

Orléans Transit Forum

March 25, 2023

What we heard

Introduction

Ottawa Transit Riders is a non-partisan, membership-based, advocacy group, working to make Ottawa's transit system more affordable, reliable, accessible, and safe for users. Ottawa Transit Riders believes that a robust transit system is at the heart of the solutions our City Council can implement in response to the climate crisis.

This report is about the transit forum in Orléans that was held on March 25th.

Questions

At each transit forum, we divide into groups and ask participants the following questions:

1. What is the state of transit in Orléans - what is important? Which routes are essential? What are frustrations?
2. What improvements or changes do you want to see? Which routes should change? Which buses need to run more frequently or on a different schedule?
3. What should Ottawa Transit Riders advocate for?

Comments / Answers

What is the state of transit in Orléans - what is important? Which routes are essential? What are frustrations?

The Chapel Hill South Community Association sent a representative with written comments from members - we are grateful for their input.

In Orléans, participants lamented the loss of express buses that used to transport people from several key locations in Orléans directly to downtown Ottawa. In 2019 routes were re-organized

to funnel people to the train. Instead of catching a bus in Orléans that would take commuters directly downtown, transit riders had to take a bus to Blair station then catch the train downtown.

Buses now run less frequently. Transfers take time. Buses are frequently late or cancelled. Many participants in the forum reported that transit takes longer now than it did prior to 2019. Transit is now much slower than driving (Chapel Hill South Community Association noted that it takes only about 10 minutes to drive from Blair station to Chapel Hill, but can take 30-40 minutes by transit even without considering missed buses).

The unreliability of transit makes transit riders anxious. Many people reported budgeting additional time to account for missed buses.

Some communities in the east like Navan and the new Avalon development have inadequate transit for their growing population. Some places have buses only at peak times.

Participants raised concerns about **route #28** in particular - it is plagued with delays and cancellations, especially in the afternoon or evening.

Communication is poor. Participants noted that riders need smartphones with data to track if buses are coming. This is an equity issue as not everyone has a smartphone, nor data.

Accessible transit

ParaTranspo is of especial concern. Participants talked about lack of capacity - there are not enough drivers and the buses are old and falling apart. The “new” website for booking trips is an improvement, but it is not an app and OC Transpo should stop promoting it as such.

ParaTranspo users complained that it was difficult to schedule bookings with any degree of accuracy leaving customers at risk of missing appointments or being late for work / school / social events.

Sometimes, ParaTranspo asks its customers to reschedule trips as if their planned excursions are less important. Coordination is poor - it is common for ParaTranspo to send multiple buses to pick up customers who are leaving from the same location and travelling to the same destination..

Infrastructure

A common refrain at the transit forum in Orléans was concerns about pedestrian infrastructure. When the LRT expands to Orléans, people will walk to and from the LRT stations yet pedestrian infrastructure is poor. Sidewalks are narrow and in poor condition, usually without shelter. Crosswalks are often inadequate. One participant described crossing at a near-by round-about as “suicidal”. Snow-clearing of bus stops and sidewalks is poor.

Blair station has some frustrating features. Two Orléans buses (38/39) pick riders up at different stops so if people are waiting at one stop, then see a bus at the other stop, they often run to catch the bus - participants worried that someone would get hurt. There were comments about the elevator at Blair station that is out-of-service far too often. Elevators are essential for accessibility and yet this one is treated as an after-thought.

What improvements or changes do you want to see? Which routes should change? Which buses need to run more frequently or on a different schedule?

The city needs to prioritize the needs of people who use mobility devices as well as people pushing strollers or who have mobility challenges. Snow clearing of bus stops and sidewalks needs to improve.

OC Transpo needs to have a plan to accommodate increased numbers of people using mobility devices and pushing strollers on transit during special events and on days with free transit (seniors' day for example).

Orléans is growing, especially to the south and consultations on route realignment should focus on asking people where they want to go. Participants at the forum expressed concern that OC Transpo would continue to funnel all riders to the train instead of offering parallel east-west bus routes south of Innes.

Participants also recommended that OC Transpo get creative - maybe consider short buses and more flexible on-demand transit for rural areas that lack density to support regular routes.

There were demands for direct buses from Orléans to Blair or from park-and-ride lots to downtown. There were also recommendations for more north-south routes to serve the LRT stations once they open. Right now, many buses going through Orléans are slow milk run routes.

The overall message from the transit panel was that Orléans is growing very fast and participants worried that the city is not planning to address their needs. Yes, transit needs to be improved, but also Orléans needs better sidewalks, better snow-clearing, better communication, better consultations ...

Fares

There was a lot of frustration about fares. Participants agreed that it is unreasonable to charge so much for a service that is failing. Participants recommended that fares be reduced across the board. The 90-minute transfer window should be extended, especially on days that service is delayed due to weather conditions, accidents, or the train breaking down.

There needs to be better coordination with STO so that people using Presto pay-as-you-go can ride STO buses. Right now, it is easier to use your Presto card on transit systems in the Greater Toronto area than across the river in Gatineau.

Customer service

Overall, participants argued that OC Transpo needs to consult with current riders and consider our needs when making changes.

Put people at the centre of all decisions

Drivers need to be more customer-oriented too. Pay attention to people trying to flag down buses, lower ramps when asked, intervene when people using wheelchairs assert their need for space, and believe riders who ask for accommodations. Drivers cannot assume knowledge about other people's disabilities.

Specific routes

Participants recommended that OC Transpo bring back route #130 (Convent Glen service). They noted that route #134 is often overcrowded - it needs to run more frequently. Route #28 needs review.

Overall improvements

Right now, OC Transpo prioritizes people commuting from suburbs to downtown offices on a regular weekday schedule. With so many people continuing to work from home, this is a poor strategy. Instead, OC Transpo should focus on transit dependent riders who may be commuting to other employment locations or travelling at off-peak hours. The post-pandemic change in commuting habits could be a golden opportunity for OC Transpo to reorganize its routes to serve more people without needing more resources.

Communication needs to be better. OC Transpo should offer more options for consulting on new LRT stations and route alignment. There should be ways for riders to provide feedback and to report real-time issues.

Accessible Transit

ParaTranspo lacks capacity - OC Transpo needs to hire more drivers and buy new buses. It should also offer a limited 24-hour service, especially to and from hospitals, the airport, and the VIA rail train station.

What should Ottawa Transit Riders advocate for?

The Ottawa Transit Riders will focus on the following issues based on what we learned at the Orléans Transit Forum:

- Overall - the city needs to improve their planning for adequate services (transit, bike lanes, pedestrian infrastructure) to handle the rapid growth that Orléans is experiencing.
- Accessibility - increase ParaTranspo capacity and customer service.
- Communication - improve communication *to* riders about delays and cancellations while also allowing for feedback *from* riders.
- Orléans-specific service - reinstate some express buses until the LRT is extended (and is reasonably reliable).
- Consult with locals about their needs.

The Ottawa Transit Riders is grateful to the people who took time on a wet, icy Saturday afternoon to provide their feedback on transit and express their hopes for better service.