

Public Transit: More people want to go along for the ride

By Stephanie Sodero

Transit in HRM

The number of people using transit in HRM is on the rise. This is good news for the air we breathe – one full bus means 40 fewer cars on the road. The catch is that greater investment in transit is needed by all levels of government, because at present there are not enough buses and services to accommodate these new riders.

Transit use in HRM increased 12% between 2000 and 2004 to 14.4 million riders annually - and demand continues to rise. HRM citizens use transit more often than people in cities of similar size, such as Waterloo and York. According to the 2001 Canadian Census, 10% of HRM's 369,000 citizens travel to work using transit - by comparison, 68% drive alone, 10% carpool, 11% walk and 1% bike.

These numbers show that the demand exists. What is needed is investment in transit so that taking the bus or ferry is competitive with private transportation in terms of travel time, cost and comfort.

Metro Transit Today

Over the past four years Metro Transit has undergone service improvements and will exceed its goal of 16 millions riders by 2007 if transit programs, such as the U-PASS and MetroLink, are expanded.

The U-PASS is a university transit pass where students pay \$14 per month, instead of the regular student rate of \$54. The U-PASS is in place at Saint Mary's and Dalhousie Universities, while Mount Saint Vincent students recently approved the program. The U-PASS is designed to increase transit ridership and has been a huge success. Student demand for the program is so high that buses are at capacity.

The new MetroLink transit service uses road lanes and signals to cut travel time. The Cole Harbour route started in August and has quickly gained popularity. Shortly after the service started, the new Park and Ride lot serving the Cole Harbour terminal was at capacity. The Sackville route starts in February, and HRM would clearly benefit from more MetroLink routes.

Metro Transit has also made operational improvements, now running its buses on a fuel mix containing 20% biodiesel supplied by Wilson's Fuel. The biodiesel mix reduces emissions significantly; 18% less particulate matter which affects air quality and 16% less carbon dioxide which causes climate change.

In addition, the TRAX project of the Ecology Action Centre, in cooperation with Metro Transit, is researching the potential for implementing an EcoPASS program at

workplaces in HRM. Typically, an employee with an EcoPASS receives a discounted fare paid through automatic payroll deduction and receives an ID card for a transit pass.

Opportunities for Change

HRM has proven we have the demand for transit and the ingenuity to make it work, but funding is needed to get more buses on the road and ferries on the water. Three key opportunities are coming up for Nova Scotians to express their support for investment in transit: the federal election, the HRM Regional Planning process and eventually a provincial election.

It is telling that transit is a plank in the platform of all federal parties. The two main issues are funding for transit infrastructure and making transit passes tax deductible. Both are excellent – however if forced to prioritize, I would pick investment in transit infrastructure. Build it and they will ride.

In March, Regional Council will vote on the HRM Regional Plan, which will guide development over the next 25 years. The Plan is based on a vision of transit-linked communities and includes components such as a fast ferry from Bedford to Halifax. However, the Plan lacks specific quantitative goals. In 2001, 10% of HRM citizens used transit to travel to work. Could we achieve a 20% ridership rate by 2020?

Finally, a provincial election may be held this year. The province contributed \$786,000 towards the MetroLink project – could this signal renewed interest after the province largely withdrew from transit funding in the 1990s? As rising fuel prices encourage more people to consider transit, now is the time for the development of a comprehensive provincial transit strategy.

Rising fuel and insurance costs combined with innovations like the U-PASS, MetroLink and EcoPASS are poised to increase transit ridership further. We need leadership at all levels of government to realize this potential.

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