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Better transit security urged

Only 38% of riders feel safe at night

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Calgary Transit needs to add more security officers and cameras, consider eliminating the free-fare zone downtown and look at returning retail kiosks to its stations as ways to improve public safety, an audit of the system recommends.

Better lighting and station design, as well as new ways of re-*porting* problems, such as through cellphone texts, should also be explored, consultant Solomon Wong told a city committee Thursday.

"What the report does is it verifies we certainly need to make some changes," said Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, who along with Ald. Druh Farrell asked for the independent assessment. "It's a great way to break through the culture of Calgary Transit that everything is just fine."

Council approved the audit last year, after the death of Arcelie Laoagan, whose body was found near a northeast LRT station after she'd taken the train home from work. The slaying and a few other high-profile incidents stoked concerns about safety on the system and how Calgary Transit tracks problems.

Transit users at a northeast station Thursday said changes can't come soon enough.

Marlborough resident Melissa Saenz, who rides the train twice a day to and from Mount Royal College, said getting on and off the train after dusk frightens her.

"The lighting is so poor that it makes the stations terrifying," the 18-year-old said. "Once I'm on the train, I feel OK, but the stations are full of drunks and hobos that make the area seem unsafe." She called on the city to add more officers to C-Train platforms.

"Police or security officers, it doesn't matter," she said. "There's nowhere near enough protection the way it is right now."

Totu Huynh is so concerned about his daughter's safety that he or his wife pick up the 18-year-old University of Calgary student every night.

"I worry," said Huynh, who kept an eye on the busy Marlborough platform while he waited outside his car. "It's my job as a parent to protect her, and this area is just not safe."

Huynh said he rarely sees police patrols in the area.

A poll conducted by the consultant, Intervistas, explored the perception of safety, finding 93 per cent of passengers felt safe using the system during the day, but that dropped to 38 per cent at night. The percentage who felt secure after dusk dropped further for older Calgarians and women.

Calgary Transit's employees feel even less safe, with 69 per cent recording a positive experience during the day, while 21 per cent felt secure at night.

Wong said it's difficult to compare Calgary's crime statistics with other cities because everyone uses different criteria.

In 2007, there were 1,694 crimes on Calgary Transit property, with just over half of those related to vehicles.

Calgary Transit said 2008 data will be released in a few weeks, after it aligns its statistics with the Calgary Police Service data so there is one comprehensive number.

"The system grew very quickly and we need to adjust to being a big city," Farrell said of the 93.5 million rides taken on transit last year. "We didn't expand the security and maintenance to accommodate the extra use."

Most of the 27 recommendations in Intervistas' report will come with a price tag, which will have to be weighed, Ald. Gord Lowe said.

"We'll take a look at what transit is doing on its own program, develop a cost for the balance of it, and council will go through the standard process to prioritize it all," Lowe said.

Colley-Urquhart said council should consider taking a percentage of its capital budget to pay for increased security measures, perhaps using some of the money set aside from each project to pay for public art.

The recommendation that didn't have aldermen jumping on board was eliminating the free-fare zone downtown, which the consultants said would make it easier for staff to deal with non-transit users loitering at the stations.

Farrell said there are problems with the zone, but believes it's important for downtown economic development.

Calgary Transit has already initiated a number of safety initiatives in the past year, including installing cameras on its buses, increasing the number of peace officers patrolling the system and seconding a Calgary police inspector to head its security department.

The report has recommended hiring even more transit security, pointing out there is one officer for every 4,440 riders, compared to the 1-1,800 ratio for Vancouver's SkyTrain.

The report will go to the city's audit committee in March, when Calgary Transit and the Calgary Police Service will comment on it.

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