Mayor Sam Katz and Members of the Executive Policy Committee,

How many times do we have to appear at EPC to fight bus fare increases? For the past 10 years we have been 'nickeled' and 'dimed' to death (the metaphor being that every time bus fares increase by a nickel or a dime, there is a decrease in ridership). And every time we have appeared, we have asked 'when will the bleeding stop?' Last year, former Mayor Glen Murray indicated to me that once the New Deal was in place there would be a decrease in bus fares and that they would not increase anymore. But of course, that hasn't happened, has it? No New Deal has been put in place, and to be blunt Mayor Katz, can you assure us that there won't be bus fare increases next year and the year after that, in spite of your promise to have seniors ride the buses for free during rush hours beginning next year? Don't you think that this idea is somewhat discriminatory? Students, people with disabilities and people on fixed incomes ride the bus too. Shouldn't they get a break? Are we going to have a larger bus fare increase next year in order to subsidize the seniors? Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not here to attack seniors. I fully support free bus rides during rush hours, but I think it should be available to everyone, not just one sector of the population.

I am absolutely sure that Mayor Katz and members of EPC are fully aware of the Transit report of 5 or 6 years ago, which indicated the crisis that Transit has been in since 1986 (the last year that Transit ridership was at its peak), during which time there has been a 21% reduction in service. There are fewer buses on the road today than in 1986. And as I have said over and over again, there has been a significant decrease in ridership each time bus fares are increased.

Now, you might ask - and legitimately - why is this happening in Winnipeg and not elsewhere? In other cities, bus fares are increased, but ridership does not decrease. That's because in all other major cities in Canada, public transportation and service is viewed as a priority - but not in Winnipeg! And as such, the continued decay of the Transit system in Winnipeg has resulted in ghettoizing public transportation. That means that only those who cannot afford a car take public transportation - people on fixed incomes, students and seniors - the majority of whom live in what we define as the 'inner city'. While in other cities, suburbanites leave their cars at home and take public transportation to work, here, suburbanites prefer to buy a second car to solve their transportation problems rather than using public transportation. Bus fare increase in those cities can easily be absorbed by the suburbanites and the middle class, while in Winnipeg fare increases force many of those who take the bus to seek an alternative such as walking or riding a bike.

Every year, City Council agrees with what I say, but shake their heads and argue

that because of the increased cost of gasoline and the failure of the provincial government to increase its cost sharing of Transit (it has decreased over the past decade from 50/50 share cost to 60/40 - that is, 60% city and 40% provincial), bus fares must be increased. This has caused us to be caught in this vicious cycle - as bus fares increase, ridership decreases, and the quality of Transit system deteriorates - and no one seems to know what to do about it.

Even more frightening to me, personally, is that the two car culture in Winnipeg is so prevalent, so ingrained. Please remember that when the public forums on the New Deal were held last year, North Enders publically indicated that even if public transit was free they wouldn't use it! So while I strongly support Donald Benham's motion to decrease bus fares, I fear that it will do nothing to increase bus ridership. Why? Because of the way people view bus service. People see service as slow, buses as dirty, bus shelters are unheated, etc. - whether this is reality or not. To be blunt, ridership will only increase when there is a **significant** improvement in the Transit system, including service, and when bus fares can be decreased.

In conclusion, we cannot continue down this slippery slope. We cannot continue in this vicious cycle of rising bus fares and deterioration of service that will ultimately result in public transportation becoming privatized. I urge EPC to freeze transit fares for this year and have the Task Force on Rapid Transit emphasize not only Rapid Transit, but to develop the steps needed to improve the current public transportation system in its report due in June 2005.

Thank you.

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Nick Ternette is a community and political activist, freelance writer and broadcaster.