

January 15, 2024

To Hamilton City Council General Issues Committee,

My name is Christie McNabb and I am writing as both a resident of Hamilton and as a member of the Council of Canadians, Hamilton Chapter and our collaborative effort with Hamilton 350: Hamilton Transit Matters. I am delegating in support of a robust, reliable, and eventually fare-free public transit system.

Orangeville is now in the second year of their two-year pilot project "aimed at removing barriers to make the transportation system more affordable and effective," especially for seniors and students. Ridership in the first year there has doubled from pre-pandemic numbers. Further, the increased ridership and the construction of a new transit terminal has peaked the interest of Go Transit and jumpstarted discussions around additional transit routes between the town and Brampton, putting a dent in commuter traffic, and boosting transit reliability and accessibility.

"It's great to see that on top of the social benefit that we're seeing within our community, we're seeing economical investment as well."

Orangeville Mayor Lisa Post.

As many critics note, fare-free or subsidized transit rides does not mean no one has to pay. Just as toll-free roads, free parking, sidewalks, and bike lanes are not pay-per-use, so too would these rides be provided by all of us (barring funding that could be brought in with advertising). Sadly, many residents, critics and city council members are quick to question why those who don't use transit should help pay for a service that (on the surface) provides them no benefit. Further, prejudices about who uses public transit impacts public support for any policy that looks like a "hand-out".

Before the ubiquitousness of cars, it would have been easy to recognize public transit as an invaluable investment for a city's economic functioning: boosting visits to local establishments, ensuring people get to work reliably, providing access to parks and recreation. These are the same considerations that now garner support for more and cheaper parking, and toll-free, well maintained roads.

While this made sense in the decades that saw car ownership increase quite dramatically, we are now facing the economic and environmental impacts of climate collapse. More and more residents will be unable to afford the luxury of a car and the increasing price of gas; they will need to adapt by turning to alternative modes of transportation. And the growing number of voices concerned with mitigating the climate crisis is shifting public opinion about fossil fuels and transportation.

It is absolutely time to stop developing our city for the car and recognize public transit, not simply as an alternative to car ownership, but as that invaluable investment for Hamilton's economic and environmental future that will, in fact, benefit us all. And far from a simple "hand-out", providing as many people as possible with a way to get around bestows all of the benefits on our city that we so easily attribute to car ease-of-use.

Hamilton is not Orangeville; it is likely too large to implement a fare-free pilot as Orangeville has, but the HDLC has proposed CareFare, an incremental strategy to get more people riding public transit starting with providing free rides for those people in our neighbourhoods that currently cannot afford to use the system. I support this initiative. As a first step, providing

transportation for people who could not otherwise afford it is ideal: it takes nothing from the fare-box.

But sadly, Hamilton will be taking a step in the opposite direction this June by removing the fare-free option for those Hamiltonians using personal mobility devices and CNIB card holders on buses and DARTS. The replacement program offering a 30% discount may not be enough to ensure affordability for many who relied on the free transit rides.

For this reason, I also support the formation of a committee of council to evaluate the benefits and feasibility of a fare-free transit system in Hamilton, as they are currently doing in Burlington. This committee could also study the positive impacts that frequent and reliable transit has on ridership, as well as considering the transition to an electric fleet. But importantly, the committee should include voices for those who most rely on public transit as well as those who are currently (or are at risk of becoming) unable to afford to ride.

Thank you for your time,

Christie McNabb, Ward 3

<https://citizen.on.ca/orangevilles-fare-free-transit-doubles-ridership-through-spring-despite-mechanical-issues-with-buses/>