

# BILLIONS FOR BUSES

**Draft position of the Bus Riders Union on the proposed  
Richmond / Airport / Vancouver Skytrain expansion**

**Bus Riders Union Planning Committee  
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[busridersnews@netscape.net](mailto:busridersnews@netscape.net)  
604 215 2662**



# Context

The Bus Riders Union believes that the needs of the transit dependent must be at the centre of transportation planning. We are opposed to the proposed Skytrain line to the airport. The proposed Richmond/ Airport/ Vancouver Skytrain line won't help bus riders get to work on time, or get a seat on an over-crowded bus. It won't end the curfew imposed on transit dependent people by cuts to the night owls; it won't alleviate the economic hardship of high user fees for transit.

We propose a new vision for transportation in Greater Vancouver, a vision that prioritizes social justice for working people, people of colour and women who most rely on public transit, specifically the bus. We believe the money spent on Skytrain infrastructure should rather be directed towards putting more buses on the road.

**Context:** SKYTRAIN CANNIBALIZES THE BUS SYSTEM, BUS RIDERS LEFT OUT IN THE COLD.

Ninety percent of transit users ride a bus for some part of their trip; eighty percent use the buses exclusively. The buses are the backbone of our transit system, but Skytrain continues to eat up a disproportionate amount of our transportation dollars. TransLink is now in the position of prioritizing further Skytrain expansion over much needed increases in bus service. Debt servicing on Skytrain already eats about of 20% of TransLink's total annual budget. Now, TransLink is looking at taking on nearly a billion dollars in debt to build a line which will not carry more than five percent of transit users despite replacing a heavily used trolley line and a successful rapid bus route.

While earmarking public dollars for costly Skytrain studies, TransLink has cut vital bus services and repeatedly raised fares. In the fall of 2001 TransLink imposed a curfew on transit dependent people when they cut the night owl buses. This means bus riders in Vancouver can't get home on transit after 1:40am, and for many people in suburbs the last bus leaves as early as 8 or 10 o'clock. The cuts to the night owls are an assault on the right to mobility for transit dependent people. Cuts to buses also constitute a racist attack on overwhelmingly immigrant and refugee night workers who are forced to find less desirable transportation arrangements or lose their jobs.

In the same round of cuts TransLink eliminated entire bus routes and reduced service on some of the busiest routes in the city. This means longer waits for buses and that many bus riders who will have to stand on an overcrowded bus for their ride.

As if to add insult to injury, on April Fools Day, 2002, TransLink raised fares. TransLink's policies and priorities are clearly inconsistent with a principled, people-centred approach to transit planning.

# Principles

**Principles:** SOCIAL JUSTICE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

At the Bus Riders Union we believe that human needs should be the priority of all public services. The principles guiding our transportation policy should be social justice and public health.

## *Social Justice*

Access to transportation has important implications for social justice in our region. For transit dependent people, access to transit shapes and limits our ability to access school, work, health care, recreation, volunteer commitments, daycare, the political process, information, peers, nature, and the arts.

From our experience of organizing on Vancouver's buses, we at the Bus Riders Union know that transit dependent people are low-wage workers, the unemployed, refugees, students, children, seniors, people with disabilities, First Nations people, and immigrants. They are majority people of colour and majority women. They are the economically exploited and politically marginalized in this society. Policies that negatively impact transit dependent people are implicitly racist and sexist policies.

Social justice for the transit dependent is not just a vague slogan for us at the Bus Riders Union. It is a principle that requires specific policy measures.

Social Justice means lower fares for the overwhelming majority of bus riders who ride the bus out of economic necessity. For the mom on welfare who has to take \$103 out of her \$370 a month budget to get around the city (that's almost a third of her disposable income to buy a bus pass for herself and her child); and for the new immigrant making the \$6/hour training wage who works a full hour just to cover the bus fare to and from work.

Social justice means late night bus service for transit dependent shift workers, overwhelmingly new immigrants and refugees. And for people like the Kwantlen college student who recently told a BRU organizer that he doesn't get to go out with his friends much because the last bus home is at 10 o'clock.

Social justice means expanding accessibility so that people with disabilities have equal access to all parts of the city without having to book handy-dart 4 days in advance.

Social justice is about more buses so that bus riders don't have to face the everyday frustration of long waits and overcrowding.

# Principles

## *Public Health*

Everyone who lives in Greater Vancouver knows what a critical question air quality is for the region. Everyone in this region enjoys the air quality benefits that accrue from a public transit system. However, the positive public health impact of improved transit (or the negative impact of cuts) includes more than just air quality. For transit dependent people, in particular seniors and people with disabilities, the mobility that comes with an accessible, reliable transit system is critical to maintaining good health. And for women, children, gays and lesbians, targets of domestic violence, sexual assault and hate crimes, a reliable ride home is absolutely critical to their personal safety.

From this broad public health perspective clearly an expanded fleet of clean air and trolley buses is the highest priority for the region. Buses meet the critical transportation needs of the transit dependent. In terms of air quality, buses have a crowding out effect on cars, as opposed to grade separated transit like Skytrain which actually creates room for more cars on the road. A well run bus system is dynamic and flexible to the changing transportation patterns of a growing region.

While “shaping growth” through transportation policy may be an important long-term strategy for the region, it becomes an empty slogan when TransLink responds to financial crisis brought on by Millennium Skytrain costs by making poor decisions such as implementing the use of lower grade diesel fuel in buses.

If policy makers are serious about improving the public health of this region they would do well to listen to rider priorities: expanded service, lower fares, more rapid bus routes, increased accessibility, clean air buses, quieter buses, new routes, and night owls.

# Skytrain

## **Skytrain:** MISPLACED PRIORITIES, HIDDEN AGENDAS.

The Bus Riders Union is not opposed to Skytrain in principle, although at-grade rail or rapid buses are likely to have more desirable public health outcomes. Unfortunately, the impact of Skytrain development in practice has been negative both from a social justice and a public health perspective.

Skytrain expansion will not provide the affordable, reliable, and accessible transit that most riders in the region need. Skytrain is not flexible, and can not move people in diverse travel patterns. More likely, high Skytrain debt servicing costs will result in further bus cuts and rising fares which, in fact, reduce access to flexible transit.

Skytrain will not answer the mobility concerns of seniors and people with disabilities or the safety concerns of women and children.

Nor will the proposed Skytrain expansion have a positive impact on air quality. According to the Underhill Company report to Vancouver City Council (February 2003), any air quality benefits of Skytrain will likely be mitigated by increased car traffic. The likely scenario is that one (Cambie) or possible two (Cambie and Oak) trolley bus lines will be replaced with one Skytrain and many more cars.

Oddly enough, given TransLinks dogged pursuit of further Skytrain expansion, the Richmond/Airport/Vancouver Rapid Transit Project is not even a priority by their own planning. According to the Livable Region Strategic Plan and Transportation 2021, the Skytrain project was to come in the context of overall transit expansion, including expanded bus service as the highest priority.

Unfortunately, the current policy planning framework seems to be dominated by agendas which have very little to do with needs of the people of the region:

- **Privatization:** Part of the ideology driven agenda of the current Provincial Government is the increasing privatization of public services, regardless of the outcomes. For this reason the Provincial Government is committing money to the Richmond/ Airport/ Vancouver Project on the basis of a Public-Private Partnership model. Right wing municipal politicians on the TransLink board are also in favour of creeping privatization as a means of undermining transit workers unions and driving down wages.
- **Olympics:** Both the Federal and Provincial Governments recognize the centrality of this of the Airport/Vancouver transit link to the 2010 Olympics bid and are forthcoming with money based on this “prestige” issue rather than the needs or desires of the people of the region.
- **Bombardier:** As one of the largest and most prestigious corporations in Canada, Bombardier has considerable influence in Ottawa. With the expansion of Skytrain Bombardier can look forward to further lucrative contracts.

If these outside agendas are allowed to dictate public policy planning for the region we have an economically and morally bankrupt transit authority to look forward to, and the goals of social justice a public health left by the wayside.

## **The Social Justice and Public Health Alternative:**

### **PUTTING BUS RIDERS AT THE CENTRE OF PUBLIC POLICY PLANNING**

In order to make the transition to a more socially just and environmentally sound transportation system we call on TransLink to implement the following policies:

1. Place an immediate moratorium on the study, planning and development of costly rail mega-projects.
2. Immediately restore night owl bus service seven days a week.
3. Use the \$300 million earmarked for Skytrain development to expand rapid bus service in the Richmond/ Vancouver corridor and increase bus service across the board.
4. Mount a campaign to secure billions for buses from the Provincial and Federal governments.
5. Rescind the 2002 fare increase.
6. Develop a plan to implement a \$1 fare and \$30 pass within the next 3 years.
7. Eliminate the zone system.
8. Develop a plan to make all regional transportation services fully wheelchair accessible within 5 years.