

Alderman seeks independent commission to oversee Calgary Transit

BY RICHARD CUTHBERTSON, CALGARY HERALD OCTOBER 10, 2011

Presented By:



A city alderman wants an independent commission to oversee Calgary Transit

Photograph by: Stuart Gradon, Calgary Herald

CALGARY — An alderman wants the city to investigate creating an independent commission to oversee Calgary Transit, in an effort to better monitor complaints and take some of the politics of city council out of public transit decisions.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said a commission would go much further than the recently announced customer advisory board, giving transit a governing body that would report directly to the city's transportation committee.

"I'm not sure that we have an independent enough panel that examines complaints and looks at how

compliant we are with meeting those issues that citizens raise,” she said.

The alderman will make her pitch to council next month and wants city officials to prepare a report on what kind of structure and how much power a commission might have.

Transit commissions are more common in Eastern Canada than out west (British Columbia aside).

The Toronto Transit Commission is loaded entirely with city councillors. By contrast, the regional Metrolinx in Ontario has only public members on its board. Many other jurisdictions have a mix of public and political.

Their powers also vary.

Some commissions, for instance, can increase fares without heading to their city council for approval, according to Michael Roschlau, president and CEO of the Canadian Urban Transit Association.

What commissions do, he said, is take some power out of the hands of politicians, whose decisions can be skewed by political interest.

He points other cities where major projects were scrapped or reshaped when new mayors took power, costing millions.

In 2006, Ottawa city council broke an LRT expansion contract and the city was forced to pay \$37 million in compensation to the company. And in Winnipeg, a bus rapid transit project was cancelled, studied again, and then resurrected.

“Politics tends to create subjective decisions as opposed to objective ones,” Roschlau said.

Colley-Urquhart points to the decision last year to can the \$3 park-and-ride fee as a controversy fraught with politics.

During the last civic election, some candidates campaigned on revoking the fee, including Mayor Naheed Nenshi, who called it a “misbegotten experiment.”

Still, some aldermen, including Colley-Urquhart, say it was a big mistake to axe the fee because it robbed transit of up to \$5 million in revenue used to pay for cleaning and security.

The move to create a commission in Calgary comes after a difficult summer for transit, when a series of breakdowns and other delays on the LRT network left commuters fuming.

Just last month, Nenshi announced transit was creating a customer advisory board, which will raise concerns and push for improvements for those who ride the system.

The deadline to apply for a position on the board is today.

This fall, council is grappling with several contentious public transit debates, such as possible fare hikes and the long-standing \$35 annual seniors pass.

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