BRIEF TO WINNIPEG CITY COUNCIL, EXECUTIVE POLICY COMMITTEE

RE: THE PROPOSED INCREASE IN PUBLIC TRANSIT FARES

By the MANITOBA OBLATE JUSTICE AND PEACE COMMITTEE

NOVEMBER 14, 2007

The Manitoba Oblate Justice and Peace Committee is are members and associates of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, who have endeavoured to serve the weakest and most marginalized among us since arriving in the Red River in 1845.

In November of 1994, we were in this same room making a presentation during the public consultations on the city's draft budget. At that time the preoccupation of the council was to freeze or reduce property taxes while proceeding with a number expensive new infrastructure projects, including new bridges and overpasses and a proposed new arena at the Forks.

Among the solutions proposed that year were drastic reductions to public services and an 11% increase in bus fares.

So what has changed after 13 years?

We still have a city council made up hard-working men and women who are dedicated to making the city a better place.

We still face an enormous problem of sprawl. The per capita footprint of the city of Winnipeg is one of the largest among major Canadian cities. Despite a stable population and efforts for down-town revitalization, we continue building massive new suburbs at the peripheries and expensive new roadways to connect them.

The overarching priority of the EPC is still to cut taxes. Today we have moved on from a freeze or modest cuts in property taxes to the total elimination of the business tax.

Thirteen years ago, among the measures proposed by the EPC were massive cuts to city pools, recreation, and alternative education opportunities and alternative work programs. Delegation after delegation came to city hall to beg our city leadership to ~~make~~ recognize the needs of the growing mass of young people who were feeling increasingly alienated from the rest of the population and who desperately needed the safe places and special projects that might deter them from the destructive (and self-destructive) alternatives that many were finding increasingly attractive.

Ominously, in 1994, the City Police had just organized a special unit to monitor youth gangs, which were just beginning to appear on the radar of the public consciousness. Today we are reaping the results of the short-sighted decisions of past leadership. We congratulate our present leadership from learning from these mistakes and not choosing to again slash youth-related programs in to pay for other priorities.

As in 1994, we are once again we are faced with a substantial increase in transit fares: about five times the rate of inflation. This drastic increase came as an even greater shock than in 1994 since the provincial government has increased its contribution to the municipal transit systems and now funds Winnipeg Transit up to 50%.

It has been proposed that a portion of this increase will be used to begin a reserve fund for a future rapid transit system. On the surface the logic is sound: save up today for what will be needed tomorrow. However, we fail to understand why transit users are to be the only ones in the city who pay in advance for future infrastructure needs – infrastructure for which there is still no firm commitment on the part of the city to build. Were Jets and Moose fans required to pay a surcharge on their tickets in order to build the new arena? Will drivers along McGillvary Blvd pay a toll to pay for the planned twinning?

We suppose the logic is that transit users have no option but to pay the increase or buy a bus pass. Unfortunately, for someone on a low income, a $71 outlay at the beginning of every month is a huge investment that is simply beyond the means of many families. $71 dollars represents just about the entire monthly food budget for a single adult on social assistance. For a minimum wage earner, it takes two full days of work to pay a bus pass. (In 1977 it cost the same minimum wage earner only 4 hours of work to pay for her monthly pass.)

Many of the low income people we work with cannot afford to use our transit system even at current rates. Mothers who forego meals in order to feed their children often walk many kilometres to appointments or work because they don't have the cash for a bus ticket.

Once again, we are placing a disproportionate burden of planned tax cuts and relentless sprawl on the shoulders of those who have the least capacity to bear it.

All of us have heard the maxim that the measure of a society is how it treats the most vulnerable among us.

We build public parks with free access, to assure that even the most destitute among us can enjoy an open green space where their children can play or their elderly parents relax. We build public libraries and schools to assure that everyone one of us can get a basic education and so contribute to the economy and cultural life of the community. We build public transportation systems to assure that everyone has a reasonable opportunity to be able to move around the city to work, to go to school, to visit family or to enjoy a few moments of recreation. A well-functioning city recognizes that access to affordable transportation is a right and a necessity for all of its citizens, not only for those with high incomes.

The citizens of Winnipeg are rightly concerned about an increase of violence in our city. But is violence only what we do with knives and guns?

When we purposely exclude a sizeable segment of our population from possibilities that the rest of us take for granted, do we not do them violence? When mothers have to forego meals to pay bus tickets for their children or men have to walk long distances home after a long day of physical labour, do we not do them violence? When, in order to get to work, people have to wait up to an hour at a transfer point on a frigidly cold Winnipeg winter Sunday, are we not doing them violence?

Violence breeds violence. Young people sense the exclusion and feel justified in defacing their buildings of their neighbourhoods; searching for somewhere to belong, many turn to street gangs. Others, sensing full well they are not valued, simply drop out, and choose not to participate. For example, go into any Winnipeg neighbourhood dominated by the economically disadvantaged on an Election Day and take a poll of how many – or better, how few – have voted. Long ago they came to feel that their voice and their needs don't really count. A culture of non-respect takes root and grows. How can a parent teach her children to respect their city environment when they feel so little valued by their fellow citizens?

Like public parks and libraries, an efficient, affordable and speedy transportation system benefits not only those who cannot afford their own vehicle. Public transport takes thousands of cars off the road, reducing congestion and travel times even for those who still need to drive private cars. Less traffic means less

wear and tear on roads, lower infrastructure repair costs and lower taxes. As cities develop their public transit systems, they become more popular with all demographic groups – even land developers! As we have seen in Toronto, Ottawa, Vancouver, it becomes highly desirable to live near a rapid transit station. Property values near stations increase and development mushrooms, not on the periphery of the city where new services have to be constructed but in established parts of the city. And of course, there is the consequent reduction in greenhouse gases and other pollutants that benefit not just city-dwellers, but all life on our planet.

In short, looking out for the needs of the weakest among us is not only an idealistic principle for idealistic pastors and social workers, but good for all of us – good for other citizens, good for business, and good for the planet.

With this principle in mind, as you work together to frame the capital and operating budgets for the coming year, we would like to make the following ~~three~~ proposals.

First, we encourage you to maintain the freeze on transit fares that was promised only two years ago. We suggest that the freeze only be lifted when current transit users will see real improvements to the system, ~~improvements that would justify an increase in fares.~~

Over the past few years it appears that a consensus has emerged that the only serious way to improve public transportation in our city is to begin construction of a rapid transit system. ~~For our second proposal~~, we urge you to fix a percentage of the capital budget that every year would be earmarked for ongoing rapid transit construction.

~~Thirdly~~, we encourage our mayor and councillors to join other city councils across the country in undertaking a vigorous lobby of the senior levels of governments to secure funding agreements for public transit projects.

Finally, we encourage the leadership of our city to return to treating public transit like every other essential infrastructure in the city. That means improvements to public transportation, including the construction of a rapid transit system, be paid for in the same way as are the city's roads and bridges – by all the citizens of the city and not only by the users of the system.

- Margot Lavoie (coordinator)
- Brother Thomas Novak OMI

Andly, given that those on social assistance generally receive no subsidy for travel needs, we propose that the City implement an additional reduced-fare pass for those surviving on minimum income.