

October 5, 2021

To: Fort Erie Council
Grimsby Council
Lincoln Council
Niagara Falls Council
Niagara-on-the-Lake Council
Pelham Council
Port Colborne Council
St. Catharines Council
Thorold Council
Wainfleet Council
Welland Council
West Lincoln Council
Niagara Regional Council

Cc: Wayne Gates, Niagara Falls MPP
Jennie Stevens, St. Catharines MPP
Jeff Burch, Niagara Centre MPP
Sam Oosterhoff, Niagara West MPP
Tony Baldinelli, Niagara Falls MP
Chris Bittle, St. Catharines MP
Vance Badawey, Niagara Centre MP
Dean Allison, Niagara West MP

To the members of our Niagara municipal councils (cc'ing our provincial and federal representatives):

We are writing on behalf of the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (NPRN) in order to share some feedback regarding the inter-municipal Moving Transit Forward plan that our councils will be reviewing and voting on this fall. NPRN is a collective of over 30 agencies and individuals working to wipe out poverty in Niagara through education, collaboration, and advocacy to address poverty's root causes. Our vision is for all Niagara residents to live above the poverty line, which can be achieved through our mission of Niagara residents, businesses and organizations working together to improve the quality of life in Niagara.

We appreciate your consideration of our concerns. In an acute way, we recognize that investment in Niagara transit needs to come from provincial and federal governments just as much or more than from our over-burdened municipalities. In light of this, we are particularly grateful for our councils' leadership on the relevant file. Our MPPs

and MPs are cc'd on this letter in order to also inform them of our concerns, and in hopes of hearing their feedback and relevant plans.

Thank you for the years of thought and consultation that you have put into the vital policy debate tied to the Moving Transit Forward plan. Thank you as well for your careful work in developing the plan's various pieces.

Re: Moving Transit Forward Service Plan, Financing, and Governance

The Moving Transit Forward model of improving transit through uploading, i.e. the Region uploading the existing lower-tier transit systems and combining them with the existing Regional system, is one that makes eminent sense to us, as this will improve coordination of our municipalities' scarce transit resources. We thus fully support the plan's core principle of funding transit through the Regional levy.

However, we are concerned by a principle simultaneously enshrined in the current version of Moving Transit Forward, to the effect that taxpayers in the lower tier municipalities are only to pay for the transit that their individual municipalities receive. This will severely limit the available municipal funds for transit expansion and improvement. The proposed rule will decrease the willingness of taxpayers both in the municipalities that currently use transit more and in the municipalities that currently use transit less from supporting significant new investment.

We thus urge you to consider a more collaborative financing model, pursuant to which higher-income Niagara municipalities agree to pay more for transit that their citizens are not currently using – so as to support our impoverished neighbours across the peninsula in a civic way, but also so as to encourage more transit and ridership within our higher-income communities, as taxpayers demand rightly demand better access to the transit that they pay for.

Our hope is that this direction will be fostered by the proposed Moving Transit Forward governance plan, which rightly enshrines a principle of representation from all municipalities on the regional transit governance body. Simultaneously, given the high economic and social stakes of transit policy, our hope is that councils' concerns about the exact appropriate structure of power-sharing within the governance model will not unduly delay the plan's implementation.

We appreciate the plan's proposal of a citizen advisory body within the transit governance model, separate from the primary governance committee. However, we urge you to incorporate citizens into the primary table, rather than leaving them out. This inclusion will permit our transit governance table to draw on the deep well of talent and goodwill among our communities' potential volunteers, and to leverage the lived experience of regular transit riders.

Transit and Intersectional Poverty Reduction

From an anti-poverty perspective, we strongly support the coordination of additional investment into transit for Niagara by all three levels of government, aimed at improving transit accessibility, availability, and quality. It is of course central to our analysis that transit is currently more used people in Niagara living in poverty than by non-impovertised people.

Disproportionate ridership among people living in poverty flows from the reality that many people living in poverty cannot afford a car and/or gas (notwithstanding the fact that a car is generally essential in order to live anywhere in Niagara, even including the peninsula's denser/more urban areas).

As you know, better transit is key to developing our regional economy as a whole and to linking people to jobs. But our status quo in Niagara is insufficient transit (at both the lower tier/local and peninsular inter-municipal levels) and insufficiently coordinated transit (between our lower and upper tiers). The result is too many people unable to get to work opportunities in a reasonable amount of time, and/or simply unable to get to work opportunities at all.

The economic fall-out of this problem is of course felt most keenly by the low-income families and individuals who most rely on transit. Significantly, we note that the fall-out is intersectional: Indigenous, racialized, female, LGBTQ2S+, and/or disabled Niagarans are more likely to be impoverished than white, male, and/or cisgender Niagarans, due to systemic bigotry, and thus rely more on transit. On many levels, then, the Moving Transit Forward plan is justified from the perspective of human rights.

Transit and Public Health

Better transit is also important from the perspective of improving local health, for all people. In order to get to transit, people have to walk – a small but significant benefit. More use of transit would also be good from the perspective of decreasing emissions from our cars and slowing climate change – developments that would have positive implications for public health. Further, using transit is good from the perspective of mental health. It is certainly less stressful to travel by bus or train, than to drive on our increasingly congested roads.

Transit Improvement: A Positive Feedback Loop

It was observed at our NPRN Roundtable that it will be vital, precisely from an anti-poverty perspective, for our councils to develop Moving Transit Forward as a plan to make transit more appealing to people of all income levels. In reality and in public perception, transit in Niagara is currently a mode of transportation mostly for the impoverished. While the inconvenience and frequent non-availability of Niagara transit is the primary reason why higher-income people use Niagara transit much less frequently, the brand and image of Niagara transit as “the mode of the impoverished” are also a factor.

In a negative, circular way, the current result of this systemic discouragement of higher-income riders is less investment in Niagara transit, by all levels of government. Higher-income taxpayers are less likely to support investment in systems that they do not use and do not see themselves or their children using in the future. In order for Moving Transit Forward to be truly successful, then, it will have to improve the brand and image of transit. The way to achieve this (now in a positive, circular way) is to be more available and more coordinated.

Investment to achieve the necessary next stages of improvement will thus require courage and foresight on your part as council members. We are thus particularly grateful for your consideration. In light of the above, we add only that, as transit improves through the investments that you are contemplating, more taxpayers of all income levels will be able to use transit. Public support for even more investment in transit from all three levels of government will thus grow too. We urge you to embrace this positive, cascading effect.

More taxpayers across Niagara support significantly better funded and coordinated transit than is widely known. It is our privilege to speak for some of those citizens through this letter. We are grateful to you for considering their priorities.

Thank you to all of you for your leadership in these challenging, unprecedented days. The fact that our councils are prioritizing discussion of how to improve transit, as part of our pandemic recovery, is a cause for real celebration and hope.

Please feel free to reach out to NPRN regarding any aspect of this letter. We look forward to your feedback.

Best,

Aidan Johnson
(they/them/Mx)
Chair, Niagara Poverty Reduction Network

Jennifer Gauthier
(she/her/Ms)
Vice-Chair, Niagara Poverty Reduction Network

NPRN Member Organizations:

Alzheimer Society of Niagara

Ample Labs

Bethlehem Housing and Support Services

CARP Niagara

Community Care of West Niagara

Community Care of St. Catharines

Credit Canada Debt Solutions

Cultivating Hope Foundation

District School Board of Niagara

ETFO Niagara Occasional Teachers

Goodwill Niagara

John Howard Society of Niagara

Niagara Catholic District School Board

Niagara College

Niagara Community Foundation

Niagara Community Legal Clinic

Niagara Falls Community Health Centre

Niagara Furniture Bank

Niagara Region Anti-Racism Association

Positive Living Niagara

Salvation Army Fort Erie

Social Justice Research Institute, Brock University

Start Me Up Niagara

St. Barnabus Anglican Church

Town of Fort Erie

United Way Niagara

Welland Public Library

Women's Place of South Niagara

YMCA