

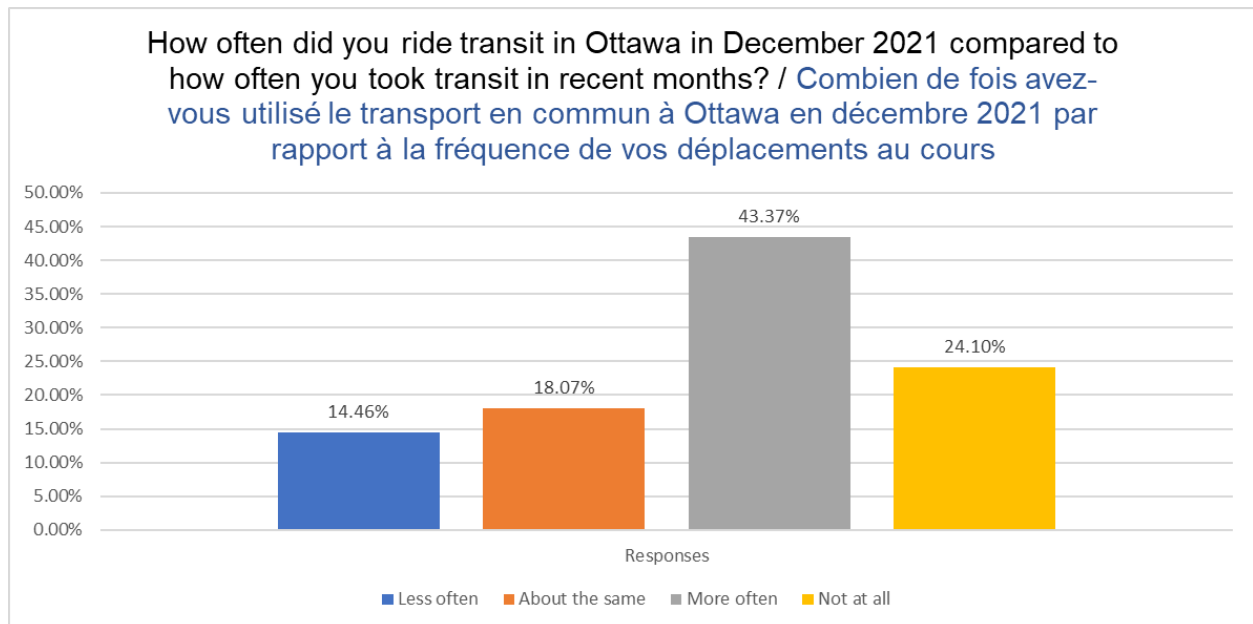


What we heard about *Free Transit* in December 2021

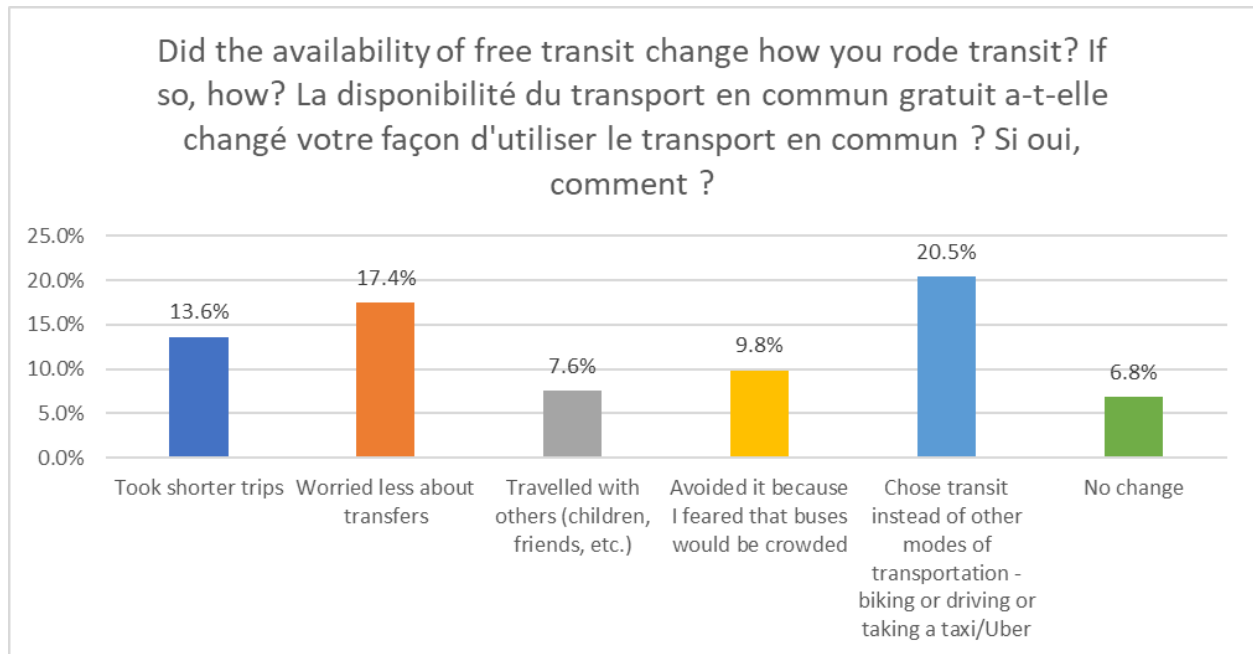
The Transit Commission offered Ottawa residents a month of “no charge” transit in December 2021 as a kind of apology for the failure of the LRT which has been unreliable and was shut down several times in the past year.

As transit advocates, the Ottawa Transit Riders decided to run a poll (available in both English and French) to ask residents about their experience. Some questions were specific to people who use ParaTranspo and some were just for OC Transpo drivers.

This is what we learned ...



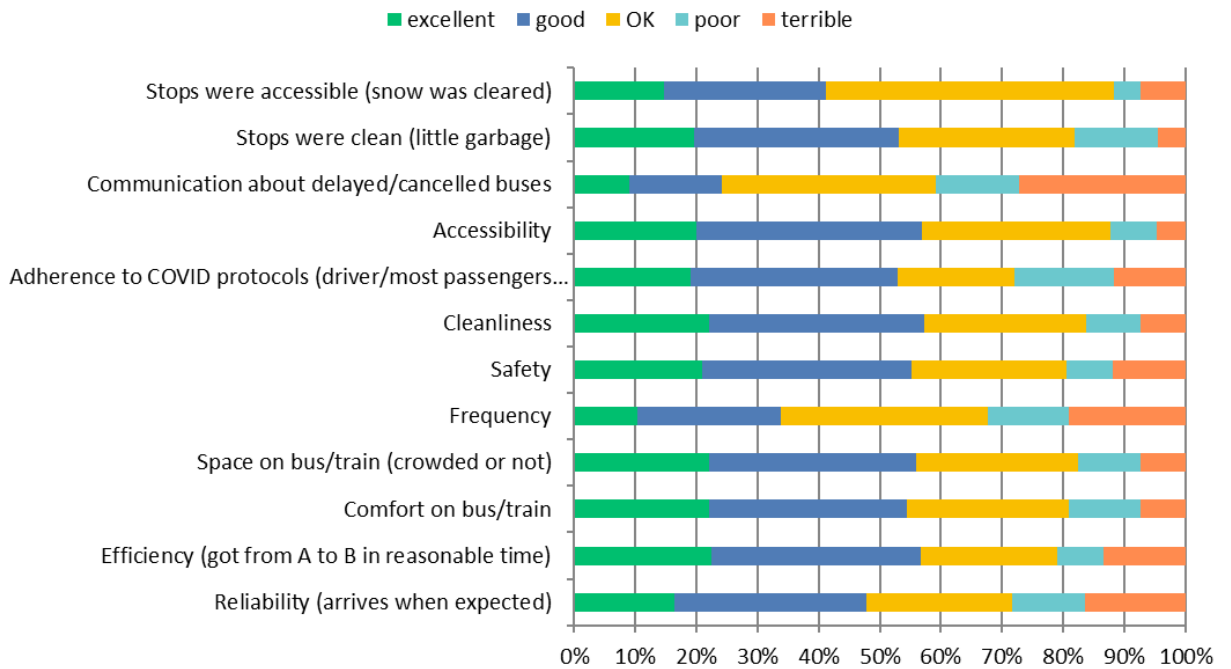
Not surprisingly, most people took transit more often.



Some questions in the survey were rather obvious, but we asked anyways. Free transit encouraged people to ride transit more often.

Note also that respondents indicated less worry about transfers ... the Ottawa Transit Riders has called for a longer transfer window to prevent people having to pay more when their trips take longer than expected - this will help low income people and infrequent riders (who pay per trip rather than with a pass).

How did you find the quality of OC Transpo's service during December? Comment avez-vous trouvé la qualité du service d'OC Transpo en décembre ?

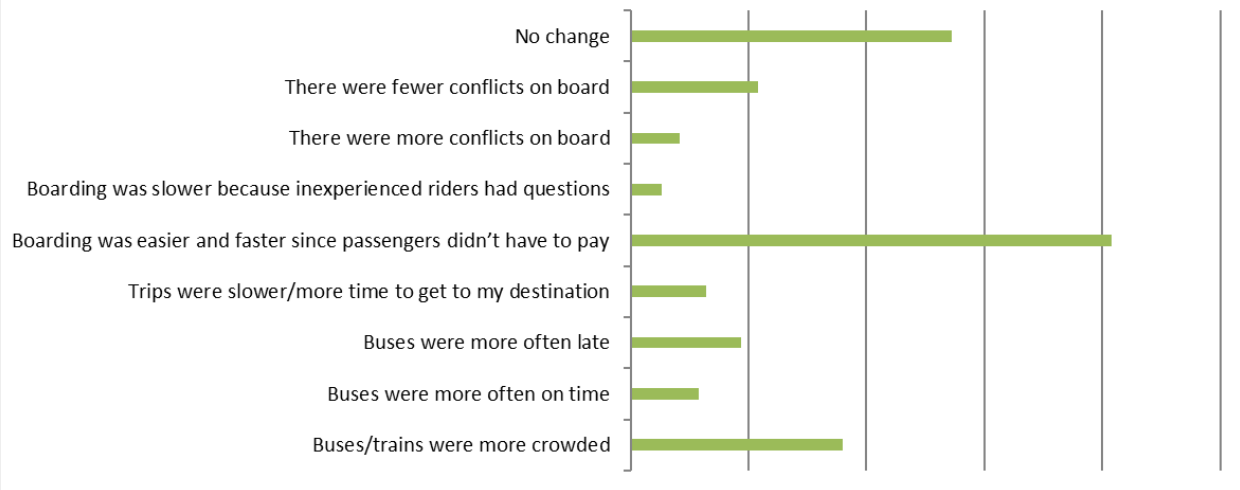


* Résultats de l'enquête en anglais uniquement

Most people who took transit in December were satisfied with the service. Some of the results of this question are surprising considering all the media attention on the frustrations of riders. Two things can be true – regular riders appreciate transit, and regular riders want transit to be better.

Note that people expressed the most frustration with poor communication about delayed and cancelled buses - 18 respondents described communication as terrible; only 6 people said it was excellent. The Ottawa Transit Riders has long argued that improving communication would be a cost-effective way to improve the experience of using transit in the city.

If you are a regular transit user, did you find that free transit affected service? If so, how? *Si vous êtes un usager régulier du transport en commun, avez-vous trouvé que la gratuité du transport en commun affectait le service ? Si oui, comment ?*



The observations are interesting. Advocates of free transit have long argued that two potential benefits are faster boarding and unloading, plus fewer conflicts between drivers and passengers.

The survey appears to support these arguments.

Riding transit was a happy experience every time - it was a more positive experience. I didn't stress about cramming as much as possible into a trip, and hurt my health doing so. I didn't have to decide whether I could afford it or not.

Several people said that they travelled more often, it no longer felt like a “waste”, and some said that they travelled at different times and to new places.

A number of respondents worried about COVID – they reported avoiding transit, described free transit as extra risky, and noted that there might have been a surge in interest if the month of free transit had not coincided with a surge in COVID.

Covid infections in community was a deterrence against greater use of a free service

Some people were very positive, indicating that they visited new parts of Ottawa and some reported that buses were more often on-time due to faster boarding. Many reported feeling less stressed about making sure that they had their wallets or Presto card ready.

Took a trip with family (kids) on the weekend, just to try out the bus and train

I am a senior; I liked not being restricted to Wed and Sun



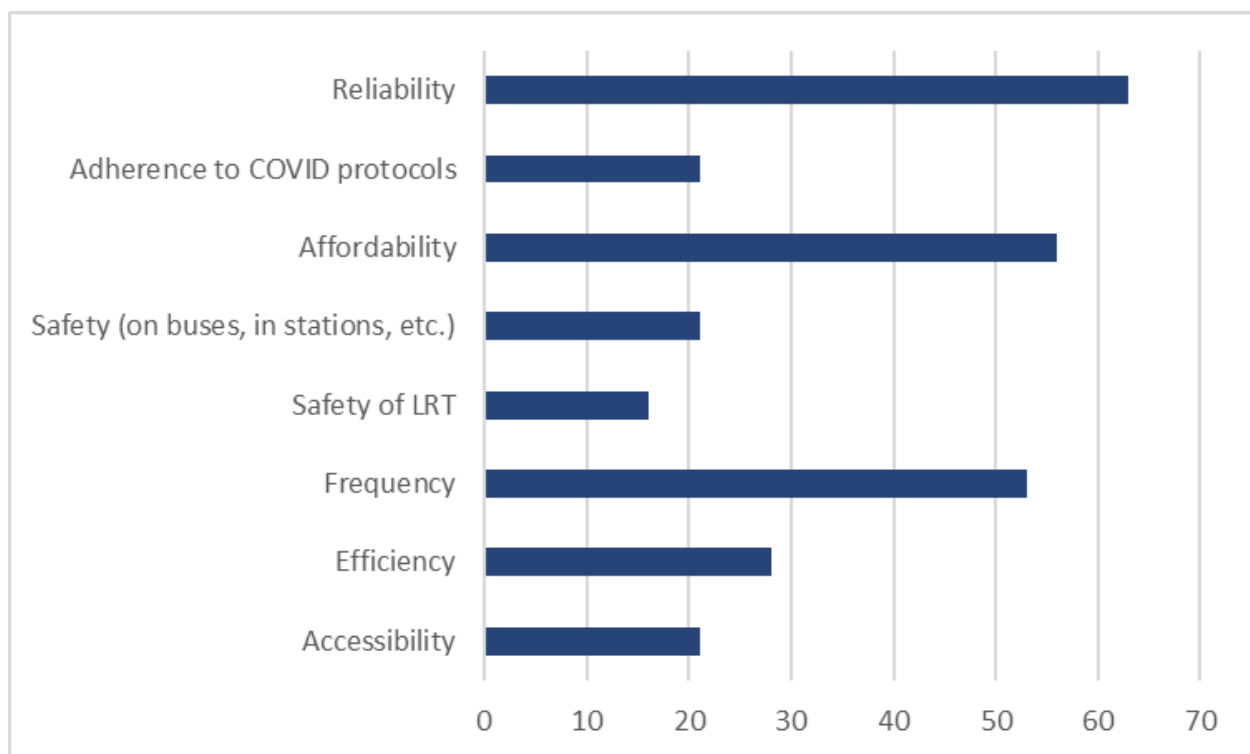
Buses were always on time this December because the buses did not need to stop to process payment for every passenger. As soon as fares returned, buses were once again 5 to 10 minutes late, forcing me to schedule with more buffer time.

Unfortunately, a few people noted that the buses were late or failed to show up so often that they were forced to use taxi or Uber as a backup. So free transit didn't really help.

Tried to take transit more often, but buses did not show up on schedule

One customer reached out to the Ottawa Transit Riders by email to report that they wished we had asked about the performance of the LRT - they were greatly distressed by the noise of the train.

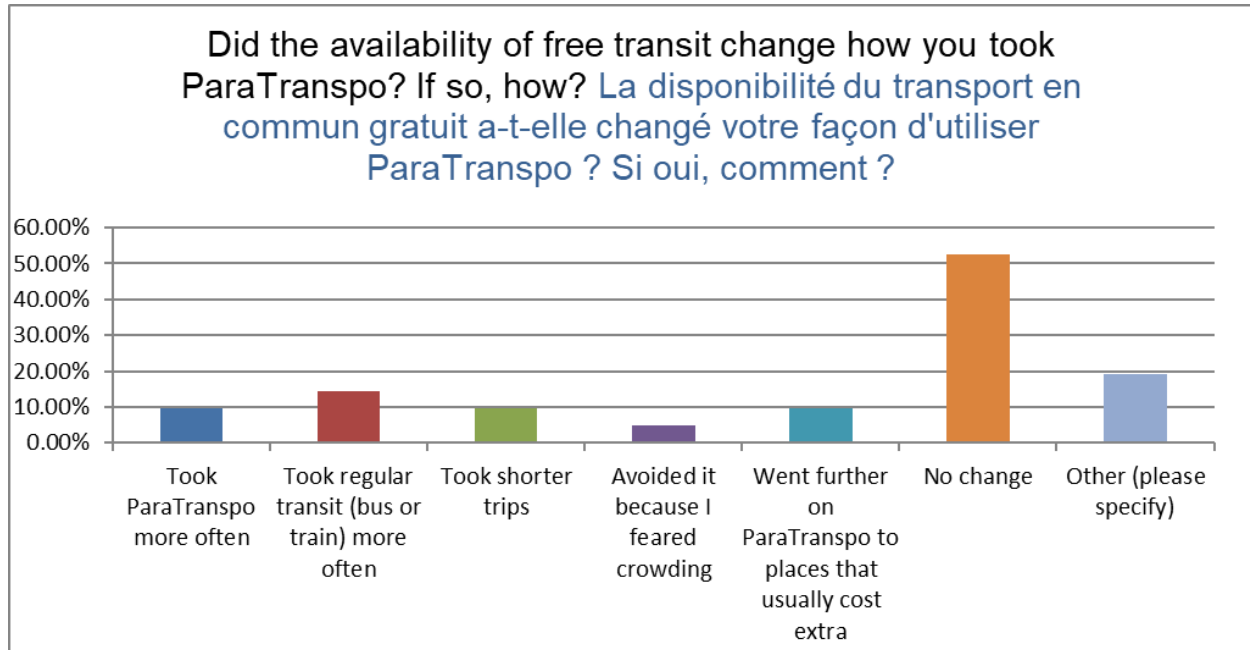
What are your top three priorities for public transit in Ottawa? / Quelles sont vos trois principales priorités en matière de transport en commun à Ottawa ?



It is no surprise that “reliability”, “affordability”, and “frequency” are the top three priorities for transit riders in Ottawa.

What did riders of ParaTranspo tell us?

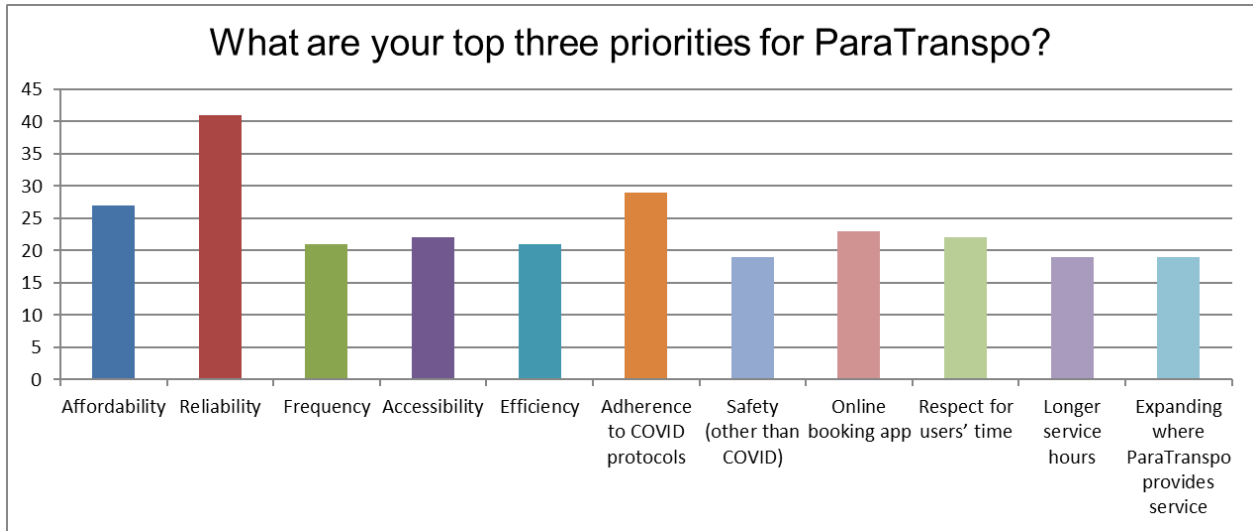
People who ride ParaTranspo have needs and experiences that are distinct from those who ride only “regular” OC Transpo buses. We wanted to capture their specific experience and priorities.



We assume that the majority of people who use ParaTranspo rely on its service so the option of free transit may not have changed their travel plans.

For people who use ParaTranspo, even more than other transit users, transit is an essential service.

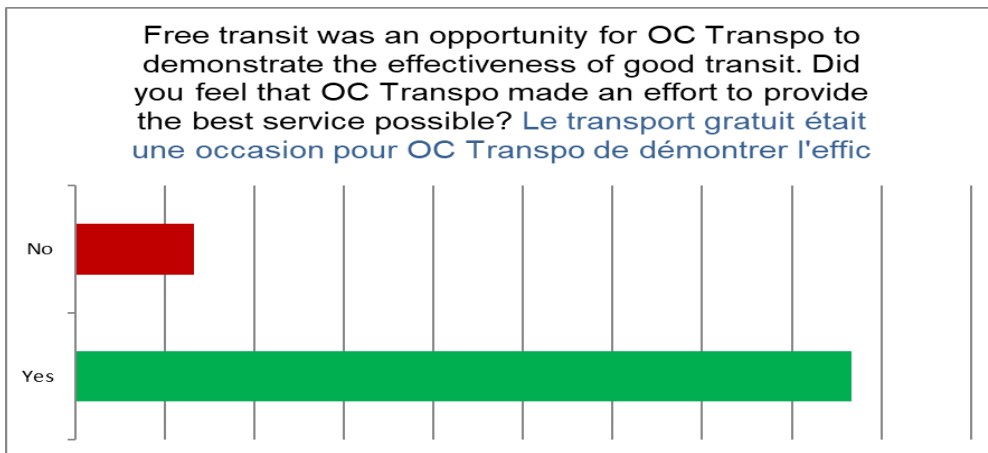
As with other transit users, some expressed concern about COVID; one respondent worried about sharing Para buses with others.



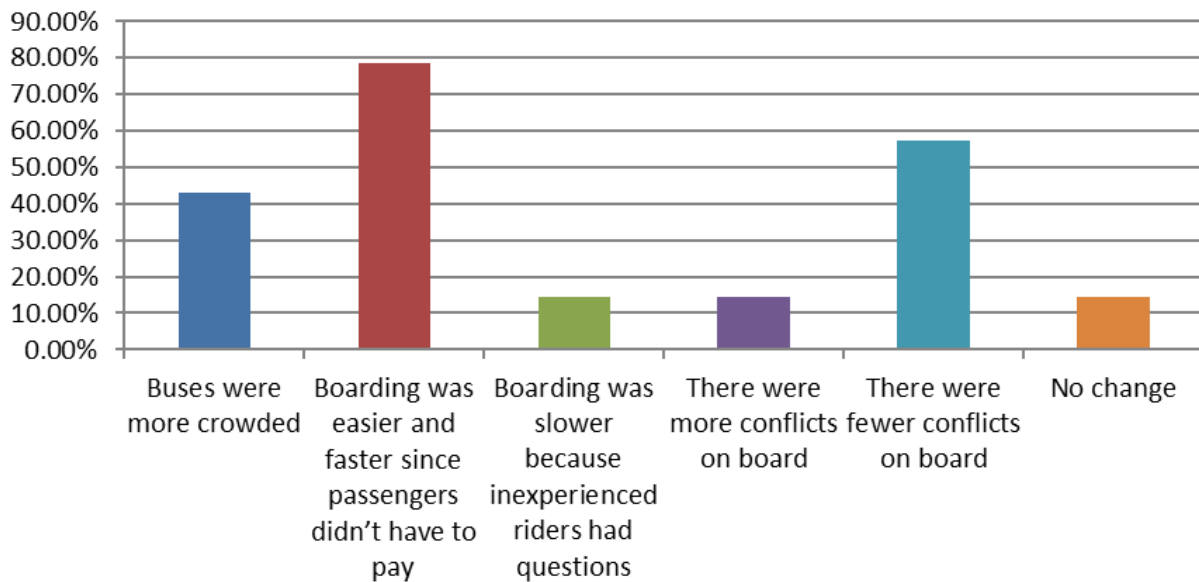
Similar to people who use only 'regular' OC Transpo service, riders who use ParaTranspo picked "reliability" as their highest priority. Adherence to COVID protocols was their second priority. Concern over COVID was high which is no surprise considering how close drivers and passengers must operate.

What did we learn from OC Transpo drivers?

In this survey, we also asked OC Transpo bus operators for their view of free transit. They have experience and a point of view distinct from riders. We were pleased that 24 drivers responded. Here is what they told us.



If you are a bus operator, what was your experience during the month of free transit? Si vous êtes chauffeur d'autobus, quelle a été votre expérience pendant le mois de gratuité du transport en commun ?



Do you have any comments about the value of free transit from the point of view of an employee of OC Transpo?

For the most part, the drivers agreed with riders that service needs to be reliable - free transit isn't much use if you can't trust that the bus will show up.

It didn't really attract any new riders. Service is still unreliable, and I feel until that is rectified, we will continue to not attract new riders (or riders who now drive).

It could have benefits however more communication, more support and security would be necessary. It was not entirely a negative experience.

At least one driver indicated that there were conflicts with people who used buses as shelter from the cold and just rode around for long periods of time.



Summary – what did we learn?

1. People chose to ride transit more often because it was free and some people changed their travel patterns (taking shorter trips, going to new locations, etc.)
2. Many people expressed concern about COVID – they were worried about riding crowded buses, etc. If the city offered another month of free transit post-pandemic, it might produce different results.
3. Transit riders prioritize affordability, reliability, and frequency.
4. The people who use ParaTranspo changed their travel plans only a little. Presumably, many are transit dependent so free transit didn't change their needs. This needs to be kept in mind as we advocate for greater capacity - ***transit is an equity issue***.
5. Drivers were guardedly positive about the experience, but doubtful about the value of free transit in the long term.
6. This tracks with experts who say that AFFORDABLE transit is important (it may be beneficial to provide free transit for specific groups such as teens, seniors, low-income residents), but that free transit for all is probably not worth the cost. It would be better to focus on better *quality* transit.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to complete the survey. We hope these data are useful to transit advocates.

Ottawa Transit Riders