. Ms. Hidalgo and her like see an EV for what it is – a car. Cars take up public space. They need to be parked. They are a menace to pedestrians and bikers. They require roads and taxpayer funds to build and maintain those roads. The ideal city is not filled with sleek, silent, non-polluting e-cars; it is a city devoid of cars. Yet the tech lobby, the Wall Street machine behind it and Elon Musk, boss of Tesla, the world's most successful EV company, would have you think that buying an e-car is the morally correct and patriotic consumer choice.

Local and regional governments who push EVs might not realize that doing so commits themselves to a spending program they cannot afford. Making cities EV friendly would require digging up streets to create a vast network of unsightly charging stations. In a 2019 report, the International Council on Clean Transportation estimated that installing a single direct-current, 150-kilowatt fast-charging station, with two chargers each site, would cost more than US\$38,000 in labour, materials, permits and taxes (the greater the power level, the higher the cost).

Paying for home charging would alleviate some of that expense, but residential garages are a rarity in many cities, especially in Europe. In old, densely packed cities such as Rome, almost no one has a garage. Juicing up EVs would rely on street charging points. Walking along streets cluttered with power cables would be a miserable experience.

If EVs prove to be popular, governments would face another enormous expense – building extra generating capacity. It wouldn't take a lot of EVs to overload the system, especially on a hot summer day, when air conditioners are running full blast. Blackouts are never popular with voters.

A 2018 report by Wood Mackenzie determined that charging 60,000 EVs simultaneously in Texas (which has 24-million registered vehicles) could bring down the electrical grid, assuming they were plugged into 100-kilowatt fast chargers. To accommodate hundreds of thousands of EV, Texas would have to build new peak-demand generating plants, probably coal burners. Cost aside, that would be a rather pointless exercise, since EVs are supposed to make the air cleaner.

Cities are run by politicians and the smartest politicians stick with what they know and what they can control. They know and can control public transportation. Most big cities around the world have a century or more of experience in this field. They have zero experience in building and managing vast networks of charging stations and all the supporting infrastructure. Public transportation will make a comeback once the COVID-19 vaccines are rolled out. The best way to reclaim cities from cars is to invest in subways, buses, rail and bike paths.

Ultimately, no city will ever be car free, because bikes and public transportation are not suitable for everyone and cars will remain essential in the suburbs. But big parts of city centres can be made mostly largely car free, as long as mayors and governors do not buy into the myth that EVs will make their cities more liveable. The propulsion system of a car is irrelevant. What is relevant is that any car of any technology takes up public space that should be devoted to people. For cities, EVs are not the future; they already belong in the past, along with gasoline and diesel cars.