



Social Planning Council of Winnipeg

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For immediate release:

Low-income bus program on hold during COVID-19 crisis:

City must suspend transit fares collection to protect workers and riders

Winnipeg – April 3, 2020

Winnipeg Transit announced yesterday that it is delaying the implementation of the City's low-income bus pass program. The low-income bus pass was scheduled to launch on April 1, but will be delayed indefinitely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, community organizations are calling for Winnipeg Transit to suspend fare collection during the crisis to protect transit workers and ensure affordable, transit services for everyone.

Winnipeg's low-income bus program would have provided a 30% discount on monthly fares to qualifying low-income households. Winnipeg Transit Service centres, where the City had planned for participants to pick up their passes, are temporarily closed. The City is planning on accepting applications May 1, but it is unclear when the low income passes will become available.

The announced delay is more evidence that Winnipeg should offer free transit during the length of the ongoing crisis. Last month, the Transit Worker's Union ATU 1505 called for the City to follow the lead of other cities across Canada in adopting rear entry boarding and a fare free policy to protect workers and passengers.

Throughout the consultation process, community anti-poverty organizations warned that the 30% discount in the first year would mean a monthly pass would still cost \$71.75. Transit would remain unaffordable and out of reach for individuals and families in poverty. Now with the program on hold, Winnipeg Transit should instead suspend fare collection.

"If it is unsafe for the City to collect and process low income bus pass applications during this crisis, it is unsafe for transit workers to collect fares. Unfortunately the City of Winnipeg is putting financial considerations over safety and the needs of low income people who are once again being shuffled to the bottom of the priority list," said Josh Brandon a community animator with the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg.



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Emily Leedham, an organizer with the minimum wage workers group, Fight for \$15 points to the large number of front line workers with poverty wages who depend on transit to get to their essential jobs.

"Many of the essential, frontline workers in this pandemic - such as grocery store workers and janitorial staff - receive poverty wages," Leedam says. "They already put themselves at risk every day, leaving their homes to go to work. The least we can do as a city is provide free transit and increase frequency along major routes. Free transit can facilitate backdoor boarding, reducing interactions between drivers and riders. Increased frequency will also ensure riders are not crammed together during peak times. These workers are so often undervalued. Now, we must make tangible changes to protect them and acknowledge how important they truly are."

Currently at least 15 other major Canadian cities are offering free transit to protect workers and alleviate costs for low income riders. These cities include: Victoria, Nanaimo, Vancouver, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Brandon, Timmins, Peterborough, Kingston, Guelph, Mississauga, Hamilton, Montreal, Halifax and Saint John.

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