

How we can pay for better transit

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Is there a long-term vision for transit service? If so, what is it? Those are questions the Victoria Regional Transit Commission should answer. There seems to be doubt about where we want to go, which makes it difficult to decide how to get there.

The transit commissioners have decided against sharp fare increases -- a wise move -- and will look at scaling back their ambitious plans for expansion. That is an understandable, but regrettable, response.

The proposed fare increases were simply too high. The idea had been to raise all fares to \$2.50. Today's basic fare is \$2.25, while seniors and youths pay \$1.40. The basic fare would have risen by 11 per cent and the discounted one by 78 per cent. The commission says it heard from about 400 transit users who said, not surprisingly, that they did not want to pay more.

Higher fares discourage ridership, driving people to use private vehicles. They hurt low-income people who rely on transit to get to and from work.

It's tricky to find the right funding formula for transit. It doesn't pay for itself; subsidies cover two-thirds of the expenses. While we might not like a \$2.50 fare, imagine the

response if the fare was \$7.50, just to cover the costs.

Even at \$2.50, transit might not be the least expensive option. B.C. Transit's website includes a commuter calculator and it shows that it can be cheaper to use a compact car on a 10-kilometre daily commute than to use the bus.

That doesn't even consider the other benefits of driving, including the freedom to pick up groceries on the way home, the chance to crank up your stereo without annoying the person next to you and the flexible schedule.

So why should anyone opt for transit? There are many reasons it makes sense.

It's good for the environment, most of the time. Being a passenger can be less stressful than driving. You don't have to worry about paying for parking at work. And for many people, it is the only way to get from here to there and back again.

Transit service is also good for the community, because we don't have to keep adding capacity to our roads. That saves money and makes Greater Victoria more liveable.

But how do we get more people to use the buses? We need an efficient, effective service that will move people more quickly than cars. We need the service to be more frequent

and to cover more areas.

It has to become an attractive alternative. That means improving it, with more bus priority lanes on local roads as one of the top choices. The controversial busway idea for Douglas Street needs to be made workable.

Increasing transit use will also involve, unfortunately, making it more expensive to use private vehicles. The provincial carbon tax is a baby step toward that goal. Higher fees for parking downtown might also tip the scales in favour of transit for many commuters.

Property owners are picking up part of the tab for transit through their taxes. When we buy gas in Greater Victoria, we pay 3.5 cents a litre into a transit fund.

There will be resistance no matter which choices the commission makes as it looks for ways to raise revenue. Yet if it is to thrive, it needs to have more money and the options are limited.

The gasoline tax went up by one cent in 2008, and a further increase would make the most sense. With gasoline hovering just about a dollar a litre, a one-cent increase would barely be noticeable.

It would, however, make a huge difference in the viability of the transit system.