

International Affairs

Free Transportation in Canadian Municipalities

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Stacie Trinh

The idea of free public transit is not a new idea. It was first introduced in 2013 in when Estonia's capital established introduced free public transport for local residents, quickly to be followed by other European countries (Johnson, 2015). The latest country to adopt this policy measure is Luxembourg, which will be offering completely free transport in 2020 as part of an environmental initiative that will be funded through government revenues (Brimacombe, 2020).

As the world is rapidly evolving around us, the question of if Canadian municipalities should consider look into the economic feasibility of a free transportation model for city residents have become more common. When considering this model, what would its overall benefits be and what unanticipated disadvantages could arise? Multiple cities across Canada such as part of Edmonton, Vancouver and Winnipeg has already began implementing free transit to city

residents; should the rest of Canada follow suite (Johnson, 2015)?

Advantages

One of the biggest arguments for the implementation of free transportation in municipalities is that it could contribute to lowering overall carbon emission rates. The growing climate crisis highlights the importance of cutting down on carbon emission rates, about 50% of carbon emissions in cities come from cars (Burt-D'Agnillo, 2020). Likewise, studies show that when public transit is free or affordable, personal car usage decreases, thereby substantially lowering overall carbon emissions (Burt-D'Agnillo, 2020).

Furthermore, public infrastructure and transportation has become increasingly important in urban centers, as with the rising cost of living, more and more people are turning to public transit as their only means of transportation. As transit fees continue to increase, this additional cost has the potential to disproportionately disadvantage

vulnerable populations within cities, presenting a socio-economic benefit of free public transportation (Burt-D'Agnillo, 2020). Some may question if it is the government's responsibility to ensure that citizens have access to fair and accessible transportation service, under the Canada Transportation Act of 1996, c.10 argues "the transportation system is accessible without undue obstacle to the mobility of persons, including persons with disabilities, governments and the private sector must work together for an integrated transportation system" (Canada, 2020).

Disadvantages

As with many Canadian policy proposals, one cannot fully consider the implementation of a policy before reflecting on which level of government would be responsible for the delivery of such a program. Additionally, it is a well-known fact that municipalities have a limited ability to raise funds, which evidently would affect their ability to finance and develop a free transportation system. In Canada, about half of municipal transport is funded by municipal funds, consequently leading to the discourse that "public transit should be funded by public funds" (Brimacombe, 2020).

For example, during cold weather alerts in Edmonton, the homeless population is encouraged to take public transport for

free, ultimately resulting in the city voting for fare free transit on March 20, 2020. (Rf, 2020). Likewise, throughout the pandemic, cities such as Mississauga, Halifax, and Nanaimo have temporarily been offering free transit and back door boarding to encourage social distancing to curb the spread of COVID-19 (Rf, 2020).

With municipalities already subsidizing forty to fifty percent of transportation cost (Brimacombe, 2020), why shouldn't they consider creating other sources of revenue to fund the remaining fifty percent as opposed to continuing to increase transit fees? This source of revenue could be derived from parking spaces, rise in property taxes, or through an optional membership program similar to libraries. This would ultimately transform the funding structure to replicate how residents do not directly pay schools, libraries and park fees within the city (Brimacombe, 2020).

When implementing this policy, it is also important to note the population difference between rural and urban populations across Canada. A free transportation system for highly dense cities such as Toronto, Vancouver, and Edmonton would be the most practical due to the number of frequent riders. Meanwhile, small rural cities in north Saskatchewan such as Prince Albert, would not benefit from a free municipal

transportation system, as it does not have the existing infrastructure nor ridership to support this model (Johnson, 2015).

Conclusion

Canada should follow alongside other innovative countries such as Estonia and Luxembourg in the development of free municipal transport. Public transportation affects everyone and should be free and accessible to all regardless of age, gender, race and income. A price cannot be put on mobility and the social justice

References

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implications of a free transit system, especially with the rise of urban inequality and the growing climate crisis.

However, this program should be administered slowly, beginning with major urban centers where a public transit infrastructure already exists as the main form of transportation for many. Public transportation is an essential service for everyone and must view it through a collective lens. There would need to be incremental changes in the administration of municipal transit over time for free transit policies to begin taking place in Canada.

[future&text=And across Canada, free transit, for a Green New Deal.](#)

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