Submission to Winnipeg City Council, Executive Policy Committee

By the Winnipeg Rapid Transit Coalition

July 7, 2010

Your Worship, Councillors,

First of all, we would like to express our appreciation for the upgrades made to the Transit system over the past year: real time bus stop announcements, queue jump lanes, transit advance signals and more diamond lanes – all recommendations of the report of the Rapid Transit Task Force in 2005.

However the reason we are here today is to express our shock and frustration that once again the main recommendation of that same report, the speedy completion of the Southwest Rapid Transit Corridor, is facing another major delay.

Your Worship, on September 8, 2008, you accepted the recommendation of that Task Force. With much fanfare, you and the Premier announced the construction of a bus rapid transit corridor to the University of Manitoba. Today, almost half of the concrete for the first phase of the busway has been poured. Over the last month both the province and federal government have made it abundantly clear that funding for the completion of the corridor is available, but sitting lonely and unwanted. Minister Lemieux is practically on his knees begging the city to accept financing that is already approved. Minister Toews has clearly indicated that should the City apply to the Building Canada Fund to complete the busway, approval would be a mere formality.

Yet, Your Worship, Councillors, you have chosen to turn down this sure and certain financing that is available through the Building Canada Fund. And now, with the concrete not even dry on the first half of Phase One, you propose to rip it all up and start again.

The proposal that is on the table today is so empty of detail that it is impossible to know with certainty what kind of bargain basement system is being proposed. The best guess that we can make is that it is not for made-in-Winnipeg buses, nor even for light rail, but for streetcars – streetcars that are designed for congested downtown streets, not for rapid transit corridors. The proposed Rapid Transit Busway is to be transformed into a slow and clunky tramway. Instead of getting on a rapid bus at the University or in Waverly West for a single ride all the way downtown, riders will get on a bus, get off the bus, wait in a cold station for a tram, then potentially get off the tram and wait again to take another bus from Queen Elizabeth Way to downtown.

Your worship, we have come to admire your constancy. Since taking office – with one lapse in 2008 – you have persistently and consistently put one obstacle after another in the way of Rapid Transit. Yes, proposals do abound. Light Rail Transit yesterday, streetcars today. Tomorrow it may be high-speed helicopters, submarines under the Red, or a cable car departing from the top of the Richardson Building. The proposals are intriguing. The photos are seductive. Every one of the members of the Rapid Transit Coalition gets a warm and fuzzy feeling looking at the photos of the sleek new Bombardier streetcars. But then we look at the facts. Under your leadership, City Council allotted not one cent for the completion of the Corridor in the current Capital Budget. Two months ago Council decided not to include Rapid Transit among its Infrastructure priorities. It is now proposed that the City turn down the certainty of the Building Canada Fund in order to pursue the risky and potentially controversial P3 Program.

The P3 Fund is a far smaller pot than the Building Canada Fund. The process of application and approval can take up to at least 12 months. And on top of it all, recourse to a P3 fund will raise the spectre of privatization. Like the recent protracted debate over the water utility, activists will come out in force to oppose the feared privatization of our public transit system. Many of those who advocate for Rapid Transit today will be lining up tomorrow to oppose it – at least to oppose the spectre of a privatized transitway. The debate will go on an on. Construction will be delayed again. And in the meantime, City Council will return their more familiar role as advocates of new roads for private vehicles and the increasing the city's network of potholes by inexorably expanding the regional street system.

Your worship, members of EPC, the members of the Winnipeg Rapid Transit Coalition are not opposed to Light Rail, or streetcars, or any other means of public transit. The new *Our Winnipeg* plan proposes 5 rapid transit corridors. It may well be that that some of these, as this proposal suggests, would be better suited for light rail or streetcars – perhaps the western line to Polo Park. We trust that planners at Winnipeg Transit are seriously studying all options as they devise plans for the expansion of the City's Rapid Transit System.

It is quite possible that, in the future, traffic on the Southwest Corridor will increase to a point where conversion to Light Rail will be economical and even necessary. However, each and every one of the studies that has been done on the Southwest Corridor has come to the same conclusion: Bus Rapid Transit is the most cost-effective solution at the present time, given all current technologies.

Your worship, members of the EPC, the report before us is extremely sketchy and incomplete. Moreover, it appears that the document that is before you for consideration today has been written, not by experts in the Transit Department but by policy-makers in the mayor's office or elsewhere in the public service. We believe that this Council is committed to accountability and transparency. Therefore, before going any further in consideration of this report, we strongly encourage you to release all the data on which the conclusions of this report are based and all the analysis on which the authors of this proposal have based their recommendations. Furthermore, before going any further in your consideration of this report, we ask you to turn over this report and all data and analysis on which it was based to Winnipeg Transit. We urge you to allow the experienced planners at Transit to digest all these facts and to give them time to integrate any new information that may have recently come to light into their own proposals for an improved transit system.

In the meantime, we ask you to get on with the work that you committed to in September 2008. Finish Phase One of the Corridor according to plans you have approved. As you promised in 2008, begin preparations immediately for the completion of the BRT corridor all the way to the new Stadium and the University of Manitoba. Accept the money that is already on the table and get on with Corridor.

There is only one more study that needs to be undertaken: a study of the reactions of Winnipeg commuters to the City's first full and complete rapid transit corridor – designed according to the model that every study has shown to be, at this moment, the most affordable, most efficient and most cost effective. Your Worship, Councillors, it's time to get on board. Let's complete the Busway.

- Thomas Novak (co-chair) and Valerie Wolbert
  For the Winnipeg Rapid Transit Coalition