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Presentation to Executive Policy Committee, City of Winnipeg

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Mayor Bowman, Deputy Mayor Pagtakhan and Councillors Browaty, Lukes, Mayes Morantz and Orlikow – thank you for your time and attention today.

To begin we want to acknowledge the commitment you have made in this year's budgets to Winnipeg Transit. The City's 2016 proposed operating and capital budgets have given a definite nod in favour of improving public transit. The large capital and transit subsidy increases will give Transit a much needed shot it the arm.

We also want to commend you for your work on increasing security on buses. We cannot have a viable public transit system if passengers do not feel safe and if operators are being assaulted. We hope that security remains a priority for you.

What we want to emphasize today is the importance of public transportation as a response to poverty and social marginalization. There are many people living throughout Winnipeg who rely on public transit to get to work, appointments, volunteer, go to the library or swimming pool and just to socialize with friends and family. They include seniors, low income families, people on social assistance, students and people with disabilities who either cannot drive or cannot afford to own a car.

We have even heard of low income families who do own one, even two cars simply because bus service is too poor to accommodate their needs. Their money could be better spent on many other things if they had access to better transit service.

I spoke to one woman – a senior - who works promoting product samples in a grocery store chain. She gets sent all over the city, often working evenings and Sundays. She often has wait up to an hour to catch the bus home, then transfer once or even twice on cold, dark winter evenings. This woman is doing the best she can to earn a living, but the transit situation is a real stressor in her life. Stories like this are not uncommon.

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Bus service is not what it should be is because there are not enough buses on the road – especially in non-peak hours. We need around 200 more buses in our fleet and those buses should be used to increase service so people who work different shifts or who need to take their children places on the weekend or evenings.

We know that adding to the bus fleet will have to be done incrementally, and buying used buses from other jurisdictions would help keep costs down. But used buses would have to be re-furbished, and that brings us to another flaw in the system: there are not enough experienced mechanics and body repairers to do the work. The shortage of mechanics also means that maintenance work does not get done in a timely manner, keeping existing buses off the road.

Transit has to come up with a strategy to attract and retain experienced mechanics and body repairers, including offering competitive pay. This could be achieved by implementing a "trades market supplement," something other municipalities in Western Canada have introduced to meet the demand for qualified tradespeople.

We would also urge the City to consider a program to train and hire multi-barriered youth to fill Transit's labour needs. At CCPA we have done a lot of research on social enterprises like BUILD (Building Urban Industries for Local Development), MGR (Manitoba Green Retrofit) and BEEP (Brandon Energy Efficiency Program) – organizations that train and mentor young, mostly Indigenous youth so they can develop skills in the trades and move on to work in the private sector. We have spoken with John Callahan at the Amalgamated Transit Union; he has been to the Social Enterprise Centre to see how these programs work and he is very interested in exploring how to do something similar with Transit. We think this is an avenue you should explore,

The City would win two ways: it could increase its workforce and it could give these young people a pathway out of poverty and, in many cases, a life of crime.

Finally, a low-income bus pass, such as the one in Calgary, should be available so everyone can afford to take the bus. There should also be an option for a 'family' pass so that parents can afford to take their children to recreational activities around the City. This spring Transit will begin introducing a Smart Card which will give passengers different options for paying fares. This technology will make it easier to provide low-income individuals and families with lower-cost options.

In sum, Winnipeg Transit employees have kept transit services running as best they could during a long period of neglect. With the new security program in place, a commitment to Rapid Transit and the beginning of investment in maintenance trades staff and the bus fleet, we are optimistic that Transit's fortunes are slowly changing. We hope you continue in this direction, and consider our recommendations, so the fortunes of low-income Winnipeggers and marginalized youth can improve as well.