



To make transit better for Burlington residents and businesses

September 11, 2017

Presentation To the City of Burlington Re Transit Service – Issues arising from September 07, 2017 Committee of the Whole Meeting:

Since our creation in 2012, *BFAST* (Burlington for Accessible Sustainable Transit) has been advocating for better transit service in Burlington. We have appeared before council many times over the past five years on many transit issues – fare hikes, budget and service cuts, and system changes. Although our submissions have always been supported with solid data and analysis, Council has ignored our requests and we have had to watch transit service continue to decline in Burlington.

Therefore, when I watched the Council of the Whole meeting via the webcast last Thursday, I was not filled with optimism.

However, we are very pleased to see that City management has finally recognized that the accumulation of transit budget cuts by the City has created a crisis within Burlington as there resources have now been stretched far too thin to continue to maintain even its current low level of service. We agree that a significant increase in transit budget is urgently needed to properly and safely provide the existing level of service and action is needed immediately.

For the future, we support the development of a long term **transportation plan** to increase transit service. We are troubled that the current Integrated Transit Mobility Study, led by Walker and Associates, is looking at transit in isolation of other transportation modes. Transportation planning cannot be done in silos. A transportation plan should look at all aspects of transportation including roads, motor vehicles, cycling, pedestrians, parking, and accessibility for all members of our community.

We know that a sound transportation plan should be based on the development of potential alternatives and that the selection of the best alternative should be based on an analysis of the economic, social, and environmental costs and benefits. This approach was used by The Region of Waterloo in the development of their long-term transportation master plan¹

When transit is looked at in isolation, there is a tendency to look only at costs versus farebox revenue, rather than including all the economic, social and environmental benefits of transit. A study commissioned by the Canadian Urban Transit Association, CUTA, determined that municipalities could make no better investment than transit. Transit investments produced economic returns of “at least 12% - probably more”². A recent study of transit benefits in Hamilton also found very good economic returns on transit investment³.

So the question for municipalities is not whether they can afford to fund transit – but whether they can afford not to fund transit.

The transit options study is not only ignoring the overall benefits of transit, it has been based on an assumption that the transit budget cannot be increased and that all alternatives are based on the same inadequate transit budget. Mr. Walker frames this in a coverage versus ridership paradigm. His claim is that by removing service from some areas and concentrating high frequency service on just a few major routes, significant ridership gains will occur. Although he says the choice is Council's, the ridership oriented scenarios seem to be favoured over the coverage scenario.

We have the following concerns with this approach:

1. **Transit planning cannot continue to occur in a silo:** A comprehensive transportation plan provides opportunities to better design a more balanced system. Renown urban planner, Brent Toderian, told us that we must prioritize spending on pedestrian, cycling and transit over motor vehicles (roads, parking)⁴. A modest shift in budget priority could provide significant additional funds for transit.
2. **Transit Planning should not be a zero-sum game:** It is very clear that Burlington trails other municipalities in per capita transit funding⁵. Burlington should be increasing transit funding to levels of other similar communities. The ridership versus coverage trade-off with the current low budget will definitely adversely affect many of our transit users.
3. **Where's the evidence?** Is there evidence that reducing coverage to improve frequency on some major routes will actually result in a significant increase in ridership? The ridership figures from Houston, which has implemented a ridership oriented plan, have so far shown a drop in ridership⁶. We do agree with Mr. Walker's statement that several years are needed to see the long-term effect. However, even if Houston ridership eventually rises, it is hard to imagine large increases (100% or more) occurring without significantly increasing the transit budget.
4. **Transformative change needed:** This limited approach will not provide the transformative changes required in our Official Plan⁷. Our Official Plan requires a 500% increase in ridership by 2030 (current 2% to 11% by 2031). Even to recover the 16% drop in ridership over the past 4 years will require significant new investment.
5. **An Inclusive Accessible City:** Burlington has declared itself to be an inclusive City. Access to transportation is a key feature of an inclusive community, The City has developed a service standard⁶ to ensure that most of its citizens have access to transit. The first requirement of a transit plan should be to meet our service standards. Once these standards are met, additional resources can be focused on the high usage routes.

On a final positive note, we are heartened by the increased cooperation BFAST has received in the past eighteen month from the City – particularly from City Manager James Ridge, former interim Burlington Transit Director Jeff Black and current Transit Director Sue Connor. We look forward to continued cooperation in the development of transit in the City.

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References:

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4. Brent Toderian presentation to Burlington Council, September, 2016
5. Municipal per capita spending on transit – Burlington and peer communities. Colm Lynn. Presentation to Committee of the Whole, September 07, 2017
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