

HABITATS

students in their municipalities
2015



OUSA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

ABOUT OUSA

OUSA represents the interests of over 140,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at seven institutions across Ontario. Our vision is for an accessible, affordable, accountable, and high quality post-secondary education in Ontario. To achieve this vision we've come together to develop solutions to challenges facing higher education, build broad consensus for our policy options, and lobby government to implement them.

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INTRODUCTION

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The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is pleased to be presenting our first issue of “Habitats,” a series of case studies researched and written by Ontario university students. Municipal affairs are an important part of the student experience, affecting everything from how students live during their time at school, to how they get to class, to how they interact with their broader community environment. Such topics are always of great interest to students, and OUSA’s members have been eager to explore them in-depth. However, their very nature as local issues can make them difficult to examine in a broader context.

Recognizing this, OUSA asked researchers at our member institutions to share their stories with us from their own experiences and the issues that their universities face. We were interested in capturing student voices to provide a snapshot of how similar - and different - perspectives can be on these topics. The result of this project provides interesting information on recent issues, and suggests some lessons and best practices surrounding initiatives on which students can engage when it comes to local affairs advocacy and policy solutions.

town *&* *gown*





ALMA MATER SOCIETY

KINGSTON

When issues arise between universities and municipalities, they can become ongoing disagreements, discussed and debated over a long period of time. Though this has the potential to frustrate both sides, it can also shine a spotlight on opportunities to deepen relationships and strengthen the channels of communication between an institution and the city where it is located. In this report, Joyce Wai and Lauren Rainsford from the Alma Mater Society of Queen's University describe the recent history of a concern between the City of Kingston and Queen's regarding noise by-laws. Additionally, they highlight how the ongoing resolution process has revealed valuable strategies to strengthen the "Town & Gown" relationship between city and university.

BY: JOYCE WAI / LAUREN RAINSFORD

INTRODUCTION

Queen's University currently enrolls over 20,000 students and expects significant growth in the near future.¹ Correspondingly, sports usage of the West Campus fields and Richardson Stadium is projected to increase. Given growing demand for field usage from both university and community sporting groups, Queen's has found that Kingston's noise bylaws have been problematic as they have "[made] it difficult for the university to hold sporting events (practices or games)."² Therefore, the University applied for an exemption from the relevant bylaws. When Queen's initially applied for the permanent exception from the noise bylaws it was met with considerable opposition from both individuals and groups among the broader Kingston community. In February 2014, Kingston residents put forth a collective media release detailing their key concerns such as the "exponentially increasing excessive noise violations... that fail to meet community standards."³ The release found that there was a lack of balance between "[Queen's-related] needs and resident recreation times...which requires manageable noise levels."⁴ Moreover, it noted that despite numerous community attempts to express their concerns with the University, there had been very few administrative attempts to alleviate noise issues. As such, Kingston residents were becoming very concerned that the continued and increasing usage of the fields would set the precedent for undermining the rights of city residents. This frustration was underpinned by a broader, historical town-gown tension in Kingston; while it is recognized that Queen's University and the student community have different lifestyles and needs when compared to Kingston's permanent residents, residents have previously pointed out that Queen's students are still residents of the city, and should therefore be held responsible for compliance to the same bylaws.

Noise exemption became a widely debated issue due to the significantly differing needs and expectations between Queen's University and the affected Kingston residents. As this report will explore, both the city and Queen's University recognized this diversity of needs, and both parties took measures to ensure that all needs and concerns were addressed. Following the filing of the noise exemption request and subsequent community media release, Queen's university and the city facilitated an extensive consultation process in order to reach a reconciliatory solution.

PRESENT ISSUES

In March of 2014, Queen's University withdrew the initial exemption application submitted in February in light of residential concerns regarding the "use of continuous amplified sound and the ability of Queen's to utilize the exemption for extended periods of time."⁵ As such, Queen's University modified the initial proposal by reducing the number of hours the noise exemption would apply for: rather than requesting an exemption from 9 AM to 11 PM, the exemption would apply from 9 AM to 9 PM. Additionally, the university altered their request from seeking a permanent exemption to a temporary pilot exemption, pending re-evaluation following December 30, 2015.⁶

Queen's University then convened a public consultation on June 18, 2014 with the intention of discussing the revised proposal with Kingston residents. However, city residents continued to express concern over the use of amplified sound, as it would be a consistent disturbance to residential life in the surrounding areas. Therefore, a further modification was made to the university's proposal in late June, as the university withdrew its request for six extra occurrence exemptions between 9 AM and 11 PM at the West Campus Fields and Richardson Stadium. Following a second public meeting on July 2, 2014, residents' feedback still reflected a significant concern regarding noise levels, as the amended proposal still allowed amplified sound on the fields under question for twelve hours a day, seven days a week.⁷

In light of persisting residential apprehension regarding the consistency of amplified noise at the West Campus Fields and Richardson Stadium, the university made an attempt to rectify this concern by specifying the number of games or occurrences that the exemption would apply for; this amendment requested noise exemptions for ninety-three games at West Campus, with a maximum of two hours for each game. Additionally, a request was made for fifteen noise exemptions for Richardson Stadium. The university also provided further clarification regarding the type and duration of amplified noise that would be exempt from the noise bylaws; these would include “the national anthem – approximately 90 seconds, opening player/game introductions – approximately 2-3 minutes, and intermittent game-related announcements – approximately 15-20 seconds.”⁸ This clarification attempted to address the issue of continuous noise. Moreover, Queen’s University agreed to commission an engineering noise study, and to work with the city to take further actions regarding excessive noise to reflect the results of the study.⁹

Following the presentation of a city report to City Council on July 4, 2014, the university’s noise exemption request was granted with the acknowledgement of several conditions. First, Queen’s University was to improve communication by using posters and annual communications to notify field users of the importance of “keeping noise levels to a minimum;” as well, a suggestion was made to develop a webpage for the West Campus Fields and Richardson Stadium, and to insert noise clauses into field-use agreements. Second, a request was made to Queen’s University to proactively monitor the aforementioned sports fields through the establishment of a well-advertised and publicly accessible hotline for noise complaints. Any complaint was to be reported to the City Manager of Licensing & Enforcement within 24 hours of its occurrence, and Queen’s Athletic & Recreation staff member was to investigate these noise complaints through field visits. Finally, the University was to

present City Council with the noise study results and subsequent recommendations by December of 2014, as well as report field usage figures by the end of each month from March to December.¹⁰

Considering the extensive consultation process and the continued expression of concern by City of Kingston residents regarding the university’s noise exemption application, it was clear that this was a polarizing issue that residents were very concerned about. These issues were chiefly focused on the frequency and consistency of noise violations, and that lines of communication between the university and surrounding residents were insufficient. While the current noise exemption conditions have attempted to rectify these concerns, the noise exemption re-evaluation is upcoming. As such, it is important for the university to engage in further communications with the city and its residents regarding any emerging issues.

BEST PRACTICES

Given that the current noise bylaw exemption is set to expire on June 30, 2015, renewal discussions will be occurring within the next few months. The renewal process could potentially be problematic should the University encounter community feedback similar to that expressed during public consultations for the first noise exemption application. However, it is hoped that the experiences drawn from the initial noise exemption process have revealed ways to improve collaboration that will lead to improvement in the upcoming renewal process, and beyond.

The Academic Affairs Commission interviewed a number of stakeholders with the intention of gaining insight regarding the emerging issues for the upcoming renewal process, and the steps that could be taken to reduce any unnecessary conflict in order to improve the efficacy and atmosphere of the negotiation process. The opinions of Ariel Gonzalez, Municipal Affairs Commissioner for the Queen’s University Alma Mater Society, Liz Schell,

City Councillor for the Portsmouth district, and Kim Leonard, Manager of Licensing and Enforcement with the City of Kingston, are expressed below. In all three interviews with Gonzalez, Schell, and Leonard, common themes emerged. For the upcoming renewal process, all stakeholders highlighted the importance of communication, public consultation, and building strong relationships in the upcoming exemption renewal process.

First, the interviewees emphasized the importance of mutual communication throughout the process of renewal negotiations. Given that there are a number of key stakeholders, all of whom have differing priorities and concerns, it is important that all relevant and interested parties are kept informed as negotiation terms change; this will preclude the unintentional spread of misinformation, and build a sense of trust amongst all concerned parties. For example, Schell mentioned in her interview that citizens often experienced difficulty finding the appropriate channels and contacts within the university to lodge noise complaints with.¹¹ As a result, city councillors became frequent recipients of these concerns. However, since the beginning of the initial noise exemption process, Schell was quick to note that the University administration had made active attempts to improve these channels of communication. Leonard also affirmed this statement, as Queen's University has since created a specific hotline for residential noise complaints; additionally, the University has been diligent with informing the city of any noise complaints.¹² Schell also applauded the efforts of the Municipal Affairs Commission, as well as the entire student government, for its attempts to engage the City Council regarding pertinent issues. Gonzalez agreed with this assessment, and emphasized the importance of the student voice during any discussions that are relevant to the student body.¹³

Second, as a further recommendation to improving channels of communication, interviewees suggested the continuation of public consultations. Because of

the number of stakeholders with differing needs and concerns, public consultations were brought up as an efficient venue for communication between parties as consultations allow for an open space whereby all relevant stakeholders can elaborate upon their positions. Public consultations were seen to be a useful forum for public input, where both the city and the university could listen to residents' concerns and develop alternate proposals and plans to best address those concerns whilst also balancing the needs and concerns of the university. For example, there were a number of amendments made in the Queen's noise exemption request following a series of public consultations regarding the noise exemptions. Having pressed the university to produce a more precise figure for field use, the university's final report reflected this request by including the number of games that the noise exemption bylaw would apply to. The successful facilitation of public consultations can continue to build a positive relationship of trust between all relevant parties, and ensure that the Kingston residential community has an accessible venue to express their concerns over negotiations between the city and the university.

Finally, a recommendation was made by Schell and Gonzalez to actively seek to cultivate an atmosphere of trust and facilitate the building of strong relationships. Schell placed a strong emphasis on this point, suggesting that the establishment of trust would not only improve future exemption negotiation processes, but also town-gown relationships in general. Because the University operates within close proximity to Kingston residents, it is integral that there is a strong relationship between all parties so that any emerging issues can be resolved through respectful means. Gonzalez also spoke to the importance of having personal relationships with city staff, and maintaining consistency in the points of contact between the city and the university. Schell and Leonard, through their respective interviews, have both agreed that the university seems to have improved upon key issues since the initial noise exemption process; as such, it is hoped that the

upcoming renewal process will also improve come June 2015. Councillor Schell has stated that she does not anticipate the noise bylaw exemption becoming a problematic issue once the renewal process begins.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the noise exemption process, it was clear that residents' concerns were not only pointed to this specific issue. Instead, the complaints that arose as a result of the noise exemption request reflect a larger theme with town-gown relations between Queen's University and the City of Kingston. As a large educational institution with a young demographic, the university often has needs that potentially contravene the needs of permanent city residents. While it is important for concessions to be made for the university, it is also equally important for students to recognize their responsibilities as citizens of the Kingston community. It is essential to strike a balance between the university and the city's needs, and to ensure that both parties are fairly treated in any decision-making process. In Kingston, the city, the university, and the Alma Mater Society have all engaged in collaborative initiatives to improve town-gown relations; for example, the Town and Gown Strategic Plan includes input from a number of Queen's University representatives in the form of their strategic leadership team. This Strategic Plan exemplifies the cooperative relationship undertaken by the city and the university, as numerous aspects of the Plan specifically incorporate student and university needs and responsibilities within the scope of Kingston community growth and development. These include the "[promotion of] two-way communication [between the] city/university," "[encouraging] student engagement," and "[integrating] university expansion with urban planning."¹⁴ In addition to this formal collaboration, the university and the Alma Mater Society has also moved towards increasing student and university engagement in community issues through participation in organizations such as the Near Campus Neighbourhood Advisory Committee, and the Sydenham District Association.

By establishing and emphasizing a cooperative and proactive relationship between the city, its residents, and the Queen's administration and student population, it then becomes possible to produce positive and reconciliatory solutions to any potential town-gown issues that arise in the future. This relationship, as seen in Kingston, can be supported and enhanced through the development and maintenance of clear and respectful communication channels, as well as constant and collective engagement with each other to cultivate an understanding and solutions-focused dynamic between all parties.

The background of the entire page is a black and white photograph of a university campus. In the foreground, there are bare trees and a paved area. In the background, there are several multi-story university buildings. A blue rectangular box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the word 'HAMILTON' in white capital letters.

MCMASTER STUDENTS UNION

HAMILTON

The previous case clearly demonstrates the value of open communication channels between universities and their surrounding communities as one important piece of Town & Gown relationships. It is natural for issues to arise, but the ways in which stakeholders engage with each other (and the issues at hand) makes all the difference. In developing pathways for conflict resolution and open communication, McMaster University has encouraged community engagement through the creation of, and co-operation with, numerous neighbourhood boards and committees. This report from Joseph Palladino of the McMaster Students Union provides an overview of these organizations, which involve all community stakeholders—university faculty and staff, students, local business owners, and homeowners—in mutually beneficial relationships that facilitate productive communication and problem solving.

BY: JOSEPH PALLADINO

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the relationship between a university and its surrounding community is integral to generating practical, beneficial, and multidirectional relationships between community members and university faculty, staff, and students. In many instances, a university may be one of the major forces that drive a specific city or area within a city forward. They provide employment opportunities, specialized facilities to community members, and even interesting forums and discussions that almost anyone can attend. There is no doubt that a post-secondary institution should have a strong and consolidated relationship with its affiliated community, but what about when it comes to community organizations and governance? This case study will focus on the relationship between McMaster University and the surrounding communities of Westdale and Ainslie Wood in Hamilton, Ontario.

“Historically, partnerships between universities and community organizations have been either non-existent or unconstructive; this state of affairs being the result of opposing philosophies and practices.”¹⁵ However, periodic re-evaluation of the relationship between post-secondary institutions and their communities, indicated by the work of boards and committees, will allow for constant positive movement, as intermittent examinations will indicate what is working, what is not, and how to strengthen relationships.

In observing the relationship between the university and community and its development through the creation of boards and committees, I also took an interest in the role played by the student body. For students, it is important to understand what initiatives are being run within the community, and how to have one's opinion heard on municipal issues. This can be done through participation on boards and committees. At McMaster, the undergraduate population of over 20,000 students is constantly participating in and impacting the community's physical and cultural environment. As such, I thought it interesting to use this case study of McMaster as a example of best practices, in the hopes that the findings discussed here can be administered at other post-secondary institutions across the province of Ontario.

ISSUES SURROUNDING SCHOOL/CITY RELATIONSHIPS ON BOARDS AND COMMITTEES

There are many difficulties and contrasting views that impact the relationship between almost all institutions and their respective neighbourhoods. It is necessary to understand the opinions of all stakeholders, not just those of students, homeowners, or faculty, in order to determine factors that may hinder participation on local boards and committees. For example, while McMaster University brings many interesting events and people to Hamilton's Ward 1, it also assists in generating congestion. Citizens who regularly commute using Main Street West, where McMaster is located, may have a negative bias towards working with the school due to its contributions to rush hour traffic.

Student housing is one particular issue that puts significant strain on McMaster's relationship with the City of Hamilton. The communities of Ainslie Wood and Westdale both hold large percentages of rental housing where the majority of tenants are undergraduate students. In some instances, absentee landlords create environments in which their properties are not maintained nor visited creating unsafe spaces that evidently prove detrimental to the overall landscape of the neighbourhood. Post-secondary students are also often labelled as part-time residents who 'use and abuse' the city and cause havoc.

Among other factors that may hamper school/city relations is the time and commitment needed to participate in boards and committees. Many students, faculty, staff, and business owners (among others) may not have the time to work closely with a board or committee. In order for a committee to fulfill its mandate, the members must be engaged and interested. If the organization deals with issues that are deemed unimportant by its members, it will not prove useful or impactful. Regardless, it seems that in the case of McMaster University and the City of Hamilton, both groups are constantly in pursuit of healthy relationships with one another, and are willing participants in committees who deal with relevant issues. In regards to student participation on local boards, Rodrigo Narro Perez (2014-2015 VP Education for MSU) suspects that students may not always know where they are welcome: “sometimes all it takes is an invitation. After being invited, I think you'd see a much larger number of students who will want to be engaged in their community.”

BOARD AND COMMITTEE RELATIONS BETWEEN MCMASTER UNIVERSITY AND THE CITY OF HAMILTON

The ‘engaged’ university is an international trend that is becoming the focus of strategic planning at higher education institutions across North America. In the case of McMaster University, community engagement is not new to the operations of the school and has been a distinguishing factor since its founding in 1887.¹⁶ However, in recent years, McMaster has taken on a more active role in community engagement, developing a number of new initiatives and associations in partnership with community groups. These programs have been created as joint projects, with the purpose of alleviating a number of stresses on the community while strengthening the relationship between homeowners, businesses, community members, students, and the institution itself.

Setting Common Goals

One such initiative was the creation of the Campus Town Association (CTA) in 2005, which consisted of resident homeowners, Hamilton Police, the Westdale Village Business Improvement Area, and University officials.¹⁷ This group worked cohesively in finding ways to deal with common problems that impacted all parties involved. Stated on the Ainslie Wood Westdale Community Association (AWWCA) website, “The CTA’s vision is to develop [the] community as the model for campus towns in Canada and ultimately to become the best campus town in North America.”¹⁸ Functioning in a similarly co-operative manner, the President’s Advisory Committee on Community Relations states that the group, which consists of university and student representatives as well as community business and homeowners, “works to identify common areas of interest and concern...to develop proposals for action and promote cooperation and mutual understanding.”¹⁹

Increasing Community Engagement & Institutional Outreach

In 2012, McMaster created the Community Engagement Task Force with membership representing a wide range of community experience. This committee was given the task of considering ways in which community engagement could be embedded into the culture of the University, assisting in strengthening community partnerships as well as the student experience. This

task force ultimately provided a recommendation for the implementation of the Network for Community-Campus Partnerships, established in September 2013, with a mandate to provide a shared framework for McMaster to support its goals related to community engagement. One example of the network’s early successes was the creation of a community engagement database. Launched in the fall of 2014 and accessible from McMaster’s main webpage, the database displays hyperlinks to all sorts of initiatives designed and governed by local boards and committees created in partnership with Network members.

Working with Student Associations

Working specifically with one of Hamilton’s larger neighbourhood committees, the MSU formed a partnership with the AWWCA in 2006 to implement the innovative justice initiative entitled the ‘Community Accountability Program’. Through this program, the MSU and AWWCA have created a platform for communication in which both parties may benefit. As such, a common theme seems explicit in the study of board and committee relations between the university, the MSU, and the affiliated communities; all parties stand to benefit from working cohesively towards solving a wide range of issues that have the potential to strain the community at large. The MSU has also implemented a variety of community engagement programs, in particular the Student Community Support Network (SCSN). The SCSN team, in turn, works directly with community partners in producing events such as the “Discover Your City” initiative. As stated by MSU Vice-President (Education) Rodrigo Narro Perez, “the Discover Your City campaign promotes the City of Hamilton as a place of opportunity for students, empowering them to step out of the McMaster bubble and explore what the city has to offer.” The SCSN works directly with local businesses for this campaign, bringing together McMaster students as well as local business owners. Through this project, both parties seem to benefit from each other- students from receiving interesting opportunities to travel to local shops, and businesses from gaining more recognition and exposure.

Exploring the Benefits of Student Engagement

This multitude of initiatives demonstrates how the university and the surrounding community have built strong relationships using boards and committees. I would like to take the time, however, to reiterate the benefits of encouraging students to engage in their institution's community. Multiple programs and faculties at McMaster also explicitly work with community organizations, boards and committees. For example, this past September the Faculty of Social Sciences worked in conjunction with Volunteer Hamilton and Community Volunteer Action in implementing the Community Engagement and Volunteer Fair. This event presented students the opportunity to connect with the larger Hamilton community by creating a networking event where organizations looking for volunteers could inform, engage, and recruit interested students. This process is extremely beneficial to students as well as the organizations involved, and once again provides an avenue in which both parties may create a platform for open communication.

I had the privilege of speaking with Professor Valerie Sadler, who teaches courses pertaining to the Not-For-Profit Management Certificate offered at McMaster. Professor Sadler, who actively encourages students to investigate community organizations that may interest them, says there is much for both students and boards to gain by coming together. "I believe that good committee governance includes a diverse range of opinions, where youth are encouraged to participate," stated Professor Sadler. "When you get involved in a committee, it can spark a passion that you may never even knew you had. It's a great networking opportunity."²⁵

Dr. Walter Peace from McMaster University's School of Geography and Earth Science also explains that boards and committees stand to gain from student engagement as well. He states, "the kinds of things that go on in various communities have a bearing on what the city is able to do, willing to do, and its awareness of such issues. Transportation issues, for example, are common to all citizens of Hamilton, but students may have a unique perspective on the issue."²⁶ In this example, a board or committee trying to mobilize support for or undermine the proposal of a new type of transport system—such as the debates involving the Light Rail Transit system in Hamilton—may see their position strengthened by the help of students or faculty.

CONCLUSION

In the case of McMaster University and the City of Hamilton, Ontario, the two parties have a fairly strong relationship developed through the establishment of local boards and

committees dealing with key issues that impact both groups. Furthermore, the McMaster Students Union also maintains a healthy relationship with community boards and committees, while developing initiatives that allow the McMaster population to engage with their communities. Moving forward, this case can be used to offer recommendations to post-secondary institutions across the province.

Firstly, I recommend that the current trend of community engagement continue to grow. As both McMaster University and the City of Hamilton have shown, committees and initiatives such as the Community Town Association, the Community Engagement Task Force, and the Network for Community-Campus Partnerships are effective community engagement tools. These tools should continue to be used as best practice examples and made inclusive to all who fit within each organization's mandate and wish to participate.

Secondly, student groups should be actively engaged and made aware of what is happening in their communities. Dr. Walter Peace explains, "If students are interested, they should be encouraged and given the opportunity to participate with local boards and committees. At the very least, they should be made aware of external committees within the community."²⁷ Furthermore, Professor Valerie Sadler says, "we talk about learning styles and characteristics of learning all the time, but I believe that for a student to be truly successful, they need to find out what they are genuinely passionate about. Becoming involved in a local committee is great way to receive first hand experience in a wide array of issues as well as local governance strategies."²⁸

This story of McMaster University and the City of Hamilton's flourishing relationship—made possible by the creation of and cooperation with local boards and committees—should be echoed across institutions around Ontario. As a personal concluding point, the dynamism associated with new, innovative committees and working groups created by amalgamating university faculty, staff, and students with community homeowners, business owners, and municipal government are capable of producing powerful synergies between institutions and their communities. All participating parties stand to benefit from effective collaboration in solving a variety of municipal issues pertaining to the groups involved. Therefore, case studies such as this one should be utilized in order to identify the specific issues facing each institution and their affiliated municipalities.

transit



A black and white photograph showing the interior of a public transit bus. The view is from the front of the bus looking towards the back. Rows of empty seats are visible on both sides of a central aisle. Overhead handrails and vertical poles are present. Large windows on the left side show a glimpse of the outside world, including a white fence. The lighting is even, and the overall atmosphere is quiet and empty.

BROCK UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' UNION

NIAGARA REGION

Adequate and reliable public transit is a perennial issue for university students. Students often comprise a significant portion of a municipality's ridership, and many student associations pursue partnerships with transit organizations to secure discount passes for their members or other such arrangements. The value of public transit to students who commute to their classes within cities (or from out of town) means that the efficiency, accessibility, and affordability of public transportation are often prominent concerns. This report from Alex Hobbs of the Brock University Students' Union provides an overview of some of the challenges facing students who rely on public transit throughout the Niagara region, and argues that a major change is necessary.

BY: ALEX HOBBS

Brock University is the largest post-secondary institution in the Niagara region. With 18,000 students eager to get to class on time, a proper transit system is essential. Unfortunately, students from all over the region have found their transit system less than accommodating. Due to the complicated network of bus systems in Niagara, delays, overcrowding, and long layovers mid-route occur commonly; these often prevent students from getting to class on time, if at all. Recent developments in municipal elections have raised the profile of this issue, and policy solutions are being explored. This report will outline various failings of the Niagara transit system and explore possible remediation.

BACKGROUND

In 2011, the independent transit operations in Niagara region became connected to one another through the Niagara Regional Transit (NRT) system, which introduced new routes and busses that bridge the gaps between the municipalities. NRT connected the municipal transit systems of St. Catharines and Thorold, Welland, Fort Erie, and Niagara Falls, allowing students to travel by bus directly to those regions.²⁹ NRT has become a necessity for many Brock University students, with a reported 40% of all riders being students from either Brock University or Niagara College.³⁰ However the service has been heavily criticised by those who use it. According to many, the Niagara transit system is confusing, ineffective, inefficient, and costly.³¹ Bridging several municipalities' transit systems together, rather than placing them all under a single regional system, does not serve the needs of students in Niagara.

Although Niagara Regional Transit itself is a single system, the three affiliates with which it collaborates are separately managed. All arrival and departure times by city bus systems are overseen independently by those municipalities, and do not account for the schedules of other municipalities' buses. This leaves the NRT responsible for matching its routes to the schedules of all its affiliates - a task too intricate and convoluted to do well. The difficulty of being

responsive and coordinated under such a system means that extremely long wait times, and even missed busses, occur frequently.³²

Each municipality also establishes its own transit bylaws and fees. If a student wanted to travel from Welland to Thorold, that student would pay a fee in Welland to travel by bus to a stop, and then would have to pay a different fee to travel via Niagara Regional Transit, and then would have to pay a final fee in order to travel by Thorold bus. All of the fees are also different at each city. Note as well that because transit laws are municipal, certain pass-holders may only be able to board the busses of certain cities.^{33,34} All of these restrictions affect more than the students of Niagara College and Brock University: they affect all citizens throughout the region who use the transit system.

ENGAGEMENT

Brock University Students' Union (BUSU) ran a campaign at the end of 2014 to gauge student sentiment towards the Niagara Regional Transit system and promote possible solutions. Students' attitudes were as expected: they were disappointed with their municipal transit system, and more concerning, many reported difficulty getting to their classes on time. When students are paying hundreds of dollars per credit, not being able to get to class on time is far more than a simple inconvenience. Representatives from BUSU began to bring these concerns to the Niagara Transit Board at the same time many citizens of the Niagara region were advocating for GO transit throughout the region - a system impossible to implement due to a lack of infrastructure.

Ahead of the 2014 municipal election, Brock University Students' Union ran a "Ride the Bus" campaign to show many candidates from around the Niagara region what a transit experiences were like by taking them on typical student bus routes. One of the routes took 45 minutes for what would normally be a five minute car ride. The campaign was

extremely successful, seeing most of the candidates express surprise and disappointment at the state of the transit system. Thorold mayor Ted Luciani remarked - in a sentiment that would be supported by the new councillors-elect:

“Not being a regular user, today has been a big experience for me, listening to the trials and tribulations that they go through... I think it's time that we look at having one system will make it better for the students, and also the seniors that use the buses a lot of times.”³⁵

The 2014 Niagara municipal election saw the largest turnover in the region's history, and many candidates had actively mentioned transit in their campaigns. It was no surprise therefore that Niagara's regional economic development director placed transit near the top of his 2015 issues list, and on February 20, 2015, the region announced it was raising taxes and was going to begin actively improving the regional transit system while boosting infrastructure in the hopes of joining GO Transit.³⁶ However, there are methods of improving Niagara's transit without the spending increases required to support GO - namely, transit amalgamation.

BUSU lobbied for transit amalgamation, arguing that without it, it would be costly and inefficient to improve management and reach. Due to the various different systems in the Niagara municipalities, it makes more sense to amalgamate them all. Amalgamation in this case refers to combining all municipal transit systems into a single large one, to be managed by the Niagara region. Instead of having a complicated mass of systems all bridged by Niagara Regional Transit, they would all be folded into one. If that were to occur, there would no longer be concerns over coordinating a regional transit bridge between each municipality; all of those transit systems would be managed together.

Under an amalgamated system, not only would coordination cease to be a concern, but per-ride costs would become consistent across the region. Ride rules would also be the same on each bus, meaning a

person with special ride requirements would be able to ride without having to jump from system to system. As well, due to the elimination of redundancies, the system may be expected to save money, meaning that a municipal taxation increase would not be necessary specifically for the regional transit system. Although an increase in municipal infrastructure for GO transit may still be necessary, amalgamation makes the most sense. It is cheaper for the region and will alleviate the problems caused by the current system, however there are significant difficulties to overcome before transit can be amalgamated.

In order to amalgamate transit, five municipalities will have to work together. They will each have to change transit by-laws, change rates, and they may have to change their route schedules - schedules which many local patrons may rely on. In addition, many transit jobs in the region will be changed, a key point that many may oppose. All of these difficulties must be addressed in order to transition from the current system to an amalgamated one. It is up to the citizens who use Niagara Regional Transit to voice their concerns and convince the region that, despite the challenges, an amalgamated transit system is necessary. BUSU's earlier Ride the Bus campaign was effective enough to convince Thorold Mayor Ted Luciani to state “one system will make it better for the students, and even the seniors who use the buses a lot of the time too”. All it took was a simple ride on a bus.³⁷

CONCLUSION

The Niagara Regional Transit system is inadequate according to many of its users. Students put up with long waiting times and are often late for class. The 2014 municipal election as well as efforts from both Niagara College Student Administrative Council and Brock University Students' Union has propelled movement forward in fixing the system. Although there is much still to be done and many concerns still to be addressed, it has become clear that students will not stop pushing for improved transit in the region until such point it is adequate for the general population of the Niagara region.



UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' COUNCIL

LONDON

While the last report highlighted how transit systems can be in need of major changes in order to increase their value to students, this next report provides examples of the policies such systems can pursue in other contexts. Similar to the Niagara case, the London Transit Commission has struggled with increasing demand over the past several years. Jamie Cleary from the University Students' Council at Western University describes the challenges the commission has faced, and provides an overview of some of the policy solutions it will pursue in the future.

BY: JAMIE CLEARY

INTRODUCTION

The London Transit Commission (LTC) first commenced service for the citizens of London Ontario on May 24, 1875. Its launch corresponded with the celebration of Queen Victoria's birthday, and initially allowed its citizens to travel by horse and carriage. Now, the LTC is looking for plans to better serve its 23 million riders and more.

As a separate corporate body, the LTC serves as agent of the City of London, with exclusive right, authority, and privilege relating to the operation, extension, alteration, repair, control, and management of the city's public transit system. While the LTC operates at arms length from the City of London, the Municipal Council maintains appropriate control through the Commission's appointment process as well as the approval of the city's share of the LTC's operating and capital investments.³⁸ In addition, the City of London and the LTC have announced the recent Shift Initiative. This initiative focuses on rapid transit as the future for transportation within the city, allowing it to both grow and prosper.

CHALLENGES AND CHANGES

From the perspective of service quality, the LTC has consistently underperformed. For conventional transit, late schedule, missed passenger, and overcrowding, complaints have increased 34% since 2010. Problems extend beyond service to students; the LTC has experienced a 54% increase in service quality complaints over the 2013-14 year. Additionally, on main line routes, such as those typically used by students, seating capacity has become a major concern, with an increase of 27% full load counts (riders can not board the vehicle), over the past year.³⁹ The LTC hopes to address these issues within their newest Business Plan for the years 2015 to 2018, called Driving Change.

A major transformational project that Driving Change outlines is the implementation of a smart card system.⁴⁰ By removing the use of a traditional bus pass, this system uses key cards that users will swipe in order to board the bus. Creating convenience for students, this system – which is hoped to be completed over the 2015-16 academic year - would eliminate the need for Western students to pick up their bus passes at the beginning of every academic year, and would use students' regular student cards themselves as the smart passes. This system would not only redefine how passengers will pay for a trip, but the digitization would allow for the Commission to keep accurate records of revenue and ridership rates. This would allow for enhanced planning in respect to service performances.

Additionally, Driving Change pledges an increased fleet size of approximately 5 vehicles per year of its duration.⁴¹ By adding these vehicles to high capacity routes - such as those commonly used by students in the campus area and the downtown core- the LTC should see a reduction in complaints, as well as a significant decrease in wait times and full capacity vehicles. This increased fleet size will also help to account for the projected 1.5 million increase in ridership for the next four years. However, it will come with a 20 cent increase in the cost per ride and may raise student bus pass prices as well, resulting in increased tuition/ancillary fees for students.⁴² If there is to be an increase in costs for students, Driving Change must truly deliver the benefits it promises.

In addition to the business plan's strategy for the next few years, the LTC has long recognized that unless there is a fundamental change with the way transit services are delivered, ridership will grow marginally at best, if not decrease outright. As a result, the commission and the city have begun work on the Shift Initiative. Approved in the Commission's 2030 Transportation Master Plan (TMP) as well as City Council's London Plan, this proposal calls for conventional transit to move towards an enhanced corridor and movement design by using either a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) or Rail Rapid Transit (RRT) platform.⁴³

BRT is a high quality and high capacity rapid transit system in which buses travel in mixed traffic and/or high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes and/or exclusive lanes, thus allowing the avoidance of traffic. BRT relies on a variety of transit priority measures such as transit signals at intersections and queue jumps for the vehicles. RRT is the use of a rail system along the main North/South and East/West corridors of the city, allowing for very quick transportation across its area. In addition, this proposed change will require increased funding from the municipality as well as the provincial and federal governments.⁴⁴ For students, this integrated system will allow for greater transportation between major destinations such as Western University, London's downtown core, and Masonville Mall.

The development and implementation of the rapid transit system was explored in a business case within the Shift Initiative, measuring the economic, financial, environmental and social return associated with the approximately \$385 million investment. The business case suggests that in financial cost-benefit terms, the transition to BRT, if selected over RRT, would generate \$1.80 of benefits for every one dollar of net operating and capital investment. This means, that over a 30-year period, the payback for investment would be just over 11 percent. This business case will act as a key requirement in gaining support in the form of provincial and federal investment. The first stage of the Shift Initiative, is an environmental assessment which is currently underway.⁴⁵ This two year project will help to confirm the overall needs, and justifications as to why the City of London needs a rapid transit system.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

The use of transportation for Western University students has been an ongoing project between the University Students' Council (USC) and the LTC. The Western community makes up a very large proportion of riders for the LTC. However, issues with this relationship stem from the fact

that the student population is very dense within the city, creating transportation problems: not enough buses, vehicles which are full, increased wait times, very specific time frames of usage, etc. Additionally, students need a transit system that can accommodate their sporadic schedules, not just a nine-to-five framework of operation typically designed for commuters. As a result, the USC and the LTC have signed a memorandum of understanding to allow a strengthening of its relationship and to seek problems with the student use of transit, and its possible solutions.⁴⁶

As part of the relationship between the LTC and the USC, all undergraduate students receive a yearlong bus pass, the cost of which is a mandatory inclusion in their tuition. This pass costs students \$210.38 and allows unlimited ridership for one year starting September 2014.⁴⁷ This results in substantial savings compared to the approximately \$81 per month pass for London citizens. The bus pass for students provides a system that aims to be safe, efficient and cost effective. This year, the USC had 99 percent of undergraduate students pick up their bus pass for the 2014 academic year, and a majority of students express that the buses are their main form of transportation.⁴⁸

An additional transportation initiative that the USC provides to undergraduate students is the Mustang Express. This late night shuttle service operates between 11pm-3am on Friday and Saturday nights, offering a system to transport student between the downtown and campus areas of the city at times when the LTC is no longer running. The cost of this system is also included in ancillary fees for students and is known to be quite efficient when used. However, both the USC and students state that problems arise in knowing the schedule, stop locations and promotion of the Mustang Express system.

For years, the USC has been advocating for improved public transit services in London. Students are the LTC's largest ridership group, and in a recent USC student survey, approximately 80 percent of students use the bus as their primary mode of transportation. Students also reported that at least once a week buses are too full to accommodate ridership demand, leaving them behind at the side of the road.⁴⁹ As the main source of transportation for students, this is a vital service that must be efficient and reliable for all Western students, especially in during time sensitive commitments such as exams. The USC believes that the move towards rapid transit is necessary and crucial, providing a higher level of service to both Western's students and the London community.

CONCLUSION

In order for the LTC to maintain a strong working relationship with the USC, as well as gaining respect among Western's undergraduate students, the Commission should continue to look at implementing both long and short term goals. Firstly, the implementation of the Business Plan's proposals of more buses over the next five years should be achieved. The increased fleet should be placed along high occupancy routes, such as those travelling through Western's campus, allowing for current students to experience a more immediate increase in service efficiency. Secondly, the LTC should continue with their plan of a rapid transit system which will allow for a significant change in the way students move throughout the city. Students recognize the need for change in transit service and strongly advocate for accessible transit strategies. In order for a comprehensible transition towards better transit for students, stakeholders such as the LTC, City Council, and the USC need to work alongside one another for years to come, making well fortified decisions which will positively impact future generations of students and Londoners alike.

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RECOMMENDED CITATION

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