

Joell Ann Vanderwagen

• Oshawa, Ontario • Canada •

TO: DURHAM REGION TRANSPORTATION EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

DATE: APRIL 11, 2024

RE: OSHAWA CENTRE TRANSIT TERMINAL

INTRODUCTION

Hello Councilors, I'm here again with more suggestions for improving Durham Region Transit.

Last month, I talked about the need for continuous, reliable transit service along the main arterials on the regional road grid. Today, I want to focus on **the transit centre located on the southeast side of the Oshawa Centre mall** (which is next to Stevenson, below King). This is an important location where many bus routes converge from across the region—where riders can begin or end a trip or transfer between routes. The problem is that this transit centre has only minimal facilities, primitive in comparison to transit centres in other cities in Ontario, and not very hospitable to prospective riders.

DESCRIPTION

The bus transfer centre is a large, concrete crescent, around which buses arrive, park, and then depart. There are some conventional glass shelters with benches. It is completely walled off from direct access to the mall inside, except for long ramp leading northward to mall entrance #7 – or a walk westward past the parking garage to lower-level entrance #5. There are no signs directing passengers to these entrances.

INSTALL ELEVATED LED SIGNS WITH REAL-TIME SCHEDULES

When I used the transit centre for the first time, I didn't know where to stand to wait for my bus. Finally, I saw it arrive on the other side of the crescent and had to make a run for it. The arrival location for each route should have a tall, visible sign—ideally an LED sign that displays real-time arrival and departure information for each bus. This is standard in centres around the world.

Ideally, there should also be LED signs in the Food Court so that riders can use the washroom and/or have a bite to eat while waiting for their bus. The presence of these LED signs would also alert mall patrons to the existence of the transit centre, which is now fairly hidden, and perhaps motivate them to give transit a try.

POST INFORMATION ON THE BARREN CONCRETE WALLS

Framing the bus centre are two barren concrete walls that should be used to display necessary information such as the fare structure, access to PRESTO card machines, the customer service number, maps of transit routes, and the location of the food court and washrooms. When taking transit trips, especially with transfers and long waits, access to washrooms is a major issue for many people.

When I toured the site recently, I didn't know about the fare structure (Sadly, I had mostly given up on transit after moving to Oshawa). I asked a waiting bus driver, who told me they take exact cash, personal credit cards, and PRESTO cards. She impatiently gestured to a sign INSIDE the bus which listed the cash fares for seniors, adults, children, and students and their corresponding, lower PRESTO charges. This fare information should be displayed on a sign outside so that riders can be ready with exact cash or know what other fare media they can use.

BETTER ACCESS TO PRESTO MACHINES

Riders throughout the GTHA can buy PRESTO cards and load them at machines or designated sellers to pay for all types of public transit. Signs should be posted at the Oshawa transit centre telling riders where they can buy or refill a card. I learned that Shoppers Drug Mart on the southwest side of the mall carries PRESTO cards. I went there and spoke to the clerk, who said their PRESTO machine had been down for two weeks and the company did not return their phone calls. So, I walked a half kilometre to Guest Services at the far north end. The clerk there said they do sell and refill PRESTO cards and have the mechanism to adjust fares for seniors and students. When I mentioned the difficulty of having to walk half kilometer each way, she said that they had asked PRESTO to install a machine at the south end, but PRESTO said NO, it was too expensive.

THE POLITICS OF PRESTO

It should be noted that PRESTO is a private company and their exclusive power to make these decisions is an important issue. From what I can piece together of the history, back in 2006 the Ontario Government had awarded a ten-year contract to a U.S. consulting firm, **Accenture**, to design, build, operate and maintain a fare card system for regional GO Transit. However, as of 2011, the TTC Commission had been planning for their own local fare card that could have been easily refilled at bank machines, making it more accessible to users, especially students and low-income persons.

However, the Provincial government of the day by-passed the TTC Commission and decided to give development of the TTC card system to the private company instead. And, according to the Provincial Auditor, rather than modifying the original Presto system to meet the needs of Ottawa and Toronto, as permitted in the contract, the Ministry of Transportation decided to pay for a new system, Presto Next Generation (PNG). As the 2012 *Annual Report* of the Auditor General concluded, the "Presto base and PNG combined would turn out to be one of the more expensive fare-card systems in the world" (p. 22).

INSTALL AND STAFF A TRANSIT KIOSK INSIDE THE MALL

I suggest that a transit kiosk be located inside the mall, possibly opposite the food court, staffed with a knowledgeable person who can introduce potential new riders to Durham Region Transit. Staff could help people understand the routes and schedules and make their own trip plans. They could inform them about how to phone the customer service centre for day-to-day help and how to find schedule information online. Making this first step easy is the key to encouraging more people to use transit. When I moved to Oshawa in 2016, I didn't have a clue about the transit system or even the existence of the DRT website. There was a bus stop in front of my building, but it proved to be only for rush hour, useless for making a shopping trip. There was a bus stop at Ritson and Bloor that I used to go downtown but, one day, it wasn't there. No explanation. That was when I realized I had to buy my first car.

WE NEED LOW-TECH, VISIBLE PUBLIC INFORMATION

Please understand that many of the people who most need to rely on transit are not high-tech! A bus driver once commented to me that "They think everyone has a computer in their hand!" There are seniors who no longer drive, or never have; low-income people who cannot afford smart phones, or people like me who don't use them for internet access. People need visible public information and easy-to-understand transit routes and schedules. The three key parts of transit are: route patterns, reliable service, and INFORMATION. The phone number of the DRT Customer Service Centre should be prominently displayed, perhaps on most bus stop signs. I am happy to say that I have found the DRT staff at Customer Information very helpful.

IMPROVE THE TRANSIT SHELTER

With only a few small glass shelters and benches, the current transit centre does not serve the needs of riders. There should be a continuous enclosed structure all along the crescent that provides seating and shelter from driving rain, cold wind, or blazing sun. Transit riders need to be able to survive in all types of weather. Hey, even throw in some vending machines for food and coffee. Again, this is not a fairy-tale, it is common practice in other places.

THE PROCESS OF IMPLEMENTATION

I visited the Oshawa Centre Administration Office, to ask for information about the mall, such as the fact that they have nine million visitors a year, and happened to speak with the Operations Manager, Craig Walsh. We discussed the need to improve the transit centre and I said I hoped that Durham Region representatives could work with the Oshawa Centre to improve transit access and use and he said they would be happy to discuss these things with the Region. Might I suggest that it would be good if the Oshawa Centre would donate the space for a transit kiosk, rent-free, and perhaps even locate a Guest Services staff person there, more conveniently located in the centre rather than just at the far north end.

Sincerely,

Joell Ann Vanderwagen