

Public Transit and Our Quality of Life: Building Better Communities

Canada's cities are booming. About 80 percent of Canadians are urban residents, and 60 percent of recent job creation has been concentrated in just 10 urban centres.^a The state of our nation now reflects the state of our cities—and the quality of urban life has become a national concern.

A recent poll found that 92 percent of urban Canadians think that public transit makes their community a better place to live, and 73 percent feel that transit benefits them personally.^b Even so, the nature of the links between public transit and quality of life may not be immediately obvious. Indeed, many quality of life indicators only measure things like individual life expectancy, education and income. But the residents of Canada's cities know that quality of life is more complex—it requires things like clean air, safe streets, access to opportunity and the freedom to move. Public transit makes a significant contribution in all these areas.

Polls have shown that Canadians believe quality of life is more important than standard of living, and is a better reflection of their social, environmental and economic concerns.^c For this reason, quality of life measures developed by our federal government address issues like health, environment, safety, economic opportunity and social participation. Many Canadian municipalities want to capture these same ideals at an urban level, and are working to achieve the vision of sustainable communities—a vision with very positive implications for quality of life.

A vision at risk

According to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the ability of our cities to become more sustainable, and to improve their quality of life, is increasingly under threat:

Investment in new infrastructure is pressing, environment and human health are at risk, the social support needs of many new urban residents are growing, and aging infrastructure in the core of our urban centres is eroding. At the same time, municipal governments have assumed more responsibilities as services and programs have been offloaded from other governments.

Edmonton Transit gets local feedback through an annual community forum. The conference features an overview of the transit system's performance during the last year, and potential future changes. Discussion groups are instrumental to building a customer perspective into Edmonton Transit policy and practice.



Municipal governments are deeply concerned about social, environmental and fiscal sustainability, as their expenditure requirements increase and revenue sources remain inadequate.^a

Clearly, an urban crisis is looming that could affect the quality of life of most Canadians. Action is required on a number of fronts—and the quest to improve public transit is among them.

Why transit matters

Transit is a major force in the struggle to keep Canada's cities livable. Without transit, our largest cities would be completely reshaped—and even small cities would change noticeably for the worse.

Transit's role in tackling important urban challenges was recently underlined by the *Canada Transportation Act Review Panel*. In its final report, the Panel highlighted transit's wide-ranging benefits including "major reductions in what would otherwise be needed by way of urban arterials and expressways, with their associated infrastructure costs, congestion and environmental impact."^d

But reducing the need for road construction is just one way that transit improves our quality of life. Many others were identified by a recent Transport Canada study to create a national vision for transit's future:

- Improving traveller choice
- Keeping downtowns healthy
- Containing urban sprawl
- Improving air quality and health
- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions
- Bringing opportunity to disadvantaged persons
- Improving business access to the labour force
- Improving municipal standby capability ^e

The Prime Minister's Caucus Task Force on Urban Issues recently reported that better multimodal transportation, including effective transit service, is needed to help our cities "improve economic competitiveness and development, the environment and quality of life."^f The Task Force noted that gridlock on our roads is affecting livability, and called for improvements to public transit as a key step toward reducing harmful air emissions.

Transit and personal opportunity

Public transit represents a valuable alternative to car use for most city dwellers. But it provides an especially critical link to opportunity for those who have limited choices—including the young, elderly, disabled and lower-income Canadians numbering among the 10 million non-drivers in our country.

Transit helps all urban residents participate in their communities, and lets them live life to the fullest. It gives them essential—and equitable—access to employment and

Post-secondary students are coming on board.

At the University of Victoria and Camosun College, 20,000 students are enrolled in the U-Pass Program, a discount transit pass initiative. Ridership is up about 50 percent since the pilot project began in 2000. And students have now formally recognized the important role public transit plays in their lives, with 88 percent of them voting to approve the permanent U-Pass program.



education, and the freedom to shop and play where they choose. This win-win situation also benefits the businesses and institutions that would otherwise be out of reach for many potential employees, students and clients.

Many transit users could choose to get around by car, but don't. And transit's low cost is a major reason. The average transit rider can save thousands of dollars a year by not owning and operating a car — money that can be used to pay for vital needs like food, housing or education.

Transit and the freedom to move

Canadians value the freedom to go where they want, when they want—whether it's getting to work or school, heading to the mall or visiting friends. And cities thrive when people can get around easily.

But personal mobility in our cities is under siege. Travel demands are exceeding capacities, and municipal governments are struggling to solve the problem. Experts increasingly agree that building roads is not a cure—with some believing that it could even make gridlock worse in the long run.

Public transit, on the other hand, helps improve overall mobility. It not only provides choice and freedom to transit users, but it reduces congestion for those who



"I am a 26-year-old single mother with a young daughter.

I take the bus to school every day, but first I have to go in the opposite direction to take my daughter to daycare. The routes match up perfectly, and the driver always smiles at us. It's marvelous to be greeted this way each morning—it brightens our whole day!"

– I.L., customer of the Société de transport de la Ville de Laval

Wherever life takes you



drive. In large cities, gridlock and massive delays to people and goods are kept in check by high transit ridership—with immense economic benefits for both individuals and businesses.

Transit is also a valuable complement to other travel options in the daily lives of urban dwellers: pedestrians hop on transit to save time and effort, cyclists park their bikes at the station or even bring them on board, and long-distance commuters can park and ride to work. Many people rely on a range of travel options, and make different choices depending on trip purpose and length, weather, family needs or other factors.

It's also true that transit's mobility benefits reach well beyond weekday rush hours. Every day, Canadian transit providers are called on to move large numbers of people quickly—sometimes on very short notice. They provide invaluable logistical support in response to fires, winter storms and other emergencies, as well as to special events like festivals and major-league sports. This standby capability is a vital complement to transit's other, more conventional, roles.

Halifax's Access-A-Bus ensures that everyone can participate in their community.

In 2001, Access-A-Bus carried 118,000 passengers to work, school, medical appointments, shopping or social visits—an increase of 73,000 trips over 15 years. And demand is still growing. One survey respondent summed up her feelings this way:

"I'm very happy with the Access-A-Bus system. It's been a blessing for me—it allows me to get out and about. I would not want to change one thing."



GO Transit's "GO Paint for Clean Air" was part of Clean Air Day celebrations in June 2001. At the height of morning rush hour at downtown Toronto's Union Station, 12 artistic young people competed to create painted

works of art with an environmental theme. The goal was to highlight the important link between transit and a healthy environment, all while having fun and putting a smile on GO customers' faces.

Transit and clean air

Heart and lung health is an important medical issue, especially for the 20 percent of Canadians who have a related illness like asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. In fact, the federal government estimates that air pollution causes at least 5,000 premature deaths each year in 11 major Canadian cities.^g And the transportation sector is the biggest source of urban air pollution—in Toronto, it causes up to 90 percent of carbon monoxide emissions, 83 percent of nitrogen oxide emissions and 60 percent of sulphur dioxide emissions.^h

These figures would be even worse without public transit. Trip for trip, transit users pollute substantially less than drivers. By enabling many thousands of people to make a less-polluting choice, transit can create a measurable improvement in air quality—giving us all room to breathe.

Transit and road safety

Every year, motor vehicle crashes kill almost 3,000 Canadians and injure over 220,000 others. They are the most common cause of death for people under the age of 35, and cost our health care system at least \$10 billion annually.ⁱ

Transit travel, by comparison, is exceptionally safe. Trip for trip, car occupants are 20 times more likely to be killed than transit passengers, and serious transit accidents causing death are extremely rare.^j In fact, transit is the safest mode of urban transportation—a contribution to public health and well-being that is only rarely acknowledged.

Transit and urban form

Many North American planning experts believe that “smart growth” can improve the quality of life in urban areas through compact, mixed-use development. But without transit, the higher densities of smart growth would yield more congestion, not less. Experts agree that transit is essential to reduce urban sprawl, conserve greenspace and keep our cities at a human scale.

Rapid transit is an effective smart growth tool that directly affects the built environment. In cities across Canada, rising land values around rapid transit stations have led to higher quality development and greater densities—both of which are key characteristics of smart growth. Transit-oriented development is also attractive, counteracting the visual blight of parking lots, strip malls and freeways that dominate many parts of our cities.

Transit benefits downtown environments, in particular. One reason for the continued health of Canada’s downtowns is that public transit can bring in commuters, shoppers and tourists without the noise, pollution and parking demands of additional cars. And because transit passengers are also pedestrians, transit use leads to walking activity that creates lively streets, supports retail businesses, and discourages crime. Continued investment in transit service will help keep our downtowns vibrant and successful.

And it’s not just downtowns that depend on transit. At the heart of most thriving older neighbourhoods in Canadian cities are compact, mixed-use corridors that formed around high-frequency transit routes—usually streetcar lines. This long-standing linkage between public transit and dynamic, walkable communities is not lost on planners and decision-makers, who are increasingly modelling new neighbourhoods after more traditional ones.



“Better transit” was a central theme of the City of Ottawa's Smart Growth Summit.

In June 2001, hundreds of local residents and international experts gathered to debate ways of making Ottawa a more sustainable community. A strong consensus emerged that more car drivers must

be convinced to take transit before Ottawa can successfully build a “smarter” future. And in similar exercises across Canada, other cities are reaching the same conclusion.

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The Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA) is the voice of Canada's public transit industry. For additional information, including research reports, industry updates, news bulletins and more, please contact us or visit our website.

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