



**“The truth about a city’s aspirations isn’t found in its vision statement. It’s found in its budget.”**

**Brent Toderian**

Tuesday, November 18, 2025

Dear Members of Guelph City Council,

Despite the city’s vision for Guelph’s transit future, the 2026 budget fails to back these aspirations with decisive investment. Postponing critical transit projects, raising fares, and cutting funding expose a lack of commitment that perpetuates poor service, under-investment, and even more public frustration. Delaying the Quality Transit Network (QTN), which will bring more grid like routes city-wide, by 3 years will increase costs due to inflation and jeopardize achieving Guelph’s transportation and climate goals. It also forfeits major economic returns from transit investment. These choices make clear that this Council is prioritizing risk aversion over real progress.

While we recognize the pressure to avoid tax increases, the cost of inaction—measured in lost productivity, commercial delays, and climate debt—far outweighs the cost of this proposed phased investment.

This prioritization of risk aversion is immediately visible in the contradictory strategy of raising fares while delaying service investment. This proposal is fundamentally flawed and risks significant public backlash.

Guelph Transit recorded a healthy **\$3.8 million operating surplus in 2024**, driven by successful initiatives like the University of Guelph ridership and the Affordable Bus Pass. Using these existing funds to offset proposed steep fare increases—like the **4.84% rise in the monthly Fare Cap to \$98.60** and the **nearly 8% projected rise in cash fares**—would offer immediate relief to riders already facing persistent service issues.

We will only support any fare increase if it is immediately accompanied by a massive, funded improvement plan with significant investment committed *before* the fare increase takes effect.

The lack of this clear, pre-committed investment strategy, compounded by the known surplus, has caused understandable public frustration, threatening to erode trust and reverse ridership growth.

**Short-Term Adjustments Cannot Replace Real Investment.**

While the 2025 route adjustments are appreciated, they are symptomatic fixes that fail to deliver the reliable, foundational service required to meet the city's urgent growth needs.

### **Strategic Cuts Undermine Broader Mobility and Climate Goals**

The proposed budget cuts directly weaken Guelph's goals for mobility, climate, and housing. Transit must be a priority for a growing city. Strong transit infrastructure is needed to support the city's growth plans. Residents are less likely to support higher density living along main routes if high-quality transit keeps getting delayed. Transit and active transportation bring economic, social, and environmental benefits, but they are not getting enough resources.

We cannot reach our environmental goals if we support only one type of transportation and cut funding for the others.

### **A Call for Strategic, Phased Implementation (The FRAP Model)**

We encourage Council to consider a phased, strategic investment plan for 2026, in line with the **Future Ready Action Plan (FRAP)**. The FRAP model has helped increase ridership through step-by-step improvements and could continue to deliver results.

For 2026, we suggest starting phased investment with the 99 Mainline, especially the busiest and most delayed section on Gordon Street between Clair Road and Waterloo Avenue. This area has the most passenger-hours lost to delays, showing it needs urgent improvement, not more short turn buses. Focusing here will help reduce daily delays for all routes.

Cost-effective Transit Priority Measures (TPMs), like queue jump lanes and signal priority, can deliver strong results and fix key system problems. By focusing on TPMs instead of bigger, delayed projects, Guelph can make faster and more meaningful transit improvements, even with limited funds. This approach balances careful spending with real progress.

A new battery-electric bus costs about \$1.72 million CAD, but Canadian municipal data shows that installing a high-impact Transit Signal Priority (TSP) system at one bottleneck can cost as little as \$20,000 CAD. In other words, for the price of one bus, you could install roughly 100 smart TSP signals.

Strategic TPMs offer an immediate, tangible Return on Investment (ROI) by improving service reliability and reducing operational costs. We need to make these basic investments now. Implementing them in high-ridership corridors also publicly signals that transit is a prioritized, essential service, rather than an afterthought.

## **Critical Service and Fleet Accountability**

The decision to defer new electric bus purchases in favour of refurbishing older diesel units, while still important, raises serious operational concerns. Staff may present this as necessary maintenance to maintain fleet reliability, but this plan introduces its own risks:

- We ask staff to provide a clear, data-based report outlining the number of diesel buses that will be out of service, the projected duration of refurbishments, the steps to maintain service consistency, and a backup plan to mitigate unforeseen delays.
- To ensure accountability, we suggest implementing a formal reporting system—such as public-facing dashboards or regular updates—to provide ongoing transparency in line with Council's responsibilities.

Although changes to the electrification timeline are important, we encourage Council to ask for a report on alternative fleet options. These could include buying hybrid buses, used diesel buses, or converting current mid-life diesel buses to electric, as the City of Milton has successfully done.

## **Addressing Specific Route and Equity Concerns**

We must critically review the adequacy of new services, particularly for Conestoga College:

- Route 98 Speedvale goes to Conestoga College, paid in part by the new UPass, but its limited daytime weekday schedule does not serve workers easily in the Speedvale industrial area or the east side of Guelph as set out in the original plan. It also does not meet students' or workers' needs for evening and weekend service.
- We appreciate that the operating budget includes money to digitize the affordable bus pass application process and to turn on digital signs. These are small but positive steps toward modernization.

## **Expanding Equitable Access**

We strongly support keeping free transit for youth and seniors, but these programs could be even more effective:

- We ask City Council to expand the free transit program for seniors to five days a week, as requested by the Guelph Wellington Seniors Association (GWSA), to ease travel and isolation. Crucially, most seniors are unaware of this program due to a lack of marketing, rendering current usage data misleadingly low. Any expansion must include a targeted awareness campaign.

- Although youth transit usage typically increased during the summer with all-day service, Guelph did not see a corresponding overall rise in annual youth ridership. We recommend staff utilize the "*Get on the Bus*" program's resources to address capacity issues and boost ridership by increasing awareness and improving access.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

We encourage Council to commit to strategic, phased, and ongoing investments in the 2026 Budget Update by focusing on the attached recommendations list.

Investing in better, more reliable transit helps everyone in Guelph. Riders have more freedom, drivers face less traffic, and the city moves closer to its climate, equity, and housing goals. When a city delays investing in transit, it delays investing in its people and businesses. Picture a future where a student easily boards a bus that arrives on time, an elderly resident enjoys free rides to see family, and a working parent chooses a fast, efficient bus instead of sitting in traffic. Action can move us from talk to real improvements and help build a better transit future.

The truth is, we are already paying for mediocre transit. This is not a saving; it is a mounting debt owed to every resident—paid in wasted time, lost productivity, and missed business opportunities. By delaying this vital investment, we are simply choosing to pay the much higher, constantly compounding price of poor transit. We are told there is not enough money to invest, but the real question is: **How much more can we afford to lose by standing still?**

Sincerely,

Steven Petric  
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## Appendix Recommendations

### Immediate Action (2026)

1. **Re-evaluate Fare Hike:** Direct staff to use the \$3.8M operating surplus to offset or significantly reduce the proposed fare increases (4.84% cap, 8% cash) or reducing to inflation (estimated at 2.7% in 2025)
2. Implement high-impact Transit Priority Measures on the “Mainline” Gordon Street corridor in 2026 to improve reliability in the busiest area.
3. Require a written, guaranteed service assurance plan to cover fleet reliability during diesel refurbishments.
4. Establish a formal reporting system (dashboard) with regular updates on the Guelph Transit Future Ready Plan, route changes, fleet and service reliability for public transparency.
5. Direct staff to present alternatives for renewing the fleet, such as hybrid, used diesel buses or conversion options, for Council review.
6. Expand and Market Seniors' Program: Expand the free transit program for seniors to five days a week and mandate a targeted awareness campaign to boost participation.
7. Boost Youth Ridership: Direct staff to utilize "Get on the Bus" program resources to address capacity, improve access, and launch an awareness campaign to increase free youth transit ridership.

### Strategic Planning

1. Direct staff to develop a comprehensive **5-year industry-standard business plan for Guelph Transit**, focused on measurable service standards, reliability metrics, and sustainable financing to guide operational stability beyond single-year budget cycles.
2. Mandating the development of a professional, long-range **10–20-year Transit Master Plan** that explicitly integrates with the Transportation Master Plan and city growth goals, providing a funded framework for QTN implementation, fleet electrification, and transit-supportive land use.