

Thursday, November 11th, 2021

Dear City Council,

Over the past 20 months, Guelph Transit and City Hall have had to reinvent everything they do. They have had to learn quickly, make rapid decisions, keep up with the fast-changing medical advice, and engineer a substantial shift in expectations. And they are accomplishing it all while falling off a cliff. While these days are dark, we must remember that dark times always contain opportunities! We can emerge from this crisis into a better and healthier world.

It appears everyone has been asked for predictions about the recovery. We all have no idea or clue. We are in a “Black Swan” event - this sudden and once-in-a-lifetime swerve in the flow of history has been challenging to say the least. There have been no recent events that can guide us to what is on the other side of this pandemic. Predicting, with any degree of confidence, is futile.

Yet so much of what we do, what the city does, is justified by predictions. So, while the Guelph Transit Route Review is expected to predict the resulting ridership from its proposal, we need to take it with a grain of salt. More ominously, many projects, especially roads and highways, are built on estimates of future peak travel demand. If large numbers of people never return to the office, will all these projects still make sense? Many certainties are not certain anymore.

So, while we do not know the future, we have something even better: We have goals and values to go along with them. These things come from the community and are expressed through you, our elected leaders, and transit planners’ convictions. In the old world of 2019 and before, predictions were sometimes used to bypass a conversation about values. Perhaps you have heard the old saying, “traffic projections indicate that we have to widen the highway.” That kind of statement avoids a crucial step: What are we trying to achieve for our community, and what important goals might this project undermine?

To start telling the transit narrative in this “new world,” we need to think about the goals more clearly than ever before and discuss them more openly in our city and with other levels of government.

Too often, this city, like some others, asks about ridership trends as though they measure “how transit is doing.” Clearly, right now, ridership is no longer the primary measure of transit’s success. But a 60% fall in ridership this year does not mean we are suddenly 60% less competent or successful. Ridership has always gone up and down for many reasons, and we have other goals that ridership alone does not quite measure.

Yes, it will be a challenge to return to pre-crisis ridership levels. Nobody knows how long that will be. Guelph Transit projects it could take up to 2-5 years before ridership returns to “normal levels,” but that could be wrong even then. This has also caused some cities to invest dramatically in walking and cycling infrastructure to ensure there are still good alternatives to the car.

Now let us speculate for a moment: If more people start to work at home permanently and/or more students’ study via online methods and need fewer trips to work or school, Transit ridership might go down, but its efficiency might go up. Transit might offer a better all-day, all-week, or even all-night service critical for diverse trips like shopping, seeing family, going to Storm games, or medical attention,

especially for lower-income people. Of course, all of that is speculation, but we do know one thing: ridership alone does not measure all these possibilities

This crisis has revealed that there is a solid new argument for transit, one that transit should deploy at anyone who wants to judge it on ridership only. Transit has kept running through the crisis as an essential service, supporting people who work in hospitals, grocery stores, utilities, and manufacturing and medical supplies. These mostly low-income people would typically have been called “transit-dependent.” But it is they who are right now holding civilization together, so we are all “transit-dependent” in this sense.

Furthermore, this has constantly been true. Transit riders have always been part of the basic functioning of our city. Measuring that role solely with ridership levels would be like measuring the success of the Guelph Police Department by how many arrests they make. The purpose of the police is to provide a base level of security that people can count on. The purpose of transit is to do the same for urban mobility. Transit means that people can go places and consequently do things that are not as harmful or expensive as driving a vehicle.

We need to build back better from the effects of Covid19 and be more ambitious with our modal target and climate goals. In Guelph, buses are the principal mode of public transit. Almost 17,000 trips are made by bus every day in Guelph, but our bus network is not nearly good enough. It operates well below its potential. Dramatically improving our bus system would accomplish so much.

A more frequent bus network would:

1. Connect riders with many more services and jobs;
2. Speed up trips to work and to school;
3. Make transit a more attractive choice, thereby increasing ridership;
4. Bring in more fare revenue as ridership increases, thereby lowering subsidies;
5. Reduce the number of people traveling by car;
6. Reduce the demand from cars for road space and for parking spaces;
7. Reduce greenhouse gas and particulate emissions from cars;
8. Encourage more people to walk for more trips (most transit trips start on foot);
9. Support higher density development and ;
10. Help attract residents and businesses who value good transit.

Good transit has enormous benefits, but those benefits only happen if many people ride transit: the more people who ride transit, the more Guelph benefits.

With the transition to zero-emission vehicles headlining a [slate of transportation-related events](#) at the COP26 conference, we must not lose sight of public transit as a vital tool for decarbonizing the transport sector.

“If national governments do not back mayors and invest to protect and expand public transport then they won’t be able to meet their own carbon targets,” Mark Watts, executive director of C40 Cities, a network of sustainability-focused global mayors, said in a statement.

Underscoring that warning is a new report by C40 Cities and the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) that states global **public transit use must double by 2030** if nations are to meet the 1.5°C emissions targets necessary to avoid the worst effects of climate change.

Electrifying the transit fleets, expanding bus and rail infrastructure, and improving system accessibility with more frequently would slash transport emissions and air pollution and boost the quality of life and economic opportunities, particularly for low-income urban residents. It estimates that those investments would create 4.6 million new jobs in a sector badly hit by the Covid-19 pandemic.

“Without a revolution in public transport the world will miss the bus on tackling climate change,” Anies Baswedan, governor of Jakarta, said in a statement. “Time is running out.”

Transit has to be more appealing and efficient than private vehicles to draw large numbers of riders out of cars. That would likely require dramatic changes in land-use policies that have promoted auto-oriented sprawl in cities worldwide and ending government subsidies for driving, such as free parking. Some cities such as London and Paris have taken action to limit driving in their urban centers, with varying levels of success.

Many policy experts say that even a rapid transition to zero-emissions cars would not avert catastrophic climate change if vehicle-miles traveled are not also dramatically reduced. We need to establish more ambitious targets to increase the use of public transit and climate-friendly modes like walking and biking.

The time to invest in public transport is right now. Governments that do so will reap the rewards of millions of good jobs, improved fairness in access to mobility, and will lock in reductions to transport emissions at the pace and scale we need.”

The problem is that the existing **bus service is not good enough**. Neither is the service proposed under Guelph Transit’s network redesign. Our buses need to be faster, come more frequently and be more reliable. Buses need to quickly and easily connect more people to more destinations. Building a radically more frequent bus network will help people who already use the bus, encourage more people to take the bus, and build ridership to support other transit projects. It will increase our modal share quickly along with cycling and walking, which are integrated with transit.

The future of funding will require new discussions of goals. Ridership matters and many other things matter too, but let us never lose sight of what this crisis teaches. Without transit, cities do not work for anyone.

Thank you for your consideration.

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