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Transit perception worse than reality, but merits attention

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Calgary Transit riders probably have a much greater chance of winning a lottery or being struck by lightning than being the victim of crime on the C-Train or transit property. That said, however, many of the recommendations made in an independent assessment of transit security, which was requested by aldermen Diane Colley-Urquhart and Druh Farrell, are well worth instituting.

The year 2007 saw approximately 95.3 million rides on Calgary Transit, with a crime rate of 1,694 reported incidents -- slightly more than half of which were vehicle crimes. Do the math -- it turns out that a commuter has a .002 per cent chance of being victimized while taking transit.

There is, however, a perception among riders that taking transit, especially the C-Train, is not safe. This is certainly understandable, for although these individuals may never personally be affected by crime, the sight of unsavoury people on the platform, drunks on the trains or groups of foulmouthed teens loitering about stations, causes alarm, which increases the perception that there is something to fear, even if these people are doing nothing untoward at all.

Certainly the high-profile murder of Arcelie Laoagan, who was followed from the C-Train by a stalker and slain off of transit property in January 2008 served to make commuters extremely jittery--rare as such an occurrence is.

Still, whatever can be done to heighten security and promote a sense of safety and security among riders should be done. Chief among that is a much more visible presence of transit police on the trains and patrolling the platforms. Indeed, the report highlighted the fact that Calgary Transit has one peace officer per 4,440 riders, while Vancouver's SkyTrain system boasts one officer per 1,800 riders.

Other recommendations are no-brainers, such as improving the lighting at stations and adding more cameras. One suggestion well worth looking at is the elimination of the downtown free-fare zone. Farrell objects to this because having the zone creates an economic stimulus for downtown businesses, but there is really no need to maintain the zone in the evening after the stores close.

Too many potential troublemakers use the free-fare zone late at night as an excuse to ride the train up and down 7th Avenue, hassling commuters for change, harassing passengers and in general deterring law-abiding Calgarians from using the C-Train at that hour.

Of course, all the extra security measures won't help if passengers don't do their part as well. The stations are equipped with Help phones and the trains with red emergency buttons--commuters who see anything suspicious going on need to alert Calgary Transit officials.

The figures indicate that Calgary Transit is indeed a very safe public transit system, and beefing up security will go far toward allaying the pervasive perception that there is much to be afraid of.

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