

The Bulletin

TRANSPORT ACTION ATLANTIC

FALL – WINTER 2019-2020

Is our public transit finally on a roll?

Positive developments seen throughout the region



There have been plenty of “good news” transit stories in all four Atlantic provinces in recent months. With a renewed focus on the challenge of climate change, there is good reason for optimism. Will the momentum continue? Our transit coverage begins on p. 10 (PHOTOS – Top left, Tim Hayman; top and bottom right, Ted Bartlett; bottom left courtesy of T3 Transit)



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MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

Transport Action Atlantic's **annual general meeting** is currently scheduled to be held at the Moncton Lions Community Centre, 473 St. George Street, on Saturday, 2 May 2020, beginning at 1400.

The agenda includes annual reports and financial statements, appointment of an auditor, election of a board of directors, and any other business that may arise.

Current members of Transport Action Atlantic may nominate (with their consent) any other member in good standing for a position on the board. It is the board's responsibility to choose the executive officers. Nominations should be made in advance of the meeting, and may be submitted by mail to the TAA Nominating Committee, P.O.Box 268, Dartmouth NS B2Y 3Y3, or by e-mail to donlinmacleod@ns.sympatico.ca.

Besides the required business, the agenda will include a panel of speakers who will focus on critical public transportation issues in our region, with ample opportunity for discussion. Please watch for further details on our website as this program is finalized. As always, our AGM is open to the general public and the media. * *Any changes to this planned date and time in light of the ever evolving COVID-19 pandemic will be communicated by email and on our website.* *

Advocacy in Action

The 2019 federal election is history, and Canadians are now living with a minority government. Not necessarily a bad thing, because it does present some definite opportunities. An administration that must depend on the support of one or more opposition parties for its survival is much more inclined to listen than one that commands a strong majority in the House of Commons. Atlantic Canadians did not re-elect a full 32-member Liberal caucus in October. In fact, this region even elected a Green Party MP for the first time ever east of British Columbia.

Although our “Ideas in Motion” policy documents released last summer did not find their way formally into the platforms of any of the major parties, climate change certainly turned out to be a significant issue in the campaign. Perhaps, indeed, it was the key factor that denied the Conservatives the return to power they were so aggressively seeking. And Transport Action’s sustainable transportation agenda is certainly an essential component in the struggle to curb carbon emissions.

In the aftermath of the election, we have sought to strengthen our relationships with MPs – focusing first on newly-elected members and those who have acquired new responsibilities.



TAA President Ted Bartlett and V-P Tim Hayman met on January 21 with Halifax MP Andy Fillmore, newly-appointed parliamentary secretary to the minister of Infrastructure and Communities.

Andy Fillmore was re-elected in October as Liberal MP for Halifax, and was subsequently appointed parliamentary secretary to the Honourable Catherine McKenna, Minister of Infrastructure and Communities. Minister McKenna has established a well-earned reputation as a committed environmentalist, and Mr. Fillmore has a solid background as an urban planner. As a team, they would appear poised to take firms steps toward low-carbon transportation options – such as public transit and passenger rail. We’ve requested a meeting with Minister McKenna, but have not yet had the opportunity. Meanwhile, we did have a very positive discussion with Mr. Fillmore in January. Hopefully we have an ally in the struggle to protect our scanty remaining VIA Rail service in the face of the challenge of losing access to the turning loop at the Halifax container terminal. (This story is reported in detail elsewhere in this issue.)

We also had a wide-ranging 90-minute meeting with Jenica Atwin, the Green Party MP for Fredericton. We are confident she will be a strong advocate for our transportation agenda. In fact, she travelled to Ottawa by train with her family for her swearing-in ceremony in November, despite having to drive 170 kilometres from her home to the nearest VIA station in Moncton. She plans to use passenger rail on a regular basis.



Cumberland-Colchester MP Lenore Zann and chief of staff Matthew Guy examine some back issues of the *Bulletin* and other TAA documents during a meeting in Amherst on February 11.

Another new face in the House of Commons is Lenore Zann, elected to replace long-time MP Bill Casey as Liberal member for the Nova Scotia riding of

Cumberland-Colchester. She's another member who has expressed strong support for TAA's convenient, affordable and sustainable transportation agenda.

As 2020 proceeds, we'll be seeking other opportunities to interface with more elected representatives, both federally and provincially. A tentative meeting is planned for March with New Brunswick Transportation Minister Bill Oliver, who's expressed particular interest in discussing passenger rail, among other topics.

-Ted Bartlett

Rail News

VIA Rail's eastern services in flux Amidst ongoing challenges and unexpected shutdowns, the *Ocean* is in for a further service degradation



The *Ocean* emerges from the Halterm (now PSA Halifax) container terminal balloon track on March 2, 2018, as it turns to prepare for its return journey to Montreal. This will be a thing of the past after November 1, 2020, as VIA is set to lose access to this track. (PHOTO – Darren Stephens)

We're only a few months into the year, but 2020 already promises to be a difficult year for passenger rail service in Atlantic Canada. The 2019 holiday season once again featured no extra trains and only a slight adjustment to the usual schedule around the Christmas holiday, leaving Atlantic Canadians with no additional options for holiday travel and missing a clear opportunity for VIA to serve more passengers through those traditionally busy weeks. Last year we were told that the

lack of extra trains was largely due to how well the existing schedule fit around the holidays, but it is clear as we move along that VIA is far from committed to providing additional service to Atlantic Canada. Despite continued rumblings about hypothetical regional services sometime in the future, 2020 got underway with no indication of anything beyond the skeletal thrice weekly service on the horizon.



Despite the prominent presence of the herald angels at Moncton's VIA station, there was little holiday cheer for passenger rail advocates as once again no additional trains were scheduled for the Christmas/New Year season. (PHOTO – Ted Bartlett)

It wouldn't take long for the new year to get off to a rough start. Blockades in solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en First Nation's protest against a pipeline project and assertion of land title rights led to a near complete shutdown of CN rail service across most of the country, and a corresponding shutdown of VIA Rail passenger service. In a move that highlighted just how much power CN wields over passenger rail service in the country, VIA was forced to suspend all train operations across the country that operate on CN tracks, despite the fact that no blockades were affecting a number of those trains. The *Ocean* was cancelled at a time when there were no blockades on its route, though one at St. Lambert did crop up during a portion of the shutdown time. CN argued that the cancellations were due to their own system shutdown, but it soon became evident that CN was still finding ways to run a considerable amount of rail traffic, including over lines that they were prohibiting VIA from operating on.

Eventually the blockades came down, and VIA services slowly got back to normal operation; but it would be only a matter of weeks before another unprecedented shutdown would begin, this time because of a growing global health crisis. As of March 13, at the time of writing, VIA has just made the abrupt decision to shut down service on the *Ocean* and Canadian immediately, in light of growing concerns about the spread of the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic. The decision to cancel service was announced with minimal notice, stranding some passengers who were already on connecting trains or waiting in the station to board their train. There is no doubt that this pandemic is a serious situation, which will necessitate dramatic changes to Canadian life if we are to effectively curtail its spread and avoid the crisis situations that other countries have found themselves in. There are almost certainly going to be further travel restrictions and reductions in rail, air, and other intercity (and even transit) services, both in attempts to stop the spread and in response to plunging ridership as people stop travelling and engage in widespread social distancing. Indeed, on March 15, VIA announced that it would be cutting its Corridor services by 50%, and implementing broad sweeping operational changes. Having said that, the fact that VIA so quickly and abruptly axed their service to Atlantic Canada is further evidence that VIA management largely considers the *Ocean* to be a more tourist-oriented train akin to the Canadian, and sees their service to this part of the country as not being essential to maintain in the same way as their Corridor services.

In the case of both the blockades and the COVID-19 shutdown, VIA has been forced by powers beyond their control to cancel trains and suffer significant losses of ridership, which will undoubtedly have ramifications lasting well beyond the time that service resumes. After celebrating continuously positive ridership growth in recent years (largely within the Corridor), the end of year reports for 2020 will likely be much less encouraging.

Looking farther ahead, there's unfortunately more bad news coming for this region before year's end. The newly-published latest version of VIA Rail Canada's five-year Corporate Plan confirms what many public transportation advocates in the Maritimes had long suspected. As of November 1, 2020 the Crown corporation will be denied access to the loop track at the Halifax container terminal. The facility was formerly known as Halterm, but was recently rebranded PSA Halifax following its acquisition by a multinational Singapore-based company. All this means that the tri-weekly remnant of VIA's once-proud *Ocean* can no longer be turned on arrival in Halifax for its return journey to Montreal.

This looming deadline has created a major challenge for VIA, as the nearest location where a train can reverse direction is Truro – 64 miles (103 kilometres) away. Transport Action Atlantic insists that the Government of Canada has an obligation to ensure a satisfactory resolution to this issue, given that the container terminal is actually federal government property, held under lease by the operator.



The *Ocean* departs Halifax in the midst of a blizzard on January 8, 2020. The train is an excellent travel option in these conditions, but the continuing 3/week schedule and the lack of extra trains around the holidays make it a difficult option for many people to use. As if that weren't enough, the iconic Park car on the tail end is likely soon to be a thing of memory. (PHOTO – Tim Hayman)

VIA has been reluctant to discuss its future plans, but regional MPs have been told that there is a so-called “solution” being proposed that involves simply running the locomotives around the train on arrival at Halifax and pulling it backwards all the way to Montreal. From what TAA has been able to learn, the scenario would use a mix of Renaissance and stainless steel (HEP) cars, with economy and sleeper class passengers scattered throughout different areas of the train. The classic Park observation car – a popular feature for sleeper-class passengers for the past 30 years – would be gone, resulting in the train losing much of its appeal for higher-revenue customers. This bi-directional operation would likely also result in more passengers having to ride backwards on the westbound journey. All in all, it would represent a substantial downgrading of an already compromised service.

TAA is urging an alternative infrastructure-based solution – one that would preserve the current service standard (such as it is) while laying the groundwork for a return to daily service by the *Ocean* once VIA's new corridor equipment is introduced. The crux of the argument is that if the operational needs of the container terminal require that VIA be denied access to this federal-owned facility, the Government of Canada needs to do whatever is necessary to ensure a proper and professional solution.

-Tim Hayman, with files from Ted Bartlett

Cape Breton rail line remains dormant, with no clear reprieve in sight

Provincial subsidy in doubt as government questions CBNS's use of funds



A sad sight just outside the now defunct CBNS shops in Sydney, a view common at grade crossings all along the line. Signals in disrepair, and undisturbed snow banks obscuring the tracks beyond the edge of the roadway.

Another new year is underway, and the rail line through Cape Breton continues to sit dormant, decaying, and no closer to being revived than when service was discontinued several years ago. The good news, to date, is that the line still has yet to be formally abandoned, and the infrastructure remains largely in place. The agreement between the province and the Cape Breton and Central Nova Scotia (CBNS) railway has continued to dissuade the railway from applying for formal abandonment; however, the future of that agreement is in doubt as the province re-examines the funding that they have been providing. Late in 2019, the province indicated that they had concerns about the way that CBNS was spending the funding that was being provided. Intended to cover the costs of keeping the dormant rail line in place, the railway has apparently been using funds to pay for legal bills and land migration costs associated with the sale of assets to the Port of Sydney. Such expenses would not fit under the intent of the agreement, and may lead to the province reconsidering the entire deal. To date, there

has been no decision on whether the agreement will be extended; the current agreement expires at the end of March.

The railway itself has been largely untouched over the past few years, with the infrastructure continuing to degrade. In the last few months, a few pieces of the rail line have disappeared. The access to Sydport has been cut off, as the tracks were lifted through a crossing when the road was being repaved. In Sydney itself, the connection to the still active Sydney Coal Railway at Sydney Jct. is set to be severed, as the railway has agreed to allow the municipality to remove a section of track that would otherwise require a new level crossing on a new road from Whitney Pier across the former tar ponds site. In both cases the rail removal still retains the railway right of way, should it ever need to be reinstated, but it is

nonetheless disheartening to see pieces of the physical infrastructure being removed. If nothing changes soon, we may well see this happen in more locations.

There have been a few other recent developments that could well impact the future of the line. First, on January 9th it was announced that the Membertou First Nation has signed on as a partner in the Sydney port development project, which brings additional support to the ongoing push to expand the port in Sydney to potentially include a container terminal. Whether this will bring the project any closer to fruition remains to be seen, but it does continue to indicate that local interest in the project is strong. As long as it remains on the table, the value of retaining the rail line will likely remain high.

The other major development is the news that CBNS parent company Genesee and Wyoming Inc. has been sold to Brookfield Asset Management Inc. It is not yet clear what this sale will mean for the myriad of shortline railways owned and operated by GWI, but the change in ownership could open up a variety of possibilities, from new approaches to operation through to the potential for some lines to be sold off to other operators. The province has been seeking a meeting with Brookfield to discuss the implications of the sale on the CBNS, and what the new owner's plans are for the railway both through Cape Breton and on the mainland. For those frustrated with the way that GWI handled the operations of the CBNS over the last decade, including the decisions that ultimately led to the shutdown of the Sydney Subdivision, there may be hope that new ownership could bring a new perspective – but it's still too early to know for sure.

-Tim Hayman

Motorcoach and Transit

Public transit – is it on a roll?

It seems to be happening all across the country. With the arrival of a new decade, Canadian transit systems are looking forward to growth and expansion, with cities of all sizes taking significant forward steps. High profile examples of tangible transit expansion include Vancouver's TransLink launching its BRT-lite express RapidBus network in early 2020, and the opening of Ottawa's Confederation Line LRT and Waterloo Region's ION LRT in 2019. Other projects which made substantial construction progress included Edmonton's Valley Line Southeast LRT, Toronto's Eglinton Crosstown LRT, and Montreal's REM automated light metro.

And the trend seems to be taking a firm hold here in Atlantic Canada as well. Across the region, transit systems are focusing on service and ridership growth, with some concrete plans to implement transit-supportive infrastructure to boost

service quality. The three largest urban areas have all recently launched promising initiatives, recognizing the growing support for climate-friendly transportation.



Passengers board and disembark from a Halifax Transit bus at the Scotia Square terminal in downtown Halifax. (PHOTO – Ted Bartlett)

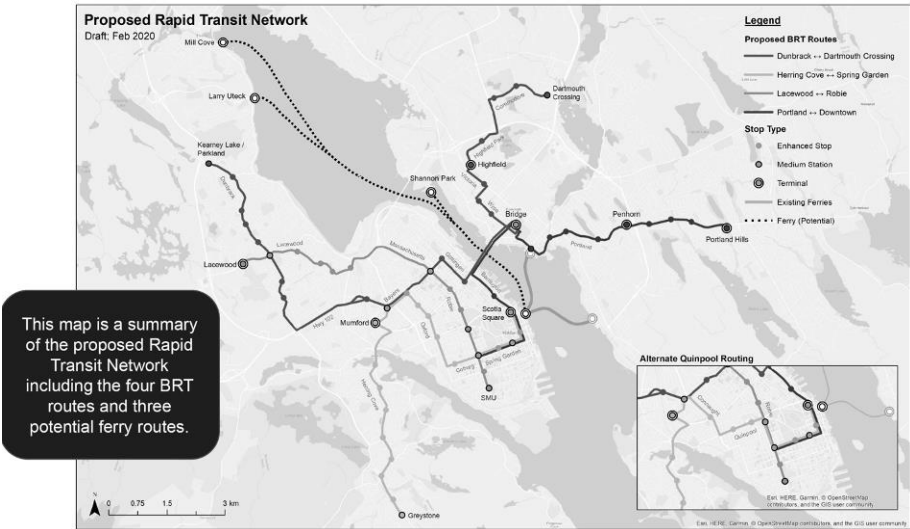
Nova Scotia:

Within Atlantic Canada’s largest urban centre, transit expansion has focused on both improving service and planning new infrastructure. In November, Halifax Transit added 18 new routes, both local and express. Hailed as the “biggest change in recent history”, this service increase is part of a larger, ongoing, optimization of transit in the city. Other minor adjustments occurred on 30 existing routes, which entail route extensions and frequency increases. These changes will help connect commuters to various employment and higher-education centres throughout Halifax.

Not all feedback about the route changes has been positive, however. As the *Chronicle Herald* reported in late November, some Haligonians have been complaining that some of the new routes have resulted in an increased number of required transfers for their journeys. Residents in Beaver Bank were also upset about a reduction in bus service. Another controversial change was a Halifax Transit fare increase which came into effect on September 30th. These changes saw adult and senior riders pay \$0.25 more for a single ride, raising fares to \$2.75 and \$2.00 respectively. These increases occurred in conjunction with a pilot

project which will make transit for children 12 and under free, which is expected to run until the end of March.

Looking to the future, HRM released its draft “Rapid Transit Strategy” in February 2020, which outlines how the municipality intends to tackle increasing gridlock over the coming decade. In June 2019, unable to come to terms with infrastructure owner CN, Halifax Regional Council voted to kill its commuter rail proposal. Instead, the City will now focus on BRT and ferry service to enhance its transit system for the foreseeable future. The plan calls for up to three new ferry routes, connecting Mill Cove, Larry Uteck Boulevard, and Shannon Park to the downtown Halifax ferry terminal.



GRAPHIC - Halifax Rapid Transit Strategy, 2020

Four BRT routes are proposed for Halifax, which connect suburban areas of the city to the Halifax peninsula - the city’s downtown. The purple route connects Kearney Lake to the Dartmouth Crossing shopping centre, running through the city’s rapidly-developing North End, and crossing the Halifax Harbour via the Macdonald Bridge. The red route begins at Spring Garden Road and Robie Street, located near both Dalhousie and St. Mary’s Universities, and connects to the Portland Hills community in Dartmouth, travelling through downtown Halifax, and across the Macdonald bridge. The yellow route connects Armdale to Halifax’s downtown bus terminal, Scotia Square, running via Mumford Terminal and Spring Garden Road. The Green route links Lacewood Terminal to St. Mary’s University, running via Robie Street.

In all, these proposed routes would both connect the outlying suburban areas of Halifax to its downtown core, while providing large network coverage on the peninsula. The network would also provide varying qualities of BRT infrastructure, ranging from signal priority and queue-jump lanes where road

space is limited, to separated bus lanes with station-like stops in areas where space is available. Halifax is running public consultations on its rapid transit proposals in early March, and will continue to refine the plans throughout 2020.

More information on Halifax's rapid transit strategy can be found at:
<https://www.shapeyourcityhalifax.ca/rapid-transit>

Prince Edward Island:

In PEI, the T3 Transit system has seen a trend of increasing ridership. T3 currently serves Charlottetown, Stratford, Cornwall, and Summerside. Compared to 2018, the system's average daily boardings have increased from 2,500 riders per day, to approximately 3,200. In September 2019, T3 set a record of 3,401 riders in a single day. Additionally, T3 experienced increased use of its weekend service. In February 2020, monthly ridership showed a spectacular 24% increase compared to the same period in 2019.

And there's more. Charlottetown is poised to become the first city in the region to boast an all-electric bus on its transit roster. T3's Mike Cassidy – who's responsible for operating the service under contract with the City – says they expect to take delivery of their first unit from Winnipeg-based New Flyer before the end of 2022. Full conversion of the fleet is expected to take another two to three years. The latest generation of vehicles have a range of 400-450 km on a full charge.

Meanwhile, in early February 2020, Summerside Councillor Cory Snow proposed that T3 should further expand service to the neighbouring communities of Kensington and Miscouche, to provide more travel options for workers who commute. Additionally, he suggested that Summerside install improved bus shelters, to improve the transit experience. Expanded and improved T3 service in PEI will be dependent on deliberations with T3 and local municipalities, and is a story to watch during 2020.

New Brunswick:

Greater Moncton is the clear front-runner in transit among New Brunswick urban centres. In November 2019, Moncton city councillors voted to increase Codiac Transpo funding by a modest \$102,390 annually to increase bus service, as part of the 2020 budget process. Changes included providing service on six routes on three statutory holidays, as well as extending an existing bus route which currently serves the Caledonia Industrial Park, to Moncton High School. This new service will help provide transportation options for students at the city's largest high school, which because of its out-of-the way location is also the only one without a connection to a bus route.

In a recent development, the Public Transit Governance Committee voted unanimously to approve free transit days during Environment Week 2020, and on additional occasions to recognize community events. New Year's Eve service will also continue to be provided free of charge. And, starting this year, the free transit days are being expanded to include municipal, provincial and federal election days in order to encourage citizen engagement and voting accessibility.



Codiac Transpo buses outside the Avenir Centre in Moncton, while still under construction. (PHOTO – Ted Bartlett)

The adjacent municipalities of Dieppe and Riverview are also served by Codiac Transpo under contract. Dieppe has just established a committee to explore new approaches to public transit, and the City has also announced extension of a pilot program that offers free rides to youth between ages 12 and 17. Despite waiving fares for more than 400 teenaged participants, transit revenues in Dieppe reached a record in excess of \$350,000 last year. In Riverview, a new route launched in January will offer enhanced service on a 30-minute frequency during peak periods Monday through Friday on a trial basis.

In Saint John, the future of transit is less optimistic. In January, city council approved a \$100,000 contract for consulting firm Stantec to conduct an audit on the transit system, in hopes of finding up to \$2 million in annual savings, via the identification of potential efficiencies. The report will be submitted to the city in

November, 2020, and city council will then determine how to proceed with the cost-saving measures proposed by Stantec.

And, in Fredericton – more than two years after release of the “Fredericton on the Move” strategic transit plan – there’s been virtually no discernable action. The lofty goal of achieving a “transit is cool” culture in New Brunswick’s capital city remains elusive, and the buses continue to provide service only six days a week.

Newfoundland and Labrador:



A line of Metrobus vehicles leaving the Village Mall. (PHOTO – Ted Bartlett)

Across the water there’s another transit bright spot. Atlantic Canada’s second-largest urban community has not been allowing a comprehensive transit report released last fall to gather dust on a shelf. Already the City of St. John’s has taken action on some of the key recommendations by Dillon Consulting to optimize Metrobus service and grow ridership. For full details, please see the accompanying story by James Fraser.

Overall, municipal transit growth in Atlantic Canada will be a story to watch throughout 2020 and beyond. With a trend of growing ridership and service increases, this decade has the opportunity to transform how people move in cities across the region. With growing congestion in places such as Halifax and St. John’s, and an increasing nation-wide emphasis on reducing greenhouse gas emissions to tackle climate change, the topic of transit system growth should be a top priority for politicians, policymakers, and residents alike.

-Alex Glista

Alex Glista is a Master of Planning student at Dalhousie University.

Metrobus Transit service review final report released

The final report of a comprehensive review of public transit in the City of St. John's by Dillon Consulting was released on November 6. It identifies strategic directions, with the aim of optimizing the existing service, creating efficiencies, and identifying investment opportunities to change the culture of transit and grow ridership.

Mayor Danny Breen welcomed the findings, which he said would guide decision making in the coming years. The chair of the Transportation Commission, Councillor Ian Froude, said the greatest challenge would be balancing the report's recommendations with current budgetary restraints. But he was pleased to announce that Metrobus ridership year-to-date was up 10% from 2018.

On the operational side, improvements to optimize existing services were identified. These include four potential route modifications, with the aim of making route networks more understandable, reducing route duplication, addressing schedule adherence issues, and simplifying routes (Routes impacted: 2/5, 6, 10, 18/25).

Perhaps even more important was the identification of four strategic directions to grow ridership over the next five years:

- *Foster a Transit Culture*

Passenger fare-based solutions to bring new users and increased usage, with a particular focus on youth, include offering a student pass program for grade 7–12; developing a transit familiarization outreach program for grade 7; providing free transit up to age 12; continuing to pursue a U-Pass agreement with Memorial University; and piloting a low income pass program.

- *Invest in Service*

Strategies for investing in a service that is more convenient, reduces travel time, and grows ridership include modifying routes to make the route structure more direct (Route 3/14/23); formally defining a Frequent Transit Network that operates every 15 mins during peaks and 30 mins off-peak, and marketing the network as a fast and convenient transport option; bringing weekday service frequency to 30 minutes during peak and midday for Routes 11/14/16/23; and piloting a dynamic on-demand transit service for low demand time periods and areas (Southlands/Galway).

- *Enhance the Customer Experience*

Strategies for enhancing the customer experience include updating the city's snow clearing policy to further prioritize the transit network, including transit stop areas; continuing to improve accessibility through prioritizing designation of

accessible routes on key routes, including Route 10; introduction of an automated stop announcement system; retrofitting non-accessible stops; prioritizing stop upgrades on routes with accessible buses; and improving integration with land use and transportation, including through playing an active role in land-use planning decisions.

- *Improve Regional Connections*

Strategies for servicing the entire region beyond the boundaries of St. John's in a way that is seamless include exploring dynamic on-demand models to provide more cost effective service to adjacent municipalities; addressing the concept of inter-municipal transit in the St. John's Transportation Master Plan; modifying the contract model to increase Metrobus authority to plan more integrated and seamless service; and leading the development of a united advocacy plan with municipalities in the region for sustainable provincial transit funding.

Improvements for GoBus door-to-door specialized transit were also identified, including addressing the issue of existing eligibility criteria being too broad and not well defined; increasing application consistency by no longer relying on an individual's physician to determine applicant's eligibility and instead finding a third party to conduct assessments on behalf of Metrobus; implementing a new 18 month contract that reduces no show payments, number of taxi trips per day, and cost of taxi trips; and developing a Go-Card app that makes it possible to use cellphones to read and debit Go-Card on taxis.

Subsequent developments:

After a record-shattering winter storm in January 2020, the City of St. John's announced they were waiving bus fares with the aim of reducing vehicles and pedestrians on the roads during snow clearing efforts. Over the two-week free ride program from January 25 to February 7, there were 172,560 rides counted by transit operators, which was 50,000 more than during the same period in 2019. The free ride program cost the city \$250,000 over the two weeks.

A two-year pilot program has been announced that will provide bus passes to recipients of income support. This program will result in passes being mailed out to approximately 10,000 people. The project is targeted to begin in April 2020, and is supported with \$2.1 million annually from the provincial government. New income support recipients will automatically receive bus passes once their benefits are approved. Councillor Froude says "when people have access to transportation, they will have access to better health-care services. They will also have opportunities for employment and other government services here in the region."

As of March 1, the age for riding free will be extended from five to twelve.

Starting on March 2, there will be express service to The Shoppes at Galway – a new retail complex at the western edge of the city that boasts, among other things, Canada's largest Costco warehouse. The service is being marketed as an express route from Village Shopping Centre, operating seven days a week.

The first step in implementation of a Frequent Transit Network is targeted for September 7. It will increase frequency and span on five key routes.

Transport Action Atlantic views the Dillon report as largely positive, and a significant forward step for public transit in the St. John's area. However, there are a number of key issues that appear to be missing from the report, including linkage with provincial climate change policy, the potential for Metrobus to play a role in school bussing, and the inconsistency of the City's promotion of more parking garages in the downtown area, which is a disincentive to use public transit.

The report may be viewed online at www.engagestjohns.ca/transit.

*-James Fraser, with files
from Tom Beckett*

A Tale of Two Cities

A comparison of public transit experience in St. John's and Halifax



Metrobus (left) and Halifax Transit (right)

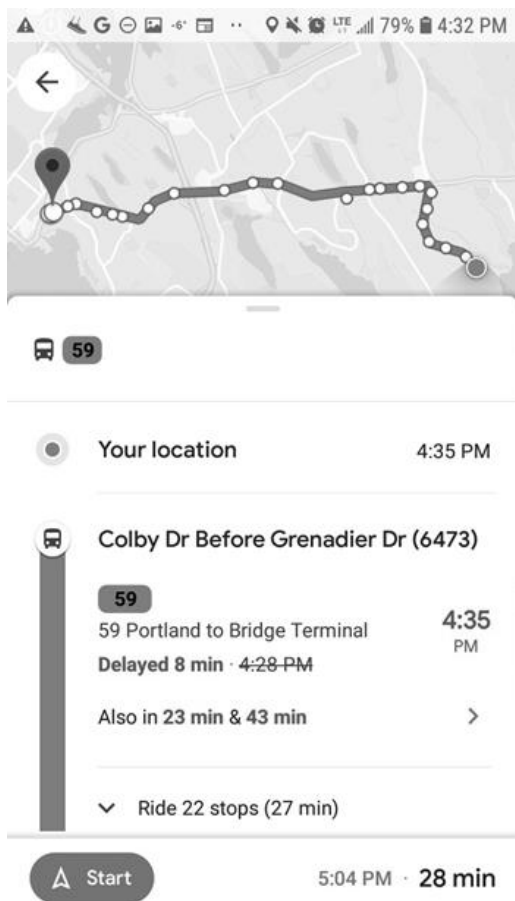
After five years as a regular user of Metrobus in St. John's, James Fraser moved to Halifax in the fall of 2019. He quickly noticed significant differences between public transit in the two cities, but concluded that each had things to learn from the other. Here are his first impressions:

Positives

Two clear positives jumped out to me after five Halifax Transit rides:

1) TimeTrack is integrated right into Google Maps. I found it much easier and more intuitive to figure out if my bus was running early or late, as compared with

using the Metrobus website. In fairness, Metrobus does have a mobile app, which I have not used, but either way it is still ideal in my opinion to have information on bus delays available right in Google Maps. As you can see in this image, when checking the bus schedule on Google Maps it is very straightforward to see that the Halifax Transit bus I needed to catch was running behind by eight minutes. With Metrobus, not only was there the additional step of going to the Metrobus website, but then often I would encounter issues such as the website not working great on my phone, no data being available on the status of my bus, or multiple buses running with the same number and it not being immediately obvious which of those buses I was waiting for (e.g. “3-1”, “3-2”, “3-3”).



A look at the integrated transit functions within Google Maps, showing real time information for Halifax Transit routes.

2) Every stop a Halifax Transit bus approaches is announced and displayed; the name of the stop flashes up on the screen and is heard over the speaker system. I found the announcement and display extremely helpful, especially in parts of town I wasn't familiar with.

Negatives

- 1) With an adult cash fare of \$2.75, Halifax Transit is 25 cents more expensive per ride than Metrobus
- 2) The Halifax Transit buses I've been on so far have not had WiFi
- 3) For the 10-ride passes, Halifax Transit gave me 10 individual paper tickets instead of a reloadable card. These paper tickets are going to be much less convenient, both to carry around and to purchase an additional set. With Metrobus it's possible to simply reload the passes online, whereas with Halifax Transit I will be required to go back into a retail store to purchase the passes.

4) For Halifax Transit's 30-day passes, the start date for the 30 days is always the first day of the month, even when you purchase the pass part way through that month (e.g. if you purchase a pass on September 8th, the 30 days began as of September 1st). This is inconvenient and costly because you are required to go into a retail store to buy a pass near the start of each month if you want to get your money's worth. In comparison, with Metrobus you have the flexibility to buy a pass at any time in the month, and your 30 days doesn't begin until whatever time in the month you actually purchase the pass.



Moving Forward

Those are the top two positives and top four negatives of my experience with Halifax Transit after five rides. Moving forward, I plan to use Halifax Transit more regularly to get a better sense of the overall experience, and will take into account how frequently the buses come, how frequently the buses are late, how well the connections from one bus to another work, how many people are on the buses, and whatever other factors jump out to me. What do you like and dislike about Halifax Transit, Metrobus, or other public transportation systems? What other factors should I take into consideration when comparing Halifax Transit and Metrobus? Is there anything I've described above relating to Halifax Transit or Metrobus that you don't agree with? I'd love to hear your thoughts by e-mail at j.fraser@mun.ca

-James Fraser

Maritime Bus test drives first all-electric intercity coach



A sizeable crowd of stakeholders, local politicians, and transportation advocates attended a demonstration of MCI's new 100% battery-electric motor coach bus in Halifax on March 12. (PHOTO – Tim Hayman)

The first-ever demonstration in Canada of a 100 percent battery-powered intercity motorcoach has taken place in the Maritimes. A test model of the new MCI D45 CRTe LE vehicle arrived at Coach Atlantic/Maritime Bus in Charlottetown for an initial test run to Summerside in early March. After that, the prototype travelled to Amherst, Moncton, Truro and Halifax.

Maritime Bus CEO Mike Cassidy was clearly excited about the demonstration, though he cautioned that the first production models won't be ready for regular service for some time yet. The prototype bus will be returning to a test facility in California for further R&D work following its Maritime debut, and builder MCI is hoping the first production models will roll off the assembly line later this year.

"This new all electric coach allows us to demonstrate its revolutionary accessibility features while gathering data to plan our future fleet." Mr. Cassidy said, adding that this particular model does have certain limitations, including a range of only 250-300 kilometres on a single charge, and very little space for baggage or parcels.

Patrick Scully, vice-president of sales, marketing and customer service at MCI, notes that the Cassidy Group's established record in green transportation makes the company a desired partner for development of zero-emissions technology.

“Operators like Coach Atlantic/Maritime Bus and Mike Cassidy are leading the all-electric discussion in North American for scheduled and charter service.” he says.



TOP: A look inside the MCI electric demonstrator, showing comfortable seating with overhead storage, and the accessible low-level area on the left. BOTTOM LEFT: No diesel engine here - the electric innards at the rear of the bus. BOTTOM RIGHT: The mid-bus low level doors include an extendable ramp (not shown) to allow level access. There are three seats and a wheelchair tiedown on the lower level. (PHOTOS – Tim Hayman)

Mr. Cassidy and his company received the MCI-sponsored 2020 Leadership in Environmental Sustainability Award in January during the United Motor Coach Association EXPO, recognizing a broad suite of green practices, including a conservation commitment that applies inside and outside the business.

MCI is a subsidiary of Winnipeg-based New Flyer Industries, which provided a prototype electric transit bus for testing in Charlottetown on Cassidy-operated T3 Transit in 2018.

-files from Tim Hayman, Alex Glista and Howard Easton

Much delayed Yarmouth ferry to sail in 2020

After a year of inactivity and over a year behind the original planned date, the Yarmouth to Maine high speed Cat ferry service is finally set to resume operation. Last year, Bay Ferries announced that the service would be moving its US terminus from Portland to Bar Harbor, a move that would make for a shorter crossing and reduce costs, while also avoiding growing issues with the terminal in Portland. This necessitated the construction of a new terminal and arranging for US customs facilities at the new location, which required substantial work and generated its share of controversy due to the financial contributions required from the province of Nova Scotia. Despite the operator's confidence that the new facilities and necessary agreements would be in place for the 2019 season, a series of delays pushed the planned launch date back farther and farther, until the entire 2019 season was ultimately cancelled. Having already committed to leave the Portland terminal, Bay Ferries had no fallback option to allow them to salvage any crossings.



After a year of inactivity, the Cat will soon sail from Yarmouth again. The terminal in Yarmouth will look somewhat different when operation resumes, as the pedestrian covered walkway has recently been removed. (PHOTO – Tim Hayman)

On February 21, 2020, Bay Ferries finally announced that service to Bar Harbor is planned to launch on June 26, 2020, with ticket sales commencing immediately. Service will consist of one daily round trip, departing Yarmouth at 9:30am (AT) and from Bar Harbor at 3pm (ET), with a 3.5 hour crossing time. The season will run until October 13th.

In this announcement, Bay Ferries said that they believe any remaining work to be done with United States Customs and Border Protection can be completed ahead of the scheduled service launch. Given the complications and frustrations associated with the series of aborted launch dates last year, one would presume that the company is particularly confident that they will be ready to go this time around – though it remains to be seen if everything will go as planned. Local Yarmouth businesses that rely heavily on the tourist market and suffered last year from the lack of ferry related business are undoubtedly hoping that everything will roll along as planned. Should there be further delays, the general public antagonism toward this publicly funded service is certain to continue to grow.

-Tim Hayman

Marine Atlantic hikes rates – again

Marine Atlantic announced the 2020-21 tariff for its ferry services to Newfoundland on February 13. As widely expected, there are increases as the Crown corporation seeks to meet its 65% cost recovery target set by Transport Canada. Once again this year, the full burden is borne by commercial customers, with a 2% increase in freight transportation costs overall, plus a 3.4% hike in the drop trailer handling fee. Trucking companies are expected to simply pass along the increase to their customers, which will ultimately mean higher prices for consumer goods on the island. The new rates take effect on April 1.

While passenger and passenger vehicle fares remain unchanged since 2018, it is noteworthy that these user costs have more than doubled in the past two decades – inflating at a rate approximately three times the cost of living index. A one-way ticket for a car and driver between North Sydney and Port aux Basques currently costs \$164.81 – including a substantial \$28 in fuel surcharges and security fee.

Transport Action Atlantic continues to insist that the current rate structure and cost recovery demands by the federal government violate of the spirit of the Terms of Union that brought Newfoundland and Labrador into Confederation in 1949. The ferry service was a constitutional guarantee, and was intended to cost users no more than travelling the equivalent distance on land. During the 2015 federal election campaign, the Trudeau Liberals had denounced the 65% cost recovery demand as “unreasonable”, but since their election have done nothing to change it.

-Ted Bartlett

Oceanex seeks leave to appeal Federal Court ruling

The privately-owned shipping company that has been that has been trying to force Crown-owned Marine Atlantic to charge higher commercial rates on the constitutional Newfoundland ferry service has suffered another setback in the courts – but the plaintiff is not prepared to give up just yet.

In a ruling handed down on October 10, the Federal Court of Appeal dismissed an appeal lodged by Oceanex against an earlier judgement in March 2018 by Justice Cecily Strickland. Judge Strickland in effect ruled that the compensatory rate provisions in the *Canada Transportation Act* did not override Terms of Union that brought Newfoundland and Labrador into Confederation in 1949, and the three judges on the appeal panel upheld that interpretation.

However Oceanex's executive chairman, Captain Sid Hynes, is determined not to abandon his campaign aimed at creating a climate more favourable to his business interests. The company filed a petition in January for leave to appeal the latest ruling to the Supreme Court of Canada. Captain Hynes – who once served as chair of Marine Atlantic's board of directors and briefly as acting CEO – maintains that the Crown corporation's existing rate structure threatens the ability for privately owned and operated companies to offer competitive freight services to and from the island of Newfoundland.

He says Oceanex has invested heavily in freight transportation infrastructure essential to the Newfoundland economy, providing critical and reliable pier-to-pier and door-to-door transportation services, and that its continued long-term viability and the livelihood of its employees is at risk as long as the federal government continues to subsidize Marine Atlantic freight rates. The Government of Canada maintains that it is fulfilling a constitutional commitment under Term 32, and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, with intervenor status, has argued in support of that position.

Informed observers expect it will be six to eight months before it's known if the country's highest court will hear the case.

-Ted Bartlett

Commentary

Do we really need a fixed link to Newfoundland?

By Jim Roche

First suggested in 1949 by Joey Smallwood, the idea of a fixed link between Labrador and the island of Newfoundland has once again captured the minds and imagination of politicians in both Ottawa and Newfoundland and Labrador.

A recent report by the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities to the House of Commons suggested that such a link would improve transportation in eastern Canada and finally connect the country from coast to coast.

In September 2019 the federal government announced that under the proposed National Infrastructure Fund the project would be an ideal “nation-building” opportunity to finally link the island of Newfoundland with the rest of Canada. Newfoundland and Labrador members of Parliament all voiced their support and championed the project as a means to make food and household goods more affordable, as well as being a solution to an inconsistent ferry service.

In the spring of 2019 the Newfoundland and Labrador Liberal Government had released a feasibility study which suggested a price tag of \$1.7 billion to construct an underground rail link system beneath the Strait of Belle Isle. The report by the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development at Memorial University proposed a single rail line capable of carrying 200 cars. They estimated 30 to 60 minutes to cross the approximately eighteen kilometre distance.

Moving this project forward will require the provinces of Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec working together with the federal government to secure the funding necessary. The Quebec Government will need to complete Highway 138 along the Quebec North Shore, and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador must commit to upgrade the Great Northern Peninsula Highway to Trans-Canada Highway standards.

The question remains: can we afford to build this fixed link – and do we really need it?

Critics of the proposal suggest that the almost two billion dollar project is too expensive when this province is facing one of the most challenging financial times in our history. With a looming \$12.7 billion bill for the Muskrat Falls Hydro Electric project, some say that the money could be better spent elsewhere.

Others, such as Mayor John Spencer of the town of Port aux Basques, are raising concerns over the impact such a project would have on their communities. He is suggesting that if this link becomes a reality it will divert employment opportunities from his town and result in a sixty percent decline in current Marine Atlantic users.

Those of us with a history of working in the industry and advocating for a sustainable, cost effective and reliable transportation link for the province have always known that Transport Canada would love to divest itself of its obligation to the constitutionally-guaranteed ferry system for Newfoundland and Labrador. The current rate structure which imposes a 65% to 70% cost recovery target on all Marine Atlantic users supports this view. As a result, commercial users are

looking to other options to move their products to and from the island and passenger traffic remains in serious decline.

If it is the federal government's goal to stop supporting the Marine Atlantic ferry service, a fixed link would be their means to do so. By continuing to increase ferry rates to the point where it's no longer affordable and entering into a private/public partnership to construct the fixed link, the onetime \$2 billion price tag may be the deal they can't refuse. But no one in authority has suggested what user charges for the proposed tunnel might be.

My advice – not just to Mayor Spencer and the citizens of Port aux Basques, but to all who live on this island – is “be worried, be very, very worried.”

Jim Roche is retired after 42 years in the transportation industry. He lives in St. John's.

Air

MAX 8 grounding continues to impact overseas services from region

The grounding of Boeing's 737 MAX 8 airliner continues, with no immediate end in sight. As the first anniversary of the world-wide ban approached, the impact on the manufacturer's bottom line passed the \$18 billion mark. Southwest Airlines, which had the largest number of the ill-starred aircraft in service at the time of the grounding, has now written the plane out of its schedule until early August. United Airlines, meanwhile, does not anticipate a return to service before fall of 2020. Boeing, however, is still predicting a return to service by mid-year.

Air Canada is apparently proceeding on that optimistic assumption. As of late February, the carrier was accepting online bookings for direct MAX 8 flights to London Heathrow from both Halifax and St. John's, beginning July 1. Until then, London-bound passengers are being rerouted on other flights involving backtracking through Toronto or Montreal. There is no indication of any contingency plans, so most observers are expecting that both YHZ and YYT will go through another summer without non-stop service to LHR.

WestJet, on the other hand, has evidently been less impacted by the crisis. The airline says it has completed more than 98 per cent of its planned departures even while its 13 MAX 8 aircraft remain on the ground. Using older 737 NG models, the seasonal transatlantic services from Halifax to London Gatwick, Glasgow and Dublin continued to operate during 2019, and are scheduled to resume in April – with an additional seasonal service to Manchester beginning on June 5. The sole casualty has been the Halifax to Paris service, which has been cancelled for the duration of the MAX grounding.

WestJet announced on January 21 that the troubled plane would remain out of service at least through to June 24, but presumably the contingency arrangements will remain in place as long as necessary.

Meanwhile, Transport Canada won't simply be relying on American certification to permit a resumption of MAX 8 flights in this country, according to a recent report by CBC News. Canada is among many countries around the world that have relied for years on the US to take the lead and certify Boeing aircraft, as they are manufactured there. And there have been concerns expressed that the Federal Aviation Administration delegates too much of the certification process to aircraft manufacturers, while public hearings revealed that Boeing ignored or covered up warnings about issues with the MAX 8.

But Canada's director general of civil aviation told a House of Commons committee in February that the department will conduct its own flight tests to examine whether the grounded plane is safe to fly after two deadly crashes.

-Ted Bartlett

Halifax poised for growth in US market

New services coming to other regional airports



Halifax Stanfield will see 63 direct flights weekly to US destinations this summer. (PHOTO – HIAA)

Halifax Stanfield International Airport recorded an overall three percent drop in passenger traffic in 2019 – largely attributable to the worldwide MAX 8 grounding. However, an exciting area of growth for the region's major air hub

was travel to and from the US, which was up by 19 percent over the previous year. The airport authority is expecting that trend to continue in 2020, according to Jo-Anne McLean, director of air service and airport experience.

This summer's peak season schedule will see a total of 63 weekly direct departures to American destinations, including Newark, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, New York LaGuardia, and Orlando.

And what seemingly flies in the face of the "flightshame" movement that's becoming an increasingly powerful influence on European travel, Atlantic Canada is anticipating a significant increase in ultra-low-fare air service this summer. WestJet subsidiary Swoop will expand its East Coast network with flights between John C. Munro Airport in Hamilton, Ontario, and St. John's, Moncton, and Charlottetown. The new services are set to begin in June as Swoop receives its tenth aircraft. The Hamilton – St. John's flights will run daily from June 22 through October 23. Moncton will be served four times weekly, with flights to and from Charlottetown on alternate days. Swoop will also continue to serve Halifax, with flights to both Hamilton and London ON.

Meanwhile, St. John's International Airport continues to pursue new routes where a strong business case exists, according to spokesperson Kaitlyn Hickey.

"We are very much focused on increasing airline seat capacity with more flights and/or larger aircraft on existing routes, as well as adding new destinations where the demand is strong," she says, noting there is particular emphasis on better access to Europe and the US. The provincial tourism industry is still keenly feeling the loss last year of a direct seasonal WestJet flight to Dublin, and easier access to and from New Brunswick continues to be a challenge.

-Ted Bartlett

Miscellany

Highway twinning continues in NS, while NB applies the brakes

The latest five-year plan for Nova Scotia's Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal shows a continuing trend toward more and more highway twinning – with four major projects outlined in the 2020-21 version of the document.

The largest of these undertakings is a 38-km stretch of Highway 104 between Sutherlands River (east of New Glasgow) and Addington Forks (west of Antigonish). The multi-year project carries an estimated price tag of \$285 million, and involves construction of 10 km of entirely new four-lane highway

bypassing the existing route through Marshy Hope. It will be designed, built, financed, operated and maintained as a public-private partnership, much like the Cobequid Pass – but without tolls. Minister Lloyd Hines announced on January 30 that Dexter Nova Alliance, one of three prequalified proponents, had been chosen as the preferred contractor. Final terms were to be negotiated by the end of March, with construction to start in the spring and completion by the end of 2023. pre-qualified to participate in the RFP stage. The contract price will be made public once the agreement is finalized.



**This new interchange on Highway 11 near Shediac Bridge will be the last such construction in New Brunswick for the foreseeable future.
(PHOTO – Ted Bartlett)**

The other twinning projects include the controversial 9-km Burnside Connector in suburban Halifax, 9.5 km of Highway 101 between Three Mile Plains and Falmouth, and 22 km of Highway 103 between Tantallon and Hubbards.

Meanwhile, New Brunswick's Higgs administration has concluded that politically popular but expensive four-lane roads are too rich for the Province's limited financial resources. The brakes have been applied to the Highway 11 twinning project started by the previous government, but with intent to make best use of work already done. Accordingly, the costly plans to build a major two-lane bridge across the Cocagne River, coupled with interchange structures on each side, have been shelved. The twinned highway will now end just south of Cocagne, and will eventually resume on the partially-completed route between the opposite bank and the Little Bouctouche River. A planned shorter and less costly bridge across the Shediac River will proceed, with construction set to begin in 2020. No other twinning projects are being contemplated.

-Ted Bartlett

Meet a Member

Jim Roche



Jim Roche at his desk in the Port aux Basques ferry terminal, ca 2005.

Jim Roche brings 42 years of transportation industry experience to TAA, in both the aviation and marine fields.

His career began in 1975 when he joined the Maintenance Department with Transport Canada at St. John's Airport. He moved steadily up the ladder, and in 1997 was appointed general manager with the newly formed St. John's International Airport Authority, remaining in that role until 2002.

In September 2001 Jim's management experience would be put to the test with the events of the 9-11 terror attacks in New York. On that fateful day some

twenty-eight aircraft and approximately four thousand passengers, would arrive at St. John's within a three-hour window – to an already congested facility with minimal amenities. Although it didn't quite make it to the Broadway stage, YYT's outstanding response to the crisis, with its dedicated team of staff and community resources under Jim's leadership, would last some four challenging days.

In 2002 he set out on his own, founding Aviation Solutions Inc., a consulting company providing strategic planning and management expertise to the aviation industry.

Two years later he chose a new career path, joining Marine Atlantic Inc. as general manager responsible for terminal and shore-based ferry operations. Based in Port Aux Basques NL, he oversaw operations at all three facilities owned by the Crown corporation in Port Aux Basques, Argentia, and North Sydney NS. In 2007 Jim was appointed manager, special projects at company headquarters in St. John's, where he remained until retirement in December 2017. In this position he played an integral part in the introduction of three new ships – the *Atlantic Vision*, *Blue Puttees* and *Highlanders* to the Marine Atlantic fleet.

Jim and his wife Lorraine reside in St. John's. They have two sons, Michael and Stephen, and a grandchild Flynn who makes retirement life all the more worthwhile.

Snowmageddon 2020

It was a blizzard for the record books! The worst winter storm in living memory roared into eastern Newfoundland in the early hours of Friday, January 17, and raged on for nearly 24 hours. Packing hurricane-force winds, it dumped more than 78 centimetres of snow on St. John's airport, paralyzing all transportation. City Hall declared a state of emergency that remained in effect for eight days, keeping all but emergency vehicles off the streets and requiring most offices and business to remain closed.



The airport was one of the first pieces of infrastructure to return to near-normal. Following what a spokesperson termed a “remarkable team effort”, YYT was reopened for medevac and military flights as of 0900 on Sunday. Commercial flights didn’t resume for another three days. (PHOTO – St. John’s International Airport Authority)



Metrobus service didn’t resume until the state of emergency was lifted on January 25, but filled an important role while the traffic and parking situation remained difficult. Transit fares were waived for two weeks after service restarted, and the buses handled standing-room-only crowds. (PHOTO from Twitter)