



Canadian Centre for
Policy Alternatives
Manitoba Office

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A Ray of Hope for Winnipeg Transit

Winnipeg's public transit system is in great need of improvement if it is to meet the needs of those who rely on it – seniors, low-income people, youth and persons with disabilities who cannot drive. By allowing people to get to work regardless of their schedules, an efficient transit system is one of the best ways to fight poverty and inequality in our city. Affordable transit also gives lower-income families the ability to participate in recreation and education, get to appointments, and to socialize.

The City also has to do a better job getting people out of their cars. Each of us has a responsibility to deal with climate change, but we need efficient publically-provided services so we can do our part.

The City's 2016 proposed operating and capital budgets have given a definite nod in favour of improving public transit. Capital investment for fleet expansion, emission control and maintenance repair is proposed to increase by \$15.7M to \$32.5M. The transit subsidy will increase 48% to just under \$70M, allowing bus fares to remain stable. We hope that a low-income bus pass can finally become reality.

This increase in spending provides Transit with a much needed shot in the arm.

In 2014, Winnipeg Transit was recognized by the Ontario Municipal Benchmarking Initiative as the "Benchmark" transit system in Canada, scoring high in two key areas. First its operating cost, per bus /per hour was 26 percent below the national average; this was achieved by a low 'spares ratio' – (the percentage of buses not needed to meet dispatch demands and to allow for maintenance). Second was the operat-

ing revenue/cost ratio: it was 30 percent higher than the national average meaning that more revenue from fares covered operating costs than in other cities, where transit requires higher operating subsidies.

But years of underfunding make it increasingly challenging for employees to meet these benchmarks.

An efficient bus fleet requires maintenance, but difficulty keeping qualified mechanics makes it impossible to keep up with demand. Thirty two of Transit's 86 mechanics are apprentices who need more time and instruction to complete repairs. Experienced mechanics are paid less than the industry standard so once they get enough experience, many move on to higher paid jobs, sometimes in other City departments. Difficulty retaining experienced staff has also eroded Transit's ability to cover costs through doing warranty work.

Winnipeg Transit's mechanical department used to do all its own warranty work for Cummins Engine and New Flyer Industries. With fewer experienced mechanics, Transit now has to contract this work out. Since June of 2015 these repair costs have totaled over \$1.5 million. Had they been done in-house, it could have saved thousands and had buses on the road much faster.

The additional 14 Full Time Equivalent positions proposed in this year's budget will help Transit begin to re-build its maintenance staff to a level needed to keep buses on the road.

Turning repairs around quickly is especially important given that Winnipeg

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IN LABOUR ISSUES

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does not have sufficient buses on the road to meet demand. We know this because technology now tracks how many people are ‘passed up’ when buses are too crowded to accommodate the number of passengers waiting at stops. In 2015, the number of passengers using wheelchairs that were passed up increased from 30 in January to a high of 109 in June and October. Pass up rates for passengers without mobility devices were varied throughout 2015: from 867 in February to 2,318 in September. There are fewer pass ups in the summer (333 in July and August) when people are on holidays and are more likely to use active transportation.

In order to reduce the number of pass ups and improve service over all, the City needs to use the increase in investment for three core service improvements:

1. Incrementally increase the bus fleet by a minimum of 200. This will reduce the number of over-packed buses during rush hour and allow for more buses on feeder routes. The City is in the process of buying 24 used but still viable buses from the City of Calgary (at a cost of \$11,000/bus vs \$600,000 for a new bus). This sort of purchase will help while keeping costs down, but the buses need to be refurbished. Once again, Transit has to come up with a strategy to attract and retain experienced mechanics and body repairers, including offering competitive pay. This could be achieved by implementing a “trades market supplement,” something other municipalities in Western Canada have introduced to meet the demand for qualified tradespeople.

2. Increase the number of buses in service during off-peak hours to accom-

modate those who rely on public transit for shift work, getting to recreation facilities or appointments, shopping or visiting family and friends.

3. Make a low-income bus pass available to Winnipeggers. There should also be an option for a ‘family’ pass so that parents can afford to take their children to recreational activities around the City. This spring Transit will begin introducing a Smart Card which will give passengers different options for paying fares. The first phase out will be for seniors and once any wrinkles are ironed out, the card will be available to the rest of the population. This technology will make it easier to provide low-income individuals and families with lower-cost options.

We know that where there’s a political will, there’s a way to improve services. This was demonstrated when the City implemented a new program using uniformed and plain clothes police to deal with the escalating number of assaults on passengers and bus operators. Operators are already reporting vast improvements since the program came into effect on February 5th of this year. There is every reason to expect that the public will now feel safer using public transit.

Winnipeg Transit employees have kept transit services running as best they could during a long period of neglect. With the new security program in place, a commitment to Rapid Transit and the beginning of investment in maintenance trades staff and the bus fleet, we’re cautiously optimistic that Transit’s fortunes are slowly changing.

Lynne Fernandez holds the Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues at the CCPA MB.

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