

Edmonton Transit Advisory Board: COVID-19 Safety and Transit

Recommendation

That the March 23, 2021, Edmonton Transit Advisory Board report EXT00421, be received for information.

Executive Summary

With the available evidence from other jurisdictions suggesting that public transit is not a “super-spreader” of COVID-19, and that, with certain safety measures in place, transit is comparatively safe, the Edmonton Transit Service Advisory Board (ETSAB) concludes that important next steps should be:

- Implement **service changes to enable distancing**
- Strengthen the existing **mask mandate** on public transit
- Inform transit users about the **cleaning procedures**, such as by **providing visual indicators of cleanliness**
- Communicate **which routes are busy in real time**
- **Clarify** the role of transit operators in asking riders to wear masks
- Employ **different communication methods** to get messages to transit users regularly
- Ensuring that the recommended necessary safety measures are being implemented and followed, and communicating these

Report

ETS relies on transit fare revenue as a key source of operating income. With COVID-19, many regular riders stopped using the system and revenue has decreased substantially. This decrease may be attributed in part to a **perception of transit being unsafe** because for the first few months of the pandemic, people were told that taking transit could spread COVID-19. The purpose of this report is to examine how we can get more people using transit again safely, also to help return to historic operating revenues, particularly at peak times of day when the buses and LRT are more full.

Background

- Safety is defined as reduced risk of getting COVID-19 while taking transit.
- Cities and countries throughout the world have been working on making taking transit safer and reducing the chance of COVID-19 transmission while on transit.
 - **Attachment 1** provides examples from other jurisdictions.
 - **Attachment 2:** APTA: Service Restoration Checklist includes selected recommendations from the American Public Transportation Association (APTA). These actions were chosen from a transit user perspective about what would make transit users feel more safe on board a bus or the LRT.
 - **Attachment 3:** Street Level Research of ETS Communication and other transit systems in Alberta
 - **Attachment 4:** Return to Transit includes examples of surface specific and air circulation specific actions, categorized by effectiveness, equity, cost.
 - **Attachment 5:** International Association of Public Transport Policy Brief about interventions for safety on transit
- Given the amount of information already available to ETS through CUTA meetings and recommendations from APTA, ETSAB has focused on ETS from a user perspective.

Key Considerations

- Existing Research: COVID-19 Transmission on Public Transit
- Currently existing research suggests that **public transportation is not a hot-spot for COVID-19 transmission**, if certain safety measures are met and followed. The UITP policy brief (see **Attachment #5**) indicates that only 0.2% of traceable outbreaks were linked to public transit in Germany, and that in France, 1.2% of clusters were linked to land, air, and sea transport (combined). Compare this to, for example, workplaces being responsible for 24.5% of clusters, and schools and universities for 19.5% of clusters.

Key points in ensuring the safety of public transit (see **Attachments**) are:

- The wearing of **masks**,
- **Disinfecting** high-touch surfaces,
- Ensuring greater **physical distancing** between riders, and
- Good **ventilation and airflow**.

Planning & Safety

Implement **service changes to enable distancing**, for example:

- Monitor and adjust bus service to respond to busy areas and routes.
 - Dynamically increase school special buses as needed
 - Ask bus operators what they are experiencing and noticing where and when routes are busy. This also helps the drivers stay safe, so they have their own incentive to provide this information.
- **Rent/lease underused vehicles from other companies** (e.g. school buses, Diversified Staffing, Red Arrow, etc)

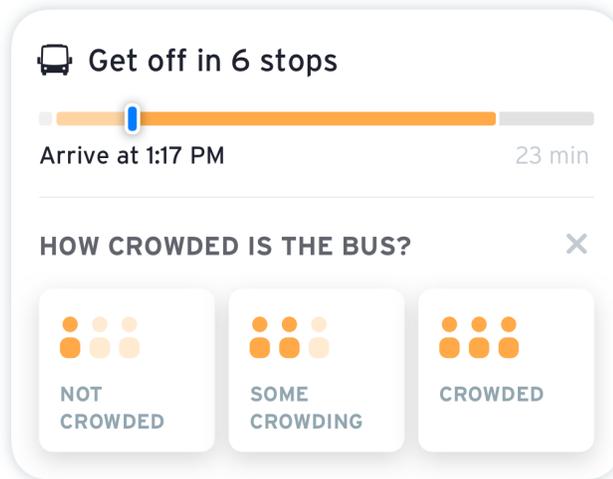
Air Circulation Research and Policies

- **Research airflow** (examples: [TTC & Metrolinx GO](#), Toronto area) and carry out **swab-tests** (example: [Transport for London](#)) of surfaces on ETS buses and trains.
- As more evidence builds that frequent air exchanges reduce the chance of transmission, ETS may consider a “Windows down” policy for **increased air circulation** on buses or an “All doors open” policy on LRTs at stations
 - This will be particularly important for express routes where there are few stops and therefore few opportunities for air exchange.
 - Recognizing that warmth on buses is also a consideration, specifically during winter time.
- Strengthen the existing **mask mandate** on public transit.

Communication

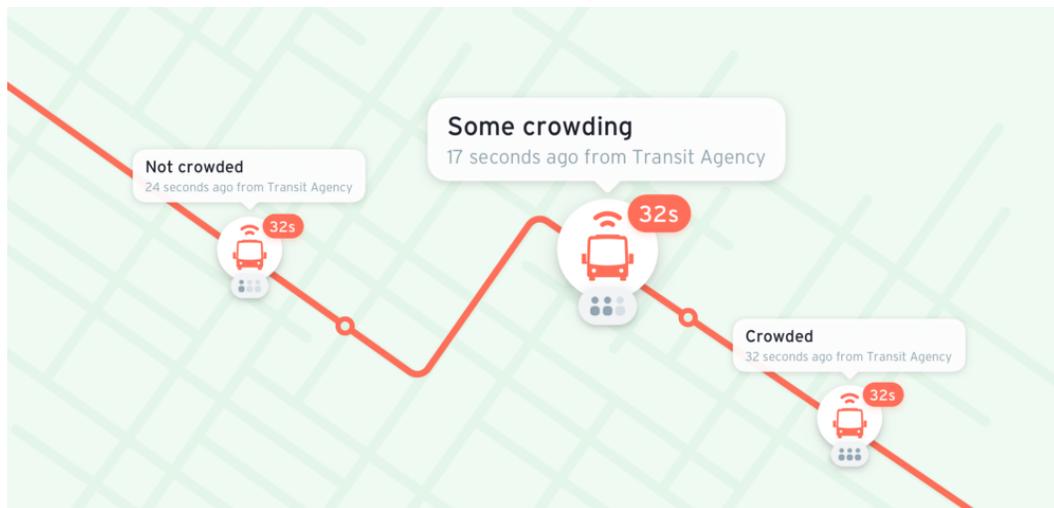
- Inform transit users about the **cleaning procedures**.
 - **Build trust** with Edmontonians by explaining what is being done behind the scenes to ensure safety. Advertise what ETS is doing, and how this work is limiting the spread of droplets.
 - Provide **visual indicators of cleanliness**, such as sheets that identify when the vehicles were last cleaned and a checklist of what gets cleaned (like you would see in restaurant bathrooms).
- Communicate **which routes are busy in real time**.
 - Connect with vendors such as Google Maps and Transit App to ensure real-time crowd sourcing options are available for every transit trip.
 - Background information:
 - [Transit Partners article: "Show Vehicle Crowding in Transit"](#)
 - [Medium article: "You can avoid crowds on public transit with new, real-time crowding info"](#)

- [Transit app help article](#), including a list of currently supported cities.
- Encourage riders to use Transit App or Google Maps to **provide real-time crowd-sourced information** on how busy the buses/LRTs are so that individuals can make choices on their transit use.
 - If apps are unavailable, can operators provide this information?



Sample image of popup within the Transit app prompting the user to indicate crowding levels on their current trip.
Source: <https://resources.transit.app/article/274-show-real-time-vehicle-crowding-in-transit>

- **Clarify** the role of transit operators in asking riders to wear masks. Provide verbiage on how to communicate this in a positive way.



a positive way.

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- Plan for potentially higher incidences of non-compliance or conflict that may arise by having clear messaging to the public. Some key questions that many transit users have, which cause fear from using transit include:
 - *"Can/should the Transit Operators enforce mask usage?"*
 - *"How can I feel safe taking transit if the driver seems to be doing nothing to address people not wearing masks?"*
 - *"How can I see firsthand the enforcement of wearing masks on transit, when I keep on hearing there are bus routes where too many people don't wear masks?"*
 - *"What is the policy for operators wearing masks?"*
- Employ **different delivery methods** to get these messages to transit users regularly, including those who have returned and those who are considering returning to ETS.
 - Regular posts on **social media** supplemented with visual cues.
 - Utilized **unused advertising space** on buses, LRTs, and at stops/stations.
 - In this context, please also refer back to the ETSAB 2019 Transit Communications Report and 2019 Bus Network Redesign Marketing Report, which provide examples of delivery methods to reach a more diverse ridership.
- Communication that positively reflects ETS' appreciation of their riders & their efforts.

Existing Communication Methods to Leverage

- Pre-program **audio announcements** on buses, LRTs, and transit stations using existing Text-to-Speech (TTS) technology or other recording methods.
- Run LED text on the **outer display** at the front of the bus, e.g. "wear a mask", in addition to already existing messaging, such as "go Oilers go", "parking ban", etc.
- Run LED text on the display in the **interior of the bus** where time and stop information is shown.



LED display at the front of the bus that could be repurposed for short, running LED messaging.

- “Commercial break”-style **announcements** informing riders of ETS cleaning procedures, such as “Did you know that we clean our vehicles thoroughly every X hours with an antiviral, static sprayer?”
- **Paper postings** on walls / bulletin boards.
- Automatic **pop-up notifications** on Transit apps:
 - When the ETS transit app opens, riders see an automatic message reminding them of safety rules while on transit.
 - Automatic message to encourage riders to provide crowding information through Transit App and Google Maps.

Recommendations/Next Steps

With the available evidence from other jurisdictions suggesting that public transit is not a “super-spreader” of COVID-19, and that, with certain safety measures in place, transit is comparatively safe, ETSAB concludes that important next steps should be:

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- Communicate **which routes are busy in real time**
- **Clarify** the role of transit operators in asking riders to wear masks
- Employ **different communication methods** to get messages to transit users regularly
- Ensuring that the recommended necessary safety measures are being implemented and followed, and
- Communicating these safety measures clearly and frequently to riders to build trust.

Attachments

1. Examples From Other Jurisdictions
2. APTA: Service Restoration Checklist
3. Communications Success - Research
4. Return to Transit
5. International Association of Public Transport Policy Brief