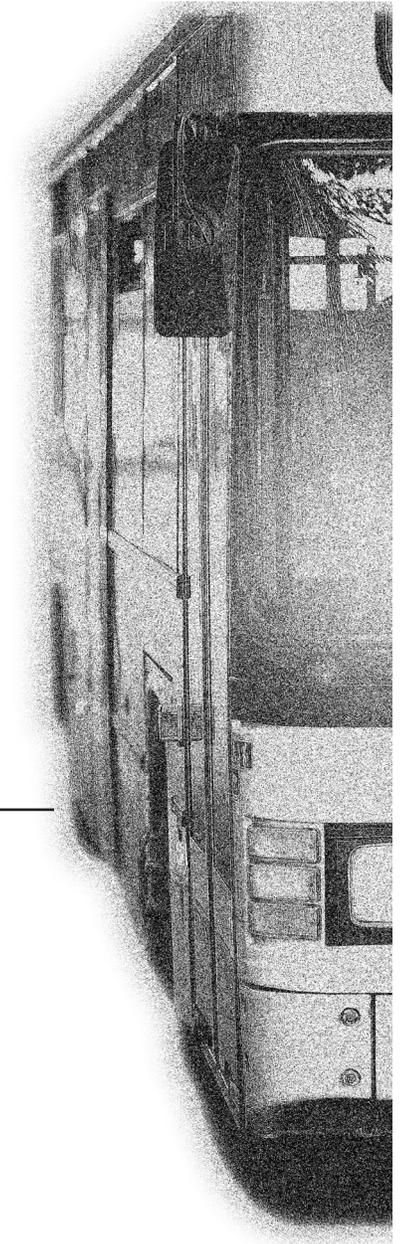

MOVING FORWARD ON TRANSIT: THE TIME IS NOW

DECEMBER 8, 2016



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**Position paper of Burlington for Accessible Sustainable Transit
December 8, 2016**

INTRODUCTION

The City of Burlington has been making promises to improve its transit system since 1991. Yet in that time, we have seen the modal share of transit in Burlington decline from seven percent to two percent. We have seen service cutbacks, fare increases and, in the last three years alone, following a near-complete gutting of the system, a decline of more than 12% in ridership.

At the same time, the City has fed its road addiction until it dominates municipal spending. City spending on road construction and maintenance is scheduled to account for some \$360 million over the next ten years. Many more millions will be spent on our Regional roads. (In comparison, spending on transit is so small that it is not even listed as a major expenditure). Councilor John Taylor said at a meeting of the Committee of the Whole Nov. 14 that spending on infrastructure – most of it on roads – would result in municipal tax increases of four percent a year for the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, the latent demand for transit has risen. Members of the Burlington Economic Development Corporation have expressed concern that their employees cannot get to and from their jobs. The City's Seniors' Advisory Committee has called on Council to provide better transit and demonstrated how more ridership will lead to more gas-tax revenue. A meeting on transit, part of the Mayor's Inspire Burlington series, drew more than 400 people to the Burlington Performing Arts Centre. BFAST's own Transit Users' Forum has drawn nearly 100 people on a Saturday morning for two years running.

As the city ages, seniors want transit to replace their cars when they can no longer drive and to alleviate social isolation. Young people are opting not to use cars and demand transit instead. Students want transit to get to school and travel to and from part-time employment. Factory and office workers need better service to get to their jobs.

But year after year, Burlington either stands pat or makes outright cuts to transit funding. If a new service is begun, it must be balanced by cutbacks somewhere else. Buses run as little as every hour on arterial roads. The system is no longer capable of even co-ordinating schedules to meet GO trains; buses often arrive at GO stations just after the train leaves, and leave the station just before it arrives in the opposite direction. Service cutbacks have meant traditional connections that allow cross-town travel have

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been severed. It has become nearly impossible to get anywhere on Burlington Transit and this is reflected in the significant decline in ridership over the past few years.

Transit will be key if we, as a city, are going to meet the challenges of intensification and not get drowned in an ever-widening spiral of spending on roads, parking and other car-related infrastructure. As consultant Brent Toderian and many studies in many cities have pointed out, support for transit is not anti-car; quite the opposite in fact. The more we widen roads, the more car-related infrastructure we build, the worse traffic will get. Investing in transit takes cars off the road and allows those who continue driving to get to their destinations faster and easier.

However, Burlington Transit has reached the tipping point. As Mr. Toderian pointed out at a meeting of Council's Committee of the Whole Nov. 14, Burlington's vision for the future will be in peril unless the City acts, and acts now.

THE PRESENT

As the chart below shows, Burlington spends less per capita on transit from its own tax base than any city of its size in the GTA and surrounding area.

MUNICIPAL PER CAPITA SPENDING ON TRANSIT OPERATING COSTS: BURLINGTON AND PEER COMMUNITIES

Table presented to Burlington City Council by Jarrett Walker at the Committee of the Whole meeting Nov. 14, 2016.

CITY	REVENUE HOURS	SERVICE AREA POPULATION	REVENUE HOURS PER CAPITA	MUNICIPAL OPERATING CONTRIBUTIONS PER CAPITA
BARRIE	172,042	135,543	1.25	\$70.90
BURLINGTON	160,072	170,310	0.94	\$48.41
GUELPH	308,800	141,097	2.18	\$92.12
KINGSTON	219,323	115,142	1.90	\$111.68
OAKVILLE	202,206	188,000	1.08	\$76.80
ST. CATHARINES	168,704	149,331	1.13	\$59.14
SUDBURY	160,715	138,000	1.21	\$77.97

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Funding from outside sources aside, Burlington's support for transit over the past five years has been stagnant or declining.

Compounding this problem is that Burlington also spends less of its federal gas-tax money on transit than other cities.

It's no wonder, then, that both ridership and transit service have suffered.

At its Nov. 14 meeting, Mayor Rick Goldring informed Councilors that there would be no increase in the transit budget for 2017, aside from \$350,000 set aside for a staff study.

This is an unfortunate situation when we consider the service cuts that have been made over the past few years. BFAST's position is that a freeze in transit funding for 2017 is in fact another cutback when inflation is taken into account.

Nevertheless, small improvements can be made in the system that will increase ridership and revenues. Connections with the GO train can be improved to attract riders and help ensure buses don't arrive at and leave GO stations empty. Cross-town connections, such as between Routes 1 and 21, and 4 and 5, can be made easier to accomplish. Such changes will at least let present transit users know that the City is listening to their concerns.

We are also heartened by the commitment to destroy the silos between transit, roads and planning that will lead, in the long term, to better land-use and transportation planning. However, the fact that the City is budgeting for separate planning studies for transit (2017-18) and for transportation (2020-21) instead of doing one comprehensive study that includes transit, cycling, roads, parking and all aspects of transportation together, demonstrates that the silos have not yet been destroyed.

We recommend that the City follow the example of Waterloo Region, whose transportation study examined all aspects of transportation together. Their study also developed some alternate scenarios that were evaluated against economic, social and environmental criteria.

Their analysis showed that a more balanced transportation plan would save the Region money, as the savings road expenditures would more than offset the costs of improving transit. In fact, they concluded that the best way to reduce the future infrastructure gap was to invest in transit. With Burlington slated to spend more than \$350 million on roads and car infrastructure over the next 10 years, it would be irresponsible to ignore the conclusions of this study, or to be willfully blind to its implications for Burlington. As for the staff study, it will be important to not prejudge its results or confine its terms

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of reference too narrowly. We fervently hope that the objective of the study will not be to reshuffle transit funding with a view to keeping it static, but to plan the foundation of a system that will serve the needs of our city for the coming decades of urban growth and intensification.

To that end, the staff study on its own will be insufficient. Council has stressed the need to make transit decisions based on a “business case” but has not allocated funds to provide basic cost-benefit analyses or measurements of return on investment.

Study after study has shown that investing in transit is one of the best expenditures a city can make, resulting in a return on investment of 12.5% or more. Burlington needs such a study to underpin its future transit plans and, if the City will not provide funds to accomplish it, it could offer written support for BFAST or other groups that could help raise funds to make it a reality.

If we must endure yet another year of lack of commitment to transit, let us at least assemble the tools to build a system that truly makes Burlington a city that moves in the years ahead.

THE FUTURE

Council’s Committee of the Whole meeting and the Mayor’s Inspire Burlington forum on Nov. 14 were important for the future of transit.

One of the talking points that emerged from the day was the discussion on frequency versus coverage. As transit consultant Jarrett Walker pointed out, with a fixed number of buses, you could decide to grow ridership by serving only main streets, or provide coverage for everyone by reducing the number of buses on the main roads and providing service to the winding roads of the 1960s-style subdivisions.

We fear that transit opponents on Council will seize on this dichotomy to advocate a system that would be almost entirely focused on providing service to main routes only. Unfortunately, that would deprive much of the city of any transit service whatsoever.

It is true that Burlington was not designed for transit. Its winding suburban streets and cul-de-sacs are not favourable for bus routes. Yet, as Councilor Taylor has pointed out, much of Burlington’s population lives in such neighbourhoods. Moving to a system that is both underfunded and unbalanced in favour of frequency over coverage may increase ridership, but it will also drastically reduce availability for people who live in our stable neighbourhoods, including seniors, working people and students who rely on the bus.

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Mr. Walker praised our grid system of roads, evenly spaced on two-kilometre squares. What he did not mention was that to have such a system would force many people to walk as much as a kilometer to a bus stop. For seniors or the physically challenged, this would not be practical.

While it is possible to have a system that is tilted primarily towards frequency, this must not be done at the expense of those who rely on coverage. Any move to such a system can only be contemplated in the context of an increase in the transit budget.

The system Burlington currently suffers with must be seen as a bare minimum. It would be unacceptable to cut any of the current services. While service based on coverage can be realigned to better interact with frequent service along main routes, the layout of our city dictates that coverage must remain an important objective.

BFAST'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE COMING TWO YEARS

The recent discussions on transit have raised the hopes and expectations of Burlingtonians for the future of transit in our city. While more work needs to be done on explaining the benefits of transit to drivers and taxpayers, Council faces a fork in the road.

Backsliding from the recent support that has been expressed for transit will further weaken the system to the point where it will be very difficult to win back the confidence of current and potential riders and to eventually scale up the service.

Further, it will condemn the city to a destructive spiral of increased spending on roads that will worsen, not improve, the traffic situation in Burlington. If Council chooses this route, we can look forward to municipal tax increases every year that are far in excess of the rate of inflation, as Councilor Taylor has already warned. And we can also look forward to gridlock for drivers and uncounted costs in lost productivity.

As Mr. Toderian has pointed out, more transit spending will take nothing away from people who prefer to drive. But it will attract riders who will find it more convenient to leave their cars at home when they travel to the GO station, when they go out for dinner and drinks, when they visit friends or when their children need to get to sports or other activities. If families have these alternatives, some of them might decide they don't need a second or third car, saving thousands of dollars a year and increasing their standard of living.

At the same time, transit will actively work towards helping the city reach its strategic

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goal of intensification. And, as Waterloo Region has proved, it will help Council save many millions of taxpayer dollars in road construction and maintenance.

Council has already set its budget priorities for 2017 and transit is not among them. Drawing on the new awareness and knowledge that Messrs. Toderian and Walker have brought to the table, however, BFAST hopes that Council will work within its budget to take the following steps that will show its good faith in seeking to improve transit in Burlington:

- Revise schedules to restore connectivity with GO trains and other transit routes and make this a strategic goal in future transportation planning.
- Study and propose a new route structure, as envisaged by Messrs. Toderian and Walker. But do so in the context of an overall transportation study, and maintain the goal of city-wide coverage.
- Combine the planned transit (2017-18) and transportation (2020-21) studies into a comprehensive transportation study
- Study the return on investment of transit in Burlington and publicize the benefits of a better system for drivers and non-drivers alike.
- Study the impact of increased transit investment as a way to reduce spending on roads.
- Plan for a significant increase in municipal support for transit for the 2018 budget year.

Should Council adopt such a strategy, BFAST will look forward to working with it to attain the goals of our transit future.