

[Date]

Dear Minister Fleming, Minister Heyman, Minister Malcolmson, President Pinkerton, Chair Pendergraft, Chair Wooldridge, and Chair Acton:

British Columbians are facing many simultaneous crises. The rising cost of living, the climate change crisis, and difficulty accessing affordable and appropriate housing are challenges which will require both innovative policy changes and investing in reliable solutions.

In the words of our current provincial government, “A good public transit system is essential to building strong communities that are more affordable for the people who live in them”¹. A reliable, accessible, and connected public transportation system in British Columbia can ease cost-of-living challenges, increase flexibility for people finding work and choosing where to live, reduce emissions, and more.

In the Okanagan, our public transit is stagnating. 73% of Kelowna residents, 82% of Penticton residents and 79% of Vernon residents are **not** transit users². Meanwhile, transportation is the largest source of emissions in British Columbia³, and Kelowna’s Transportation Master Plan explains that the savings from giving up one vehicle could increase the size of a mortgage that a household qualifies for by well over \$100,000 or more. Ridership rates are low across the province, except for some key examples. Victoria has nearly 50% of residents regularly using public transit. 57% of Kelowna residents would *like* to be transit users⁴. This means that with the right mix of incentives and quality service, significant ridership is possible. Our requests are in alignment with Budget 2022 to keep British Columbians moving.

While we welcome and celebrate the promised \$1.2 billion in transit investments over the next decade in communities served by BC Transit, those investments focus on upgrading existing services - new fare technologies, electric buses, and park and rides. To provide a service that can be a legitimate alternative to personal vehicles, we need to expand service and provide new incentives to switch.

Over the last year, the citizens of the Okanagan have made our own efforts at improving our public transit services. We have engaged in town halls to gather feedback about the

¹ <https://news.gov.bc.ca/factsheets/delivering-reliable-efficient-and-green-public-transit>

² <https://www.bctransit.com/corporate-reports/customer-tracking-surveys>

³ <https://www.cer-rec.gc.ca/en/data-analysis/energy-markets/provincial-territorial-energy-profiles/provincial-territorial-energy-profiles-british-columbia.html#:~:text=GHG%20Emissions,-B.C.'s%20GHG&text=The%20largest%20emitting%20sectors%20in,12.8%20MT%20CO2e>

⁴ <https://kelownapublishing.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=42789>

service from as many citizens as possible. Our [findings](#) were then turned into four concrete goals for improving our services.

1. Ensure transit in the Okanagan is public by bringing it under local management.

Under the current model, transit in our region is managed by a private, overseas hedge fund - TransDev. Their main goal is to keep costs as low as possible, rather than provide the best service per dollar. There is very little transparency or accountability. There are other models across BC and Canada for more responsive, democratic, and local transit management - such as Victoria, which is managed directly by BC Transit, and Nelson, where transit is managed by the City of Nelson.

We are asking BC Transit and the Regional Districts of the Okanagan to find and implement a publicly-managed model that works for our community before the next contract renewal with TransDev (April 2024).

2. Expand HandyDart service to 7 days a week, including public holidays.

HandyDart brings people with mobility challenges to doctors appointments, errands, and all kinds of activities - but they don't have that option on Sundays or public holidays. Instead, passengers are offered a 50% subsidy on taxi fares, which can be significantly more expensive per trip. As for any other community member, being able to get around the city is an essential need, and that need doesn't go away on weekends. Year after year, the number one request from HandyDart users is to expand the public service to 365 days a year.

We are asking for an end to this discrimination, and funds for additional transit service to expand HandyDart to include Sundays and public holidays beginning in 2024. This would ideally happen province wide, and be led by BC Transit. As a medium-term solution, this could be funded directly by the Regional Districts of the Okanagan.

3. Maximize our current available service hours by developing frequent service in high density areas, and commit to a timeline for Kelowna's new transit yard.

Transit in Kelowna is limited by the number of buses that can be held at the current transit yard. Buses that come only once an hour or a few times a day

aren't reliable enough for people's daily needs. A smaller network of reliable, frequent routes can encourage riders in higher density areas to make the switch to transit. Outlying and rural areas also need reliable service, but may be better served by community buses, transit on-demand, or other creative solutions. [One smaller city, St. Albert, Alberta, has been successful with transit on-demand.](#) This would also provide greater accessibility for those who want a wheelchair spot on a conventional bus because they would have the agency to book their own trips and confirm their spot for the duration of their to/from trips. BC Transit has also recently committed to providing transit-on-demand for Crawford, in Kelowna.

We are asking BC Transit to prioritize the creation of at least three new frequent transit routes for each city in the Okanagan, with at least one in place for each city by the end of 2024.

We are also asking BC Transit and the Regional District of the Central Okanagan to commit to a clear timeline for the creation of an expanded transit yard, to increase the number of buses available to the region.

4. Expand fare-free service from ages 12-and-under to ages 18-and-under.

Allowing youth to access our transit system without barriers can achieve multiple goals all at once: encouraging youth to use transit from an early age as an alternative to car dependence; giving them more freedom to get to work, see friends, and try new activities; and easing the cost of living for families in the Okanagan. Victoria, Kingston, and Oakville already have free transit programs for youth. The Kingston program increased youth ridership from 30,000 trips to 600,000 trips in the first year alone.⁵ There is widespread support for this ask across the province,⁶ and research shows that barrier-free access to public transit allows youth, and especially lower-income youth, to access new activities and services, feel a stronger sense of freedom, and to feel included with their peers.⁷

We are asking the province to expand the fare-free transit program to youth 18 and under, beginning in 2025.

We have significant support for these changes, and are turning to the appropriate levels of government to take action. Every day, thousands of trips are taken in vehicles in the Okanagan that are missed opportunities to grow our transit system. We recognize your

⁵ <https://greenmunicipalfund.ca/case-studies/case-study-kingston-gets-more-youth-riding-public-transit>

⁶ https://www.centreforequity.ca/transit_for_teens_campaign

⁷ https://www.singlemothersbc.org/_transit4teens

ongoing efforts for sustainability, affordability, and inclusivity, and are excited to work together on achieving this through expanding public transit services.

Thank you for your consideration, we look forward to meeting with you at your earliest convenience to discuss this further.

Sincerely,

(Sign ons will be added below)