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Toronto roads czar championed Spadina Expressway plan

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Sam Cass speaking at a traffic meeting in Toronto City Hall, on Jan. 22, 1965.
HAROLD ROBINSON/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Sam Cass, the long-time roads czar of what was then Metro Toronto whose controversial plan to remake the city by building more expressways through the downtown was blocked by the provincial premier in 1971, has died. He was 99.

The former commissioner of roads and traffic argued to his final years that construction of the Spadina Expressway, the first of a collection of urban highways planned to crisscross the city, should have gone ahead. But the times changed even as his opinion didn't: Last year Toronto Mayor John Tory and other city leaders celebrated the 50th anniversary of the expressway's cancellation.

Mr. Cass didn't hold a grudge about the province stepping in, his son Murray said, but he wasn't happy about it. Whether it was local councillors or high-profile Spadina Expressway opponents such as Jane Jacobs, he didn't like laypeople meddling in what he believed should be done.

"He resented politicians coming in, who were technologically unaware, with questionable motives, to question the experts," Murray Cass said. "He felt maybe a bit slighted that it [the highways plan] was challenged by people who did not have the expertise to comment, whether that's fair or not."

Sam Cass died on Jan. 15 of undetermined causes, according to his family. He was predeceased by wives Lilian Zimmerman and Thelma Gibbs, and leaves three

generations of descendants, including his children, Corinne Cass, Murray Cass and Barbara Santamaria; seven grandchildren; and six great-grandchildren.

Mr. Cass's legacy depends in large part on how you feel about traffic in Toronto.

If you deplore congestion you may see him as a thwarted visionary. But if you argue that there is more to a city than moving cars, his focus on the motoring public may feel like a relic from generations past.

"That was his mandate and that's what he cared about, and he didn't seem to be able to put that within a broader context as to how the city worked," former Toronto mayor John Sewell said.

"Many other bureaucrats recognized that they were part of a larger picture and they held one idea of what the truth was, but they didn't say that was the only idea of truth. And that was how I saw Sam Cass, his idea of truth was: We gotta have more room for cars."

But Paul Godfrey, who overlapped with Mr. Cass while serving as chairman of Metro Toronto Council, the level of government that dealt with broader issues in the pre-amalgamation cities, remembers him more positively.

The former commissioner of roads and traffic Mr. Cass, pictured here on Aug. 12, 1977, argued to his final years that construction of the Spadina Expressway should have gone ahead.
BARRIE DAVIS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

"His role was to bring the best master plan for solving the traffic problems," said Mr. Godfrey, who deplored the number of bike lanes in Toronto and the city's attempt to give public transit priority on one road downtown, arguing that Mr. Cass harked from a time with a better approach.

"The existing Toronto city council is basically not in favour of building more roads … and Sam would not have liked that."

Samuel Cass was born in what is now Vilnius, Lithuania, in December of 1922 – the date is variously described as the 12th and the 14th. His parents, of Russian Jewish origin, were in the city waiting for approval to immigrate to Canada.

They arrived in Toronto in 1923 and landed in the tight-knit area near Kensington Market. Ironically for someone whose career was defined by automobiles, his first taste of Toronto was in what would now be called walkable neighbourhoods, where few people had cars and they didn't need them.

Mr. Cass volunteered twice for the Second World War, according to his family, but didn't make it overseas before the nuclear bombs were dropped on Japan, ending the conflict. He graduated in 1949 from the University of Toronto with a degree in electrical engineering.

He took a job in 1950 as a Toronto traffic engineer and was a civil servant for 39 years, rising eventually to the merged role of Metro commissioner of roads and traffic. Although he authored dozens of engineering articles and brought marked crosswalks and computerized traffic-signal control to Toronto, he is most known for his desire to build more highways through the city.

Mr. Cass's career began in an era of great optimism around the future of the automobile and his approach to transportation reflected those times.

While debates about major roads in many cities have in recent years been about whether to remove them, narrow them or make them more amenable to transit and people on foot or bicycle, the mid-century was a time when highways were being built across North America at a dizzying pace. And if one got too busy, the solution was simple: Build another.

In 1961, the average rush-hour speed on Toronto's arterial roads was 20.3 kilometres an hour. For traffic planners partial to highway construction, the answer seemed obvious. So Mr. Cass and his team formulated a vision for tackling congestion in Toronto.

The centrepiece was the Spadina Expressway, pushing south through the Annex neighbourhood. It was to connect with a Crosstown Expressway, which would run east-west through the northern part of downtown and cut through posh Rosedale. Highway 400 was to be extended south to the lake, partly along the residential Grace Street, and the Gardiner Expressway was to stretch east and then curve north into Scarborough.

Although Mr. Cass admired Los Angeles's approach to expressway building, it wasn't just about highways. He widened a stretch of Avenue Road from four to six lanes, a move some residents now want reversed. And he pushed to widen both Dundas and Queen streets, four-lane roads lined by a lively mix of retail, to six lanes.

Although his son said he was technocrat who never felt personal ownership of the plan, it became associated with him directly. So much so that a 1969 cartoon in The Globe and Mail depicted him tucked into bed and dreaming about an elevated expressway running directly over the council chamber at Toronto City Hall.

While he didn't actually propose going that far, the plan would have left Toronto a very different place.

Mr. Cass imagined a future in which most urban travel was shunted onto major roads and expressways. He wanted no resident to be more than three-quarters of a mile (1.2 kilometres) from a highway access point. But to achieve that, some established neighbourhoods would have been replaced with wide roads and off-ramps.

In the end, little of his vision came to fruition. The ideas, while bold, gave less consideration to the experience of residents who lived downtown than the convenience of those driving through it. And they provoked fierce opposition.

There were questions about the cost of the plans, and growing concerns about the effect they would have on neighbourhoods. Critics pointed to decades of evidence showing that new roads simply filled up, resulting in a greater volume of traffic moving just as slowly.

Emotions grew heated. One time, Murray Cass remembers being told by a Grade 6 teacher to stand up in class and explain his father's plans.

By pitting residents against city officials, the standoff resembled major fights to stop new expressways in New York. But Jim Jacobs, son of activist Jane Jacobs who was central to both battles, said there was no comparison between Mr. Cass and Robert Moses, the legendarily ruthless builder who had been pushing for the new infrastructure in New York.

Mr. Moses was barely accountable, for decades answering only in theory to politicians who feared him. And through his role as chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority he controlled his own police officers and a source of toll revenue.

"Robert Moses was a dictator, and that's different from an actor in a democratic government, so fundamentally different," Mr. Jacobs remembered. "[Sam Cass] was, you know, like many of the Toronto staff, really a part of the machine that he worked for."

In 1971, Conservative Bill Davis, trying to make his mark as the new Ontario premier, decided that the machine was wrong about the Spadina Expressway. He moved to block it with the celebrated line that, "if we are building a transportation system to serve the automobile, the Spadina Expressway would be a good place to start. But if we are building a transportation system to serve people, the Spadina Expressway is a good place to stop."

Although stopping Spadina meant the unravelling of Mr. Cass's planned network of highways, his worries about the city strangling on traffic proved unfounded. Before the pandemic, in 2019, the average rush-hour speed on Toronto arterials was almost 20 per cent faster than in 1961 – about 24 kilometres an hour, according to city staff.

The career civil servant accepted the provincial decision, though he believed to the end it had been a foolish move. But it would be unfair to say he cared only about drivers. He thought transit had a place, his son said, providing transportation for the young, old and those who couldn't afford a car.

And in his later years, the thrifty Mr. Cass would run errands on the Toronto Transit Commission, taking advantage of one perk of being a former senior civil servant.

“He used it primarily because it was free,” his son, Murray, said. “He loved using his TTC pass, even though his view was that mass transit was not a great solution.”

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