

Commentary: Facing our transit future in Saint John

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Commentator Tom McGraw says provincial election candidates need to understand public transit is a major regional asset facing significant challenges and is in dire need of help from the province.

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It was encouraging to see the City of Saint John include transit items in a recent provincial election white paper, but the response from regional candidates was less than overwhelming.

Some didn't comment on the paper at all. Do all the candidates not know that public transit is a major regional asset facing significant challenges and is in dire need of help from the province?

The proposed federal carbon tax is especially ominous. At \$10 per tonne of greenhouse gas emissions this year, rising to \$50 by 2022, the additional tax could be devastating for transit given its fuel reliance.

Some cities like Winnipeg are grappling with how a carbon tax will impact service and have decided to increase fares. Other cities are smartly preparing ahead of the curve. Calgary is bankrolling a major transit expansion project using \$2 billion in carbon levy revenue.

On Sept. 4, the federal and B.C. governments re-announced their commitment to more than \$3 billion in funding for Vancouver and Surrey transit projects through a partnership that relies heavily on the federal infrastructure fund and a possible local fuel tax. Metro Vancouver mayors have asked for a portion of carbon tax revenues to cover gaps.

Likewise, New Brunswick needs to help smaller cities like Saint John cope with the inevitable added pressure on its transit budget.

Several candidates do agree that more should be done to improve public transit, especially in our priority neighbourhoods. Access to affordable transit is proven to reduce poverty. Cities like Edmonton and Halifax have introduced low-income passes to assist vulnerable communities. Saint John and its outlying communities need to follow this lead.

As well, public transit can foster inclusion and promote population growth across the province. Newcomers rely on transit to discover their new city and they are asking for improved night and weekend services. There is no question transit helps attract and retain immigrants, young people and supports seniors in an active lifestyle.

The Comex and "Park and Ride" were both major investments that were intended to steer the whole region toward environmentally friendly transportation. Tens of thousands of cars continue to make the daily commute into Saint John, while less than 200 passengers use the Comex. This speaks loudly to an idea that needs to be revitalized.

So what can the provincial government do to help with these pressing issues? How about removing the property tax on the transit garage, as we are the only province to tax such facilities?

As well, a portion of the existing gas tax could be designated for transit operations. The province can also climb aboard with innovations and promotions. People need to know it only costs about \$1 per ride with a monthly pass and there are no insurance or maintenance fees for passengers.

Those who already take our 2.5 million rides per year see the advantages, but we need help in a regional effort to push back car culture and encourage citizens to use other modes of transportation.

In modern cities, public transit is an enabler, a key component in building better, more pedestrian-friendly cities. Ask your regional candidates if they have solid plans to support public transit and get out and vote in the Sept. 24 provincial election. Hop a bus to polling station!

Tom McGraw is president of the Amalgamated Transit Union, Local 1182.

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