

It's not just a bus, it's access!

by SHERALYN ROMAN

This might come as a surprise to some, but not everyone in Caledon owns, or has access to, a vehicle. For a community that is spread across over 700 square kms this can be a real inconvenience. For a community that also provides precious little public transportation, it adds up to a whole lot of missed opportunities: for youth, seniors, stay at home parents, persons who are neurodiverse or with differing abilities.

Not having access to a safe, affordable and reliable means of transportation excludes so many people from being able to participate in our community, in our economy or from having something as simple as some autonomy in their daily lives. Those complaining about a bus driving around their neighbourhoods are missing the point of public transportation. It's about access for all, not just for those who happen to drive.

I'm not about to suggest Caledon spend millions of dollars on bus transportation across our entire region. I may not be a fiscal conservative, but I do understand the challenges facing our community when it comes to providing public transport across every hill and dale. We are geographically diverse and there will naturally be limits and confines within which any public transportation system would be required to operate. That said, certain populations in Caledon could be well-served by regular access to reliable transportation and we can look to a community like Orangeville as an example of how well access not just to a bus, but a free bus at that, is working for them.

According to Sam Odrowski, who writes for our sister paper the Orangeville Citizen, in an August 2023 article, 'Orangeville's fare-free transit is under a two-year pilot project aimed at removing barriers to make the transportation system more affordable and effective. The removal of bus fares is intended to help seniors, students and those who struggle with access to transportation due to its cost.'

What the Town has found in the early stages of this pilot project is that 'the number of people utilizing Orangeville's transit system has roughly doubled since fare-free rides were instated (and that) during the first three months of this year, ridership was up 71 per cent.' The Town of Orangeville predicts that number will continue to rise, perhaps proving that access to public transportation is indeed a very good thing. In the area and driving behind a bus one day, I personally watched as an older adult with a bag of groceries got on the bus outside the grocery store and exited it just a few stops later outside a condo/apartment building. It was a short ride and it would not be unreasonable to assume had that trip been subject to a fare, the senior might not have been able to afford it and would have struggled home in icy, wintry conditions. Instead, they had access to the grocery store (independence) at no cost (helpful for those on a limited income) and choice (where and when they wanted to shop.)

Bolton residents too have had some access to public transportation and there are plans for that to continue - and possibly be enhanced - through a partnership with Brampton Transit. Currently, it provides services along the Highway 50 corridor that are primarily 'rush-hour' based. The same is true for Southfields Village.

According to a Town staff report however, 'Brampton Transit is prepared to expand its transit service in Caledon, subject to cost recovery.' The proposal 'comprises a 10-hour-per-day service, including a morning and evening peak and a new midday service' the net cost of which 'is estimated at \$320,000 per year.'

It's a small price to pay in my opinion and promises greater return in terms of economic benefit, providing more people with more access to more opportunities including employment.

In Southfields, the promised improved service times began on January 8 of this year with both mid-day service and early evening trips added to the existing service schedule. On its website, the Town specifically noted 'This update to service serves seniors, students, families and employees traveling outside peak hours.' Well done, Caledon.

It seems, however, that some don't like it.

Commenters on social media, disparaging the arrival of more buses in town (no doubt keyboard warriors with at least one, if not more, vehicles parked in their own driveways) claim this enhanced bus service will degrade property values and bring 'the wrong sorts of people' into our neighbourhoods.

To you folks may I suggest that defending your 'anti-bus' position by saying you've 'never seen a single senior using the bus,' is lamentable and laughable. Are you watching? Has it occurred to you that a senior doesn't need to be on an early morning bus because they aren't commuting to work but they may very well need 'and use' a bus service during the day? By exploring partnerships with Brampton Transit to provide access to public transportation the Town is opening up opportunities: for students looking for part time employment, or somewhere to volunteer to obtain their 40 hours of community service, and for older adults who no longer drive but need access to grocery shopping, medical appointments, or to visit friends. It's providing a stay-at-home parent without access to the family car, the ability to attend library programming for their children and it's potentially offering freedom and access to communities of people who may not be able or allowed to drive to look for employment opportunities, attend special events and/or day programs geared to unique needs and so much more.

In short, it's not just a bus - it's access.