

# ADVOCACY POSITION STATEMENT

February 22, 2024

## WUSA ADVOCACY POSITION STATEMENT: Local and Regional Transit

**ISSUE:** Ensuring accessible, reliable, and high-quality local and interregional public transit for undergraduate students at the University of Waterloo.

### RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY:

The following decision makers and stakeholders are tasked with the presented recommendations:

- Government of Ontario
  - Metrolinx
- Regional Municipality of Waterloo
  - Grand River Transit
- The Government of Canada

### DETAILS:

Public transit is a crucial service provided by local and provincial agencies, especially for a significant proportion of undergraduate students attending the University of Waterloo. When surveyed, students revealed that over 60% used the GRT several times a week, and around 40% of use GO Transit at least several times a month.

Widespread usage of public transit yields many direct and indirect benefits for the wider community, including financial, economic, environmental, safety, and health.

For students, access to reliable and robust public transit enables much-needed flexibility, supports financial stability during their post-secondary careers, and provides a safe way to engage with their local and surrounding communities socially and economically.

### IMPACT / ANALYSIS:

#### Local/Regional Transit

An on-campus survey indicated that students' most common barriers to utilizing local public transit were related to route frequency, followed by geographic coverage, lack of late-night service, and length of the intended trip(s).

In Ontario, public transit systems are mainly funded through a combination of fare revenue, public funding, and external sources of revenue (such as advertising).

However, it is important to highlight that a heavy reliance on fare revenue severely hinders the ability of transit authorities to act on long-term strategies to improve transit networks and increase ridership.

Federally, Infrastructure Canada is responsible for allocating the Public Transit Stream of the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program (ICIP), which currently includes \$20.1 billion over 10 years and promises a permanent \$3 billion annual pool beginning in 2026/27. Local municipalities have already made substantial use of ICIP funding to invest in transit terminals, fleet storage capacity, fleet size, on-vehicle technology, and on-street transit infrastructure; additional applications continue to be reviewed.

Provincial public funding for local transit systems comes primarily through the Gas Tax program, distributed annually; these funds can be used freely by municipalities for operating costs, maintenance and repairs, service expansion, and capital projects.

### **1. Network & Route Design**

When surveyed, students who indicated instances of being unable to complete a trip with GRT services indicated common reasons being that there “was no route close enough to my location/destination” (43.9%), that the bus/ION “wasn’t running because it was too early/late” (40.0%), and that the trip “would have taken too long” (38.5%).

The GRT network is designed with the ION and iXpress routes providing express service to major stops combined with a more comprehensive network of bus routes that connect various neighbourhoods back to the main corridor. Despite its many strengths, the current network design still limits transit riders' access to key destinations in the region which are still reachable by car.

As of January 8, 2024, the network’s timetabling and route design can make it challenging for students to depend on transit as their main form of transportation. Frequent service is only common during weekday peaks, and service is extremely limited during evenings and weekends. In line with this, the most frequently cited reason for an incomplete transit journey was that the next bus/ION “didn’t come soon enough to work for my trip” (55.4%). Late-night service, in particular, is lacking.

Current service levels force riders to choose alternate transportation, which may an unexpected out-of-pocket expense (35.7%), or opt to not complete their trip at all (20.9%).

### **2. Reliability**

A significant decider of service quality is a transit network’s reliability, especially with respect to schedule adherence, usually measured as on-time performance (OTP).

GRT monitors OTP using real-time GPS data, considering a bus to be on-time if it is running “within a three-minute window of the schedule” at specific points along its route. From 2022–23, OTP fluctuated month-to-month between 76.6% and 61.7%.

Increasingly, riders have also been impacted by overcrowding on vehicles, including instances of critical overcrowding leading to denied boardings; GRT reported record ridership levels in the first week of September 2023, with 150,000 boardings per day. Unfortunately, the issues of vehicle crowding and service delays exacerbate each other.

Regional Council has identified service reliability and meeting demand as a priority; however, GRT has indicated that their biggest constraint is hiring and training bus drivers — a challenge compounded by “COVID-related turnover” — as well as that at peak times, service has been ultimately limited by the size of its fleet and required auxiliary infrastructure.

Students have also been impacted by transit worker strikes which disrupted service and prevented students from accessing public transit for essential trips.

In January 2020, a GRT workers’ strike resulted in twelve days without bus service (with continued ION service), affecting an estimated 17,000 students at the University of Waterloo each day and in many cases resulting in unexpected transportation costs, inability to attend classes, and extended walks in winter temperatures.

Similarly, in May 2023, a workers’ strike was triggered and in place for eleven days, impacting the Region’s bus ridership and forcing students to find alternate means of transportation. While fares were waived for the following twelve days, including for those who purchased a monthly pass, post-secondary students with a UPass program received no analogous compensation from the region for the disruptions.

### **3. Access**

The current UPass agreement provides students an affordable, as well as convenient, way to access the GRT network. Crucially, the program also provides a large, stable funding source for the GRT, at an estimated average of \$11.5 million per year (prior to the approval of Conestoga College’s new UPass program).

The GRT Business Plan (2017–2021) notes that UPass programs “help to attract life-long transit riders by habituating students to transit use during their formative years”). Going forward, an active UPass program will continue to promote transit ridership among students, providing symbiotic benefits to students, GRT, and the community at large.

Additionally, riders must be able to retrieve accurate, up-to-date information about routes and timing. The current implementation of vehicle position systems across the GRT fleet provides reasonably reliable information to riders on demand via text, as well as through other mapping software that utilizes GRT’s open data sources. Continuing to invest in improved bus stop infrastructure with passenger information display systems will improve rider experience and safety.

Micro-mobility and adequate networks for active transportation modes (such as walking, biking, and use of mobility aids) are necessary to facilitate an effective public transit system. Active transit networks limit excess load on public transit routes by decreasing the number of short trips that could be completed by foot.

Relevant authorities should continue monitoring physical barriers to accessing public transit. Often, this comes in the form of bus stop and surrounding infrastructure, especially during extreme weather that limits pedestrian mobility; this applies to both disabled passengers (who may or may not have mobility aids) as well as able-bodied passengers. Infrastructure to facilitate level boardings is a sector standard; GRT currently accomplishes this with kneeling buses, but physical accessibility is still limited by obstacles at stops, such as curbs, puddles, and snow.

### **Inter-regional Transit**

In contrast to local transit, students primarily (44.5%) use GO Transit to visit family and friends outside of the region. However, students also commonly rely on GO Transit to attend class (29.2%), to visit specific businesses (23.9%), and for essential trips – such as medical appointments (19.1%).

As of March 14, 2022, youth and student discounts for PRESTO payments on GO Transit was increased to 40% off the full adult fare. Students must re-apply for the discount each school year.

GO Transit serves passengers primarily through commuter-focused rail, supplemented by a growing network of bus routes providing more off-peak and flexible service. Accordingly, barriers to completing trips using GO Transit are fairly distributed across route coverage, frequency, trip length, and temporal coverage.

Increasingly, students and other transit users in the region have expressed concerns about route capacity: riders are sometimes denied boarding due to buses being full, leaving them to wait for the next scheduled bus – usually an hour later – to complete their trip. However, many peaks in usage are predictable and regular, such as in advance of weekends and holidays, when many students transit from Waterloo to their family homes elsewhere in the province.

In addition to other challenges posed by reliance on bus service during off-peak times, as of January 2024, not all bus stops are physically accessible. Trains are designed to be fully accessible, with dedicated accessibility coaches and on-board customer service ambassadors to assist riders. Unfortunately, however, elevators at otherwise-accessible stations frequently face mechanical issues that can delay or cancel trips for disabled passengers.

An ongoing priority for transit users in the region is 2-Way All-Day GO (2WADGO), a campaign to increase train service along the Kitchener line beyond peak commuter hours. This is something that has been repeatedly noted as a priority by successive governments—both federally and provincially—for well over a decade. Metrolinx uses tracks owned by Canadian National (CN) on the Kitchener line, and so ongoing negotiations and infrastructure work will be required to facilitate increased passenger operations along the railway.

Within the region, local leaders from all levels have and continued to speak on the importance of comprehensive GO service to meet growing demand and “accommodate post-secondary schedules, workforce needs, and weekend trips”. With respect to GO Train service, many continue to request updated timelines on their commitments made on 2WADGO service.

**POSITION / RECOMMENDATION(S):**

The Waterloo Undergraduate Student’s Association supports initiatives that encourage:

- all relevant decision-makers and stakeholders to ensure and prioritize accessible, reliable, and cost-effective transit options for undergraduate students attending the University of Waterloo.
- investment into long-term, strategic improvements and expansions to transit service infrastructure serving undergraduate students attending the University of Waterloo.
- collaboration with decision-makers and stakeholders to collect data to identify and address specific areas of concern for students related to transit use, whether local, regional, or interprovincial.
- providing resources, direction, and supports to students to raise awareness and inform them of their options pertaining to transit.
- working with various levels of government, including elected officials and other community stakeholders, to actively address student transit needs.
- continued engagement between WUSA and Grand River Transit to ensure that the GRT UPass program continues to offer value-added service to undergraduate students.

The Waterloo Undergraduate Student’s Association opposes initiatives involving:

- disruption or decrease of students' access to accessible, reliable, and cost-effective transit options.

**ATTACHMENT(S) AND REFERENCES:**

- [Performance measures - Grand River Transit](#)
- [Grand River Transit Business Plan 2017 - 2021](#)
- [OUSA Housing, Transit, & Community Development Policy Paper \(Fall 2020\)](#)

**USEFUL LINKS:**

- [Grand River Transit](#)
- [GRT UPass](#) (WUSA)