Articulated buses poorly designed for snowy conditions, trainer says: Power is in rear section only
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Ottawa's transportation committee will meet today to discuss what should be done after 54 OC Transpo buses became stuck or slid off streets during Friday morning's snowy rush hour.

Goulbourn Councillor Janet Stavinga, who heads the committee, said that although the committee won't meet formally again until January because of budget talks, members will gather today to try to find out what went wrong.

"With an event of this magnitude, we need to see what lessons we can learn," she said, adding she'll be asking for a verbal report in January.

"Certainly, we'll be asking our staff what can be done to prevent this," added Bay Councillor Alex Cullen, who sits on the transportation committee. Almost all the problems involved late-model articulated buses, which are badly designed for use in heavy snow, according to a Transpo driver trainer.

Guy Tasse, who trains new drivers and drives buses himself, said the latest-model articulated buses (the two-section buses with the "accordion" in the middle) made by New Flyer of Canada, have both the drive wheels and engine in the rear, past the accordion section.

This means the front section has no power of its own, making it difficult to manoeuvre through snow, especially on hills.

The other problem is that, once an articulated bus has turned at a 32-degree angle or greater, drivers can no longer reverse, preventing them from doing anything if a bus starts to jack-knife.

"They've got 42 or 43 new buses that are entirely redesigned. It'll take a bit of time to get all the bugs out," he said.

"I haven't seen the city in that kind of mayhem in a long time."

However, "on light snow, they're fairly good," said Mr. Tasse.

He said the new buses are equipped with a "deep mud switch" that a driver can push to get the drive wheels moving full-throttle when stuck, but with the other design issues, there is only so much that system can do.

Mr. Tasse, who was driving an older bus on Friday, had no problems during his shift, but he saw many of the new buses stuck.

Mr. Cullen noted that the city has used articulated buses for many years without any major problems.

But Osgoode Councillor Doug Thompson, who also sits on the transportation committee, said he's eager to learn what happened.

"I think it's important to find out what the problem was," he said.

Mr. Thompson suggested he might look into not using the articulated buses on days when snowfall is expected to be as heavy as it was Friday.

"I know that we need those types of buses to get residents around the city," he said. But "if they're out there and they're not in service, they aren't helping anyone."

Mr. Cullen, however, said the freak snowfall was the biggest problem.

"I think people need to realize that was a lot of snow. We came within centimetres of having a record snowfall."

The traffic-slowing buses included one stuck on the hill leading up to Slater Street from LeBreton Flats, backing up the transitway to Tunney's Pasture, and six articulated buses stuck at Eddy Street and Tache Boulevard in Hull.

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