

Police urged to assess transit security takeover

Aldermen seek? update on pros, cons of change

BY KIM GUTTORMSON, CALGARY HERALD MAY 16, 2009



Calgary Transit peace officer Jordan Scott rides a northeast C-Train near the Bridgeland/Memorial station on Friday. The city is debating whether to have the Calgary Police Service take over transit security from officers like Scott.

Photograph by: Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald, Calgary Herald

Two aldermen want the Calgary Police Service to again review what it would cost the force to take over patrols on Calgary Transit and see if it makes sense to have more officers on the lines.

"The first question is, can it be done?" said Ald. John Mar, who supports the takeover, but believes the cost could be an issue for the city.

"I think it's the right thing to do. Calgarians are better served from a safety perspective by police officers rather than transit security."

Mar and Ald. Diane Col-ley-Urquhart, who sit on the police commission, will ask their council colleagues May 25 to request the police service update a 2006 report examining the pros and cons of running transit security. It would include a look at the cost and how many additional bodies would be needed.

The safety of passengers and employees has been front and centre over the past 15 months, with

council ordering a transit safety audit following a number of high-profile incidents last year.

In July, Calgary Transit -- which has ramped up its security measures with additional peace officers, improved technology and hiring a police inspector to head public safety and enforcement --will report back on how it is addressing the audit's recommendations and what some of those moves will cost.

Colley-Urquhart wants details on what a police strategy would look like so that the two can be compared at that meeting.

"It's really important we understand the police perspective on this," she said. "I think it's really important to get all the alternatives."

If Calgary Transit can implement all the audit recommendations, she added, "I'm happy with that. But it doesn't mean to say that the police don't need to be involved."

Transit disagrees with having the police take over security, arguing it already works closely with the service and that the majority of incidents --such as dealing with intoxicated people--can be dealt with by peace officers.

"We feel the wrong question has been asked," said Brian Whitelaw, a police inspector seconded to transit as its coordinator of public safety and enforcement.

"The question of who polices is the wrong question."

"The right question is how should it be policed," said Whitelaw.

Whitelaw, who says they already co-ordinate with police to improve coverage on the LRT lines and in the case of more serious incidents, said the report in July will address how to best deliver security. "My view is peace officers are the right response to in excess of 90 per cent of the problems that occur on the system," he said.

Jeremy Britnell, who regularly rides the C-Train, says it's a good idea for police officers to take over transit security. He said his concern involves teenagers hanging out at LRT stations and trying to sell drugs.

Britnell said that having police officers handling security will make for a greater deterrent, and people who cause problems on the LRT are "going to think twice about lighting that smoke up, smoking that joint on the train, opening their booze up on the train."

Transit user Agnes Galka said she doesn't think it's necessary for police to take over transit security. "If there's a big problem, the police get called," she said.

Ald. Gord Lowe, who was part of the committee overseeing the transit safety audit, said previous

reports exploring police-run transit security found the "costs to be prohibitive. I think we have far better uses for sworn officers than transit security."

Whitelaw said the cost of police providing security versus peace officers could result in fewer bodies patrolling or less money for technology improvements.

If council approves Mar and Colley-Urquhart's notice of motion, which is being brought forward as a matter of urgent business, it would be up to the police commission to ask the police service to update its numbers.

"I think the citizens of Calgary just want the most effective policing solution to be made available and for safety to be enhanced as best it can," commission chairman Denis Painchaud said. "Our position has always been that if, after appropriate study, the police service is the appropriate body to provide security for the transit system, we're more than willing to take on that responsibility."

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