

Our Vision: Women at the Centre of Public Transit

After eight months of organizing on Vancouver's buses, talking to hundreds of women in workshops, focus groups and on the bus, and studying collectively, the Women in Transit team has learnt the numerous ways in which the transit system does not serve the needs of women.

When we struggle for public services, we are struggling against neoliberalism; when we struggle for public services designed around the lives of working class women and particularly Aboriginal women and women of colour, we are struggling against patriarchy, national oppression and all other forces of imperialism that intersect to exploit and oppress us. We see the limitations in the Lower Mainland's transit system now, and while we struggle to defend what we do have, we also fight to expand the transit system so that it fully serves all our needs.

As we struggle for a better transit system, we build on past struggles for public services that work to redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor, struggles for the

rights of women, and struggles for the rights of Aboriginal communities and communities of colour. We struggle to improve the lives of all women, and to expand our power and resistance to exploitation, so that we can



win short-term gains for a long-term struggle that envisions social justice for all.

What follows is our positive vision for change in the transit system, beginning with our guiding principles for change, and then specific recommendations to be immediately acted-upon by TransLink board members and staff.

Guiding Principles for Change

Keep Public Transit Public

In order for everyone in the Lower Mainland to have the human right to mobility, transit must be kept public. Public transit improves social equality where private enterprise, including the private provision of transit, exacerbates existing social inequality. Public transit redistributes wealth towards the needs of working class communities in the context of a growing gap between the rich and the poor.

Plan Transit to Serve Women, People of Colour, & Aboriginal People

Public transit cannot be planned in a vacuum. Public transit must be centred on the needs of transit dependent women, particularly women of colour and Aboriginal women, who are among the most marginalized in society. The public transit system operates in a social, political and economic system that exploits and oppresses working class women and particularly women of



colour and Aboriginal women. In order to fully provide everyone with the right to mobility, the transit system must address the specific transit needs of women.

Since women are responsible for the majority of socially necessary reproductive labour, the transit system must be designed to facilitate this work. Women need a transit system that allows them to travel with children, to access public services, and to visit family and friends.

With the flexibilization of labour, women are increasingly working in short-term, low paying, and irregular contract work. Women need a transit system that allows them to access work at all hours of the day and in all areas of the region in order to provide for themselves and their families. Since women work a double workday, women are in special need of a reliable transit system that minimizes their unpaid time in transit. Public transit must value women's time and provide service that is comprehensive, frequent, and reliable.

In addition, women in wheelchairs, women who do not speak English, and women travelling with children all have a right to transit. TransLink must make transit accessible to all women and eliminate any barriers to use.

Implement Democratic Process

Public transit must be run for and by the transit dependent. As a public body, TransLink must be accountable to those who need it. Democratic process must provide avenues for transit dependent women to have their needs heard, to determine priorities, and to have meaningful involvement in the design and planning of the

transit system.

Systemic Problems Require Systemic Solutions

TransLink must recognize that systemic problems require systemic solutions. TransLink must realize that public transit provision in the Lower Mainland occurs in the context of systemic and interpersonal racism against Aboriginal people and people of colour who are perceived as 'Other' and demonized in society, coupled with systemic and interpersonal sexism against women of colour and Aboriginal women. TransLink must recognize and address the real systemically racist barriers that women of colour and Aboriginal women face in Canada.

An anti-racist perspective should direct the TransLink board and staff throughout its transit planning process. An anti-racist perspective is one that looks beyond multiculturalism and alleviates transit racism by concretely prioritizing serving the needs of working class communities of colour and Aboriginal communities.

Transit can help equalize the hierarchies brought on by class, race and gender exploitation by facilitating the needs of the most oppressed in their access to employment, community participation, education, and in fostering healthy communities.

Move Beyond 'Multiculturalism' to Alleviate Transit Racism

Public transit plays a vital role in the economic and social vitality of working class communities of color. In addition to meeting the basic right to mobility, transit can play a crucial role in alleviating the systemic racism that working class com-



munities of colour and Aboriginal communities face daily in their lives.

TransLink must recognize the independence of Aboriginal peoples and how they need to travel between their land and the services they need. For transit dependent Aboriginal women and women of colour, transit is more than just a transportation that brings them home from work and back again. Transit represents the right to participation in their communities, places of worship, employment at all places, hours and days of the week, safety, school and access to other public services we need in our everyday lives. Public transit as a right means that the needs of transit dependent Aboriginal women and women of colour must lie at the centre of transit policy and planning.

Acknowledge that Public Transit Planning is Public Health Planning

While health is a personal and community experience, our capacity to achieve or maintain health rests on a foundation of public policy, social planning, and access to resources. Our health is determined by the course of our daily lives and our social environments. Alma Ata declared health as a “social goal whose realization requires the action of many other social and economic sectors in addition to the health sector”, and the subsequent Ottawa Charter called for health to be put on the agenda of all public policy makers. In this context, there is growing support for the fundamental principle that all public policy constitutes health-related policy.

Public transit policy and planning must be considered as health planning. This perspective has the potential to positively impact the health of

women and communities throughout the region, and in particular low-income communities where immigrant and refugee women, single mothers, and low-wage workers are clustered.

Recognize Public Transit as a Determinant of Health

The social determinants of health prompt an examination of the role of the social environment in the creation and maintenance of health. Social determinants of health include gender, ethnicity/race, income inequity, social exclusion, employment, working conditions, food security, and access to public services. When the social determinants of health are lacking, health is virtually impossible to achieve. Social determinants detail the social resources and policy actions necessary to ensure a just and equitable distribution of resources.

Over the course of the project women shared the impacts of a poor public transit system on their health, the health of their families, and the health of their communities. Reversing the trend of public transit cuts and increased user-fees and designing a system to meet the unique needs of women and families could help reverse the pattern of ill-health for transit dependent women.

Build Healthy Communities & Environmental Justice

The health of the community is determined by the women who live there; this became increasingly clear throughout the Women in Transit project. A healthy community is one that reduces disease by ensuring equitable opportunities, promotes and protects health, and achieves optimal



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quality of life. When women envision the kind of public transit system that would meet our needs, the connection between public transit and a healthy community has persistent correlation.

The attainment of environmental justice and healthy communities includes the involvement of all people in determining the development of environmental assessments and decision-making based on their own determination of needs and priorities. Our working class communities must be key stakeholders in determining their own liveability. In order to ensure both social and environmental justice, full and meaningful participation based on accurate and honest information must occur immediately, starting with a revision of the recent Richmond-Airport-Vancouver Line decision.

All decisions made at TransLink must include an environmental assessment based on the health and environmental justice needs of individual communities who will be impacted by those decisions. Those assessments must be presented to the communities involved in a fully accessible manner, and democratic discussions and decision-making must take place.



Specific Recommendations

Public transit is a human right and a woman's right, it is a necessary part of ending systemic racism, sexism and class oppression, and it is an essential determinant of women's health. The Women in Transit team therefore makes the following concrete recommendations for the continued provision of public transit services in the GVRD.

It is important to note that all the following recommendations need to work together in order for women to truly be put at the centre of public transit policy and planning.

Keep Public Transit Public

Put the needs and visions of transit dependent women at the centre of transit planning. TransLink must keep public services public! In recognition of the fundamental role of public services, and in particular public transit in impacting public health, TransLink must keep all aspects of the public transit system public and return all aspects of the public transit system currently under private control and operation to public control.

Steps to achieve this goal:

- Reject contracting out, PPP and all forms of privatization
- Immediately stop passing the responsibility for providing an affordable public transit system to other social service agencies. Shift the bulk of funding to an affordable public transit system for all regardless of life circumstance
- Consider the expansion of an affordable, accessible, clean-air, bus centred public transportation system as a fundamental determinant of public health
- View the region from a population health perspective, and examine public transit impacts on the determinants of health in public transit decision-making



From visioning drawing, BRU focus group

Implement Democratic Process

Women are the experts of our own lives, and we know best how the transit system can best serve our needs and keep us healthy. Transit planning in the Lower Mainland should be led by transit dependent women, particularly transit dependent women of colour. TransLink must facilitate women's full participation in the transit planning process by taking measures to create spaces for a democratic participation where women, particularly Aboriginal women and women of colour, can openly share

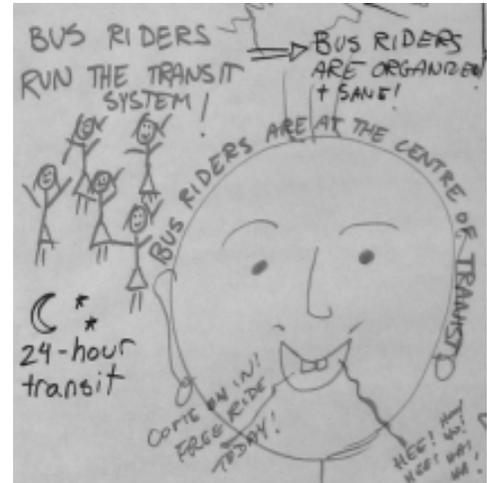


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their experiences and knowledge for a people-centred transit system, be able to criticize and challenge TransLink for its decisions, and have meaningful impact over long-term changes.

Steps to achieve this goal:

- Ensure transparency and full accountability to the public
- Involve working class communities in genuine decision-making and democratic process for budgets
- Engage in meaningful democratic process with existing women's organizations and public health agencies to determine the gendered and health implications of public transit policy and planning
- Involve all communities in genuine decision-making about infrastructure investments, such as SkyTrain, that could potentially divert funding from other necessary services
- Provide all communities potentially impacted by a public transit decision a clear cost-benefit analysis to form the basis of community consultation.
- Provide environmental assessments and public consultations of all new service or infrastructure proposals in clear and accessible language with translations
- Make all documents accessible and available to transit dependent people at all times
- Translate all documents in different languages that reflect the languages spoken by transit dependent women in the region
- Hold smaller community meetings in working class communities of color with translators to gather meaningful information from transit dependent women
- Ensure all meetings are:
 - Accessible by bus
 - Held in neighborhoods that are highly represented by the transit dependent
 - Prioritize bus riders to speak before business people
 - Posted in advance in different languages
 - Provide childcare



From visioning drawing from BRU Focus Group

Affordable Transit Fares

For transit dependent women to access employment, schooling, social and recreational services, places of worship, and other parts of their community, they must be able to afford the bus fare.



Steps to achieve this goal:

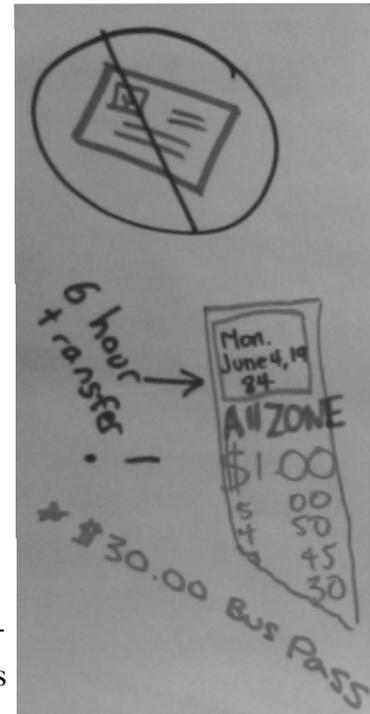
- Decrease fares, and make them affordable for everyone
- Eliminate the zone structure
- Extend transfer times
- Eliminate means testing for youth, seniors, people on disabilities and people on low income
- Make available family fare packs that are affordable
- Provide free bus passes to people on welfare
- Provide free bus passes to all refugees

Make Transit Accessible to All

Transit dependent women must have full access to existing transit services.

Steps to achieve this goal:

- Make all buses wheelchair- and stroller-accessible
- Publish information about the transit system (e.g. schedules and fares) in multiple languages to reflect the languages spoken by transit dependent women in the region
- Make information about the transit system more widely accessible by posting schedules at each bus stop
- Offer tours about how to use the transit system for new immigrants



*from visioning drawing
Van Tech Workshop*

Stop Systemic and Interpersonal Racism

All communities, including Aboriginal communities and communities of colour, have the right to equal access to public services, and to well-paid, secure unionized work.

Hiring more Aboriginal bus drivers and bus drivers of colour, particularly those who speak the commonly spoken languages among transit-dependent women (such as Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi and Tagalog) would increase Aboriginal women's and women of colour's ability to access transit. In addition, TransLink would be addressing a systemic barrier to Aboriginal women's and women of colour's access to transit. By hiring bus drivers who are Aboriginal or of colour, this would both increase Aboriginal and people of colour's sense of entitlement to using public transit as a public service. This would also increase their right and entitlement to well-paying unionized jobs, particularly in an environment where people of colour and Aboriginal people, especially women, are disproportionately denied such jobs and concentrated in non-unionized, low-paid and flexible work. In this way, TransLink would be addressing a systemic barrier to Aboriginal and women of colour's access to public transit by



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combating different manifestations of systemic racism head-on.

Steps to achieve this goal:

- Hire phone operators that speak languages overwhelmingly used by bus riders such as Punjabi, Cantonese and Tagalog
- Hire bus drivers who reflect communities who are transit dependent: women and working class people of color
- Match multi-lingual bus drivers according to the routes they serve
- Hire bus drivers with class, race and gender consciousness

Prioritize Women's Safety

Women have a right to feel safe when accessing a public service such as transit. Women's safety means that we want to be free from sexual harassment and racial profiling.

Steps to achieve this goal:

- Provide frequent bus service that runs 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Eliminate SkyTrain police.
- Provide good lighting at all bus stops.
- Provide washrooms at close proximity to every bus stop and SkyTrain station.
- Involve all transit dependent women and their communities in designing a people-centred system of safety that meets their needs.

Massively Expand the Public Transit System

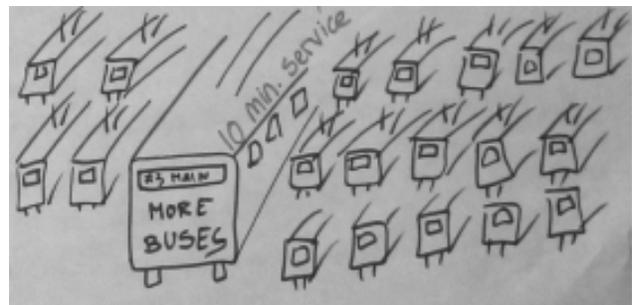
Public transit must be comprehensively developed to accommodate the needs of women.

Steps to achieve this goal:

- Re-invest money into a bus-centred system
- Place a moratorium on SkyTrain spending
- Expand the frequency and reliability of bus service
- Implement a 24-hour transit system
- Expand current bus routes, especially East/West routes
- Create new routes that are accessible to places of worship, community centres, grocery stores, etc
- Expand public transit in suburban areas

Make Transit Environmentally Just

The quality of our environment has a huge impact on the health and well-being of



from Visioning drawing from BRU focus group



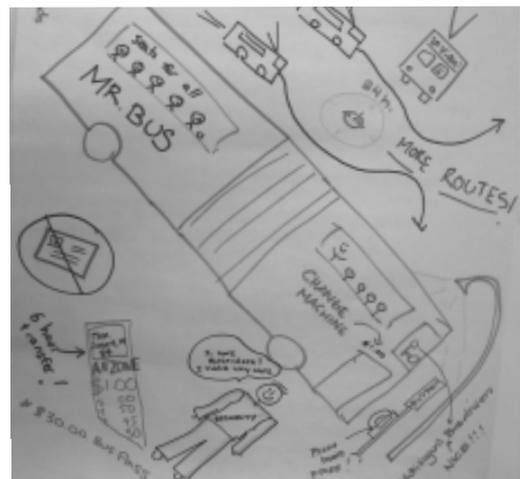
women and our communities. Public transit is fundamental to the health of our environment and our communities.

Steps to achieve this goal:

- Provide environmental assessments of all new service or infrastructure proposals in clear and accessible language with translations.
- Immediately convert all diesel buses to clean-air buses.
- Fund community-directed SkyTrain Station evaluation and improvement/beautification projects.

Conclusion

Women have a right to mobility, and must be served in the Lower Mainland by a public transit system that allows them to travel where they need to, when they need to. It is only when TransLink takes into account the above recommendations and affirms a strong commitment to the public provision of transit service will women begin to benefit from the transit system. When we have a strong anti-racist, anti-sexist public transit system that serves the needs of those who need it most – working class women, particularly working class women of colour - we will be on our way to social justice in the Vancouver region. Therefore, we demand: Put women at the centre of public transit!



Visioning Drawing from Van Tech Workshop



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