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Southwest ignores transit issues at its peril

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Andrew Perez's column *Sun sets on region's influence* (Jan. 3) on the economic decline of London was well-written, if contentious. Pugilistic bloggers were quick to point fingers, but as usual not one offered a forward-looking solution.

It's easy to blame globalization, agricultural mechanization, "tree-huggers," pricey hydro and perhaps organized labour for decline. Some or all may be valid, but there are two perhaps more obscure reasons: mobility and connectivity.

Apathy is justifiable because we have come to rely on personal automobiles, trucks, telephones and the Internet for interactions with others. There is nothing particularly wrong with this, other than the fact that our demographics and global competitiveness are increasingly demanding something different.

We have lived, quite happily, with ever fewer trains and buses until recently. The baby-boom generation revelled in big V8 engines and cheap gas and gave little heed to long journeys. But we now have a silver tsunami comprising many seniors who will be increasingly unwilling or unable to drive.

Meanwhile, our youth place greater emphasis on personal electronic devices than scoring a driving licence. While many will choose to locate to communities more suited to their evolving lifestyles, others will suffer the pain of immobility and isolation if they have no supportive friends or family close by.

Would-be investors in Southwestern Ontario, especially those involved in forward-thinking businesses, don't want their employees stuck in traffic or facing long, unproductive commutes.

So they judge our region against those of other countries that have invested in fast, frequent passenger rail services and local transit integration. Except perhaps for Kitchener-Waterloo, it's clear that many are giving Southwestern Ontario a miss.

And herein lies the problem.

Unless cities like London can be made to prosper by becoming more connected and more attractive to inward investment, both the city and surrounding rural communities will suffer.

Seniors and youth are already starting to feel the effects of this and, judging by unemployment statistics, those in the middle demographic are not far behind.

This loss of prosperity was the thrust of Perez's article.

Making Hwy. 401 into a 10-lane highway is not going to solve the problem. It's going to remain an absolute mess east of Kitchener for the foreseeable future.

Federal, provincial and municipal governments must work to make Southwestern Ontario a convenient place to live and do business by radically improving and expanding mobility options for people and industry.

This means building modern transportation infrastructure that will match our longer-term economic and demographic needs and aspirations while improving the quality of life for urban and rural populations.

Successful post-industrial regions and communities around the world have all taken connectivity and mobility seriously, but it seems Southwestern Ontario has not.

Ken Westcar is a Woodstock resident.