West Central Women's Resource Centre:
Statement on Proposed Transit Fare Hike and Route Cuts

EPC Special Meeting, December 5, 2017
2018 Budget Review

Good afternoon Honourable Mayor, Councillors and Public Service Representatives,

My name is Denise MacDonald and I am here on behalf of the women and families at West Central Women's Resource Centre.

Let me start by telling you about Selma (not her real name). Selma came to Winnipeg as a refugee from Central America to secure a better life for her family. She is a single mother of three school-age children with limited resources and limited English. She comes to our centre regularly to access services that help her make ends meet and provide for her children. She also comes to be part of a vibrant and supportive community.

Selma and her children are often on the bus twice a day. The proposed fare increase mean that every ride will be one dollar more and Selma could be paying up to $14 more a week or $40 more a month if she uses buss passes. She is especially worried about her ability to take her children to their church on Sundays. The church allows them to remain grounded in their culture and spiritual beliefs, and the services last longer than a bus transfer.

Like all women living in poverty, every dollar counts. Selma and countless women in the same position will have no choice but to further reduce their meager budget for food and other basic needs.

You state in your budget that you do not think it is fair for transit riders to bear the entire burden of addressing the funding gap the City faces. We agree with you on that. What you need to realize is that this increase will be a disproportionately larger burden for women and families.

Women are still expected to take on the majority of caregiving, so for them, it's not just a 25 cent increase. If they have one child, it's a 50 cent increase, for two children it's 75 cents, and for larger families, which is especially common among newcomers, it can be over a dollar each trip. This may limit their access to the food bank, social worker, women's centres, educational opportunities, employment etc. And many women are working on reuniting their families. As one woman told us: "it will make it harder to get to visits with my kids and go to very important appointments." By limiting their mobility, you are limiting their ability to get out of the cycle of poverty.

We've been hearing from many women worried that they don't have the ability to walk more if they can't afford the bus. One of our staff who depends on the bus has a bad back and ankle. Many others have to navigate uncleared winter sidewalks with a stroller or in a wheelchair. Elderly women are scared that one fall on the ice could send them to the hospital with a broken hip. What are their options?

We understand that the Province's decision to unilaterally eliminate the 50/50 transit funding agreement put the City in a difficult position. But tight budgets are about priorities. And your message to the women and families at our centre is that reliable and affordable transportation is not a priority, while reducing business taxes, opening Portage and Main, and increasing policing is.

Policing takes up the largest portion of your budget. We support an adequately funded police force, but there are countless studies that link crime with poverty. Poverty can make a person desperate, especially when they need to provide for a family. So if you want to lower crime, you need to address poverty and its roots. Poverty is a result of colonization, racism, and a lack of supports.

Mayor Bowman, you have been an important advocate for reconciliation and the elimination of racism in our City. However, the City has so far failed to make the link between reconciliation and poverty reduction. Indigenous Winnipeggers are over-represented in poverty-related statistics, and this fare increase will only make it more difficult to escape poverty. This is not the road to reconciliation.

I'd also like to address proposed route cuts, which also impact the women we serve. By cutting services in off peak hours, you are impacting Winnipeggers that – as Michael Redhead Champagne put it – don't have the luxury of a 9-5 job.

One woman who accesses our centre discovered that the ~~four~~ three bus routes she depends on to get to work (the 97, 79, 45, ~~47~~) are on the cut list. With reduced service, she says she would have to leave three hours earlier to get to work, which is three hours less to spend with her family.

Our centre conducted a survey earlier this year and found that women are coming from all four corners of the city to access our services, including during our evening and Saturday hours. Cutting these routes means women will spend more time waiting at bus stops, usually alone and for much of the year in the dark. This is not a mere inconvenience – it places them in danger.

Even with these routes, some women have *walked to our centre from the perimeter* to access our services because they could not afford bus fare. Try telling them they should feel lucky we still have among the lowest fares among Canadian cities.

This comparison to fares in other jurisdictions is not meaningful, nor a justification for an almost 10% increase in fares overnight. It's an issue of *affordability for Winnipeggers*. Winnipeg has a high poverty rate, a low vacancy rate in housing, huge waitlists for social housing and childcare, and is in the bottom half of the country for average salaries. EIA rates aren't going up. Disability rates aren't going up. And the minimum wage is a poverty wage.

Transit is *currently* not affordable for so many, and groups have been advocating for a low-income bus pass. Instead, the affordability gap is widening even more. You have to realize that you will further impoverish the women and families in our community. And organizations like ours don't have the capacity to make up the difference.

We urge you to eliminate this increase and lift the burden from women, Indigenous citizens, and all those living with low-income. You are financing capital assets to the tune of $22.1 million. We urge you to also see your citizens as assets. To see women and families as assets. To see Selma as an asset.

Thank you

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