

HOT WHEELS: SUSTAINABILITY IN ACTION

by Sarah Webb and Jane Worton

Accessible public transportation is a critical link to mobility for the young, the elderly, and people with disabilities, and it is crucial for people and families on low incomes who are looking for work. Lack of transportation affects a poor household's ability to afford housing and food. Increasing the cost of travel for people living in poverty decreases the amount of money available for food and housing. An efficient transit network is an invaluable community resource and provides many social, economic, and environmental benefits. Access to public transit is an important element in most of the Community Council's projects.

Public transit helps to build the kinds of communities that Canadians want to live in - ones with clean air, healthy environments, strong economies, safe roads, and green spaces.

Employment

For those on low incomes, access to affordable, reliable transportation such as public transit can be a crucial factor in finding and keeping work. About three-quarters of workers in the Capital Region travel to work in cars, but at 10%, the number of transit riders is substantial, and it is growing. A further 15% walk or cycle to work.

Recent research shows that people who are looking for work and many new employees consider access to transit a priority concern in our community. This is supported by findings from the Community Council Ticket Assistance Program, which works in partnership with the Victoria Regional Transit Commission to distribute bus tickets to agencies that provide human services. In 2001-2002, the program distributed 33% of its tickets (7,900) for employment-related travel. Demand for this program is increasing. This year, it will give out 40,000 tickets.

Housing

Access to transit is a key factor in making housing affordable. In recent interviews about housing with people on low incomes throughout the Capital Region, many commented on the importance of access to transit.

For many people who live outside of the downtown area, low-cost public transit is crucial for accessing emergency food, medical services, and other essential basic needs.

In order to access basic services, people need to live within walking or cycling distance from these services. Matt would rather live downtown but cannot afford housing there. However, the bus is too expensive for him. "To go downtown and back is almost \$4 a day. To do that every day is \$20 a week, \$80 a month, and I don't have that kind of money." Elderly people and people with disabilities on restricted incomes receive a BC bus pass, which is very helpful, but for some people on low incomes, especially those on income assistance, a bus pass at the full price of \$55 is financially out of reach.

Environment

Transit undoubtedly plays a key role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and it contributes to cleaner air in urban centres. The average Canadian commuter who uses mass transit for a year instead of driving to work saves our environment from 9.1 pounds of hydrocarbons, 62.5 pounds of carbon monoxide, and 4.9 pounds of nitrogen oxide. Cleaner air means healthier living and can result in fewer cases of asthma and other pollution-related allergies. Not only does transit reduce traffic congestion and pollution, it also makes the roads safer for cyclists and pedestrians.

Many people who ride the bus regularly also own cars and walk or cycle to places they have to go.

Anna drives, walks, and rides the bus. "My \$20 for gas has to last me the whole month, so I divide my time between walking or busing and driving because once that gas runs out, that's it."

Regional Planning

The Capital Regional District is currently engaged in a regional planning process focused on three interrelated areas: housing, transportation and economic development. This process has produced a working paper on transit that identified the following priority initiatives:

- Express bus service
- Para-transit services in the Western Communities and on the Peninsula
- Transit priority measures along the Douglas Street Highway #1 corridor
- Fare Incentives such as the U-Pass for employers

You can check out the report at:

http://www.crd.bc.ca/regplan/RTP/papers/transit_strategy_working_paper_4draft.pdf

Properly designed land-use patterns and growth strategies can aid in improving transit efficiency and promoting more active transport. However, smart growth is not the only answer to revitalising transit. That comes with adequate, sustained funding from all levels of government.

According to the Canadian Federation of Municipalities, the ability to maintain transit systems is challenging for many urban areas: "Investment in new infrastructure is pressing, environment and human health are at risk, the social support needs of new urban residents are growing, and the ageing infrastructure in the core of our urban centers is eroding. At the same time, municipal governments have assumed more responsibilities from the provincial and federal governments." (2002)

Funding for public transit must be a community priority. A strong transit system has numerous benefits for society, the economy, and the environment. Without bold and direct action by all levels of government and a shift in public attitudes, we could continue on the road to lower ridership, greater government spending on traditional transport, increased congestion, and a changing climate.

To find out more...

Greater Victoria Transit Association

www.gvta.org

Victoria Regional Transit Commission

www.busonline.ca/regions/vic/news/commission/default.cfm

Regional Transportation Strategy

