

Subject: CUTA Spring Summit 2023

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Report to Transit Commission on 29 June 2023

Submitted on June 8, 2023 by Wilson Lo, Councillor – Ward 24, Barrhaven East

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Ward: Citywide

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Rapport présenté à la Commission du transport en commun

le 29 juin 2023

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Quartier : À l'échelle de la ville

REPORT RECOMMENDATION

That the Transit Commission receive this report for information.

RECOMMANDATION DU RAPPORT

Que la Commission du transport en commun prenne connaissance du present rapport.

BACKGROUND

In March, the Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA) invited me to join their Transit Board Members Committee (TBMC).

The TBMC is a committee comprised exclusively of people who sit on transit boards across Canada. Depending on local governance, TBMC members could be an elected official or a member of the public who was elected or appointed.

Aside from my seat on transit commission, my invitation was based on my passion and unique experiences and involvement with public transit in Ottawa. The invitation was sent prior the TBMC meeting on 7 May 2023 and was part of CUTA's spring summit and annual general meeting in Saskatoon.

On 22 March 2023, [Council approved funding my attendance](#) at the TBMC meeting and CUTA summit in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, including travel expenses. This report is a requirement of that travel and attendance funding.

DISCUSSION

Transit Board Members Committee meeting

The TBMC meeting was attended by councillors from Brampton, Calgary, Edmonton, Halifax, Longueuil, and Saskatoon, among others, plus a public member of the transit board from St. John's.

The meeting was centred around a presentation by David Cooper of Leading Mobility Consulting. Mr. Cooper, who previously worked in planning for Vancouver's TransLink and the City of Toronto, spoke at length about transit's integral role in addressing Canada's housing crisis, which was also a central theme of the overall CUTA summit. More about the topic will be discussed later in this report.

Later, in a roundtable session, each board member spoke to the transit situation in their respective municipalities. Of particular note was the ridership recovery of some other transit systems across the country.

Some transit systems across the country have reached or exceeded pre-pandemic ridership numbers. However, most transit system reporting such an achievement are medium-sized and located in cities with a different employment structure, like Brampton, Halifax, and St. John's.

Edmonton also reported a return to 100 per cent of pre-pandemic ridership in January.

The city launched a redesigned bus network in 2021 to better align with the demands of its ridership. It has since made regular improvements to the initial redesigned network, and ridership has positively responded. Interestingly, its LRT ridership remains between

60 and 70 per cent of pre-pandemic ridership, which highlights the importance of strong local community-based transit.

Concurrently, Edmonton launched on-demand services in areas and on routes with lower demand and new neighbourhoods. The program has been relatively successful, and usage has steadily increased in its two years of operation, despite a few persistent issues, like wait times and technological integration (such as trip planners).

Although Edmonton's bus network redesign process began before the pandemic, its need became highlighted. As Ottawa undergoes its own bus route review, including an on-demand transit pilot, I'm hopeful the results of Edmonton's experience can be replicated here.

Unfortunately, our experiences in procuring, building, and operating the LRT has been no secret.

Peers I met from the Montreal area have been closely monitoring and testing their upcoming REM system following multiple major service disruptions to our LRT caused by freezing rain. The REM will use overhead catenaries to power their vehicles.

Calgary has also used the LRT public inquiry report to ensure our experience is not replicated in their forthcoming Green Line.

Otherwise, some issues not unique to OC Transpo and Ottawa include:

- Rapid transit (mostly rail) lagging local services in ridership recovery
- Safety on transit property and aboard transit vehicles
- Increase in traffic due to changing travel patterns since the pandemic's peak
- Demands for better local connectivity, like "last kilometre" resources
- Increased operating costs

The TBMC was a valuable opportunity for me to connect with transit board members across the country to learn about challenges affecting public transit nationwide as well as positive experiences of initiatives to address those challenges.

Transit's role in housing

A central theme of CUTA's spring summit and AGM was its integral role in addressing Canada's housing crisis, plus how and where CUTA will advocate for funding and changes to benefit both transit and housing.

One of the key proposals was to shift the thinking in the relationship between public transit and housing. Typically, transit services are brought to areas with housing, particularly lower income communities that need more service beyond “traditional” commuter hours. The proposal turns it on its head—bring housing to transit.

Essentially, this brings people to transit, rather than transit to people.

The proposal supplements transit-oriented and 15-minute community planning policies that have been instilled in planning practices for several years. Where it differs is land acquisition, target audience, and strategies to keep the housing affordable.

Across Canada, including in Ottawa, lands owned by public transit (or by the municipality for transit use) represent some of the most valuable real estate available without greenfield development. This not only includes station complexes, reserved land, and—most importantly—park and rides, but also tracts of land adjacent to these properties.

In some cases, a mix of public and private land prevents the ability for agencies and municipalities to develop important affordable housing communities in these areas, requiring some form of land assembly to achieve such goals. CUTA will be advocating to the federal government to include land acquisition for the purposes of affordable housing in its upcoming Permanent Transit Fund, due to be available in 2026.

An important and longstanding concern has also been the pricing out of people who need good transit service the most. The market rate and rent of homes near these major transit hubs also need to be kept affordable to ensure those in greatest need aren’t relegated to the ends of infrequent, possibly unreliable local routes.

David Cooper, mentioned earlier in the report, provided a few exemplary locations and developments in Vancouver and Calgary, cities with which he has the most familiarity and experience.

However, there are several opportunities in Ottawa where we can bring housing to transit to bolster ridership and ensure those who need it most have easy access to good service. These opportunities include expansive park and rides, public lands near rapid transit properties (including future Stage 2 stations, the future Baseline BRT, and the southern Woodroffe corridor), and some buildings planned to be disposed by the federal government.

CUTA notes this initiative, plus the availability of the overall Permanent Transit Fund, may change with a change in government.

Miscellaneous

The summit also consisted of several learning sessions on the topics of sustainability, technology, integrated mobility, and equity/truth and reconciliation, led by transit stakeholders, including transit agencies, contractors, and industry leaders.

Below is a summary of the sessions I attended:

- Transit app – using and incorporating machine learning into how vital service information like detours and disruptions are communicated to customers, including Transit app’s own upcoming initiatives
- CNIB – defining true transit accessibility beyond accessible vehicles, including surrounding infrastructure like sidewalks leading to/from bus stops
- Dillon Consulting Ltd. – transit in small communities, using nearby Humboldt, Sask. as a case study—several strategies which can be applied to Ottawa’s rural villages
- MiWay (Mississauga Transit) – phasing in their bus electrification from a facilities point of view, including deciding to build a new garage altogether instead of retrofitting, due to potential loss of capacity in older facilities with charging infrastructure
- New Flyer – other upcoming alternate propulsion systems beyond battery electric, specifically hydrogen
- KPMG – tracking equitable access to infrastructure beyond accessible public transit vehicles

Part of the summit also included a technical tour of Saskatoon’s civic operations centre, which is an integrated facility that houses their bus and public works garages. The integration in facility reduced some costs and also allows for easier planning for employee mobility considerations.

A slight surprise also included seeing six ex-OC Transpo articulated buses (now retired) parked outside by the garage. The six buses were purchased by OC Transpo in 2002 and then by Saskatoon in 2012 and were the latter’s pilot vehicles for articulated buses. Though the body was refurbished and repainted to Saskatoon’s colours, the interior remains very OC Transpo, including the faded blue seats and bilingual stickers.

Future

TBMC meetings are held semi-regularly and usually coincide with CUTA spring and autumn summits. Although CUTA mostly deals with policies at a federal level, it has recently supplemented the efforts of provincial transit bodies to advocate more locally.

I am hopeful the knowledge I gained during the summit can be shared more deeply and eventually applied in our city to improve transit in Ottawa, from land usage to service delivery and model.

CUTA's annual conference and transit show is 12 to 15 November 2023 in Edmonton, while their next spring summit and AGM will be in Halifax, dates to be confirmed. A policy/advocacy day relating to the Permanent Transit Fund is planned for the autumn in Ottawa, date to be confirmed.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There is no financial implication receiving this report for information.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no legal impediments to receiving this report for information.

COMMENTS BY THE WARD COUNCILLOR(S)

Citywide report.

CONSULTATION

None.

ACCESSIBILITY IMPACTS

A few items from the sessions involved discussions surrounding true accessibility of public transit, beyond just the vehicles and even the bus stops. However, there are no direct impacts as a result of this report.

RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

No specific risk implications have been identified.

RURAL IMPLICATIONS

One of the sessions included improving mobility in smaller communities (the specific

example used was Humboldt, Sask.). Although I indicated Ottawa's rural villages may benefit from improved mobility, this report has no direct impacts on rural communities.

TERM OF COUNCIL PRIORITIES

Not applicable

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

None.

DISPOSITION

Should Council determine further discussion be required or beneficial, Council may refer this report to the appropriate committees as required.