Feeling flushed

Unlike some other big cities, Vancouver's public transit system features a dearth of public toilets, creating desperate and embarrassing moments for many transit riders.

By Stanley Tromp, Vancouver Courier August 26, 2011

On a bright Monday afternoon, Aug. 17, 2009, Vancouverites were invited for a free ride on the new $2 billion Canada Line in celebration of the rapid transit system's opening. For some, the launch recalled the excitement of the start of the original Skytrain Expo Line that heralded the 1986 World's Fair.

As befitting a "world class city" preparing to host the Olympics the following year, the trains whizzed like sleek, silvery torpedoes fired down a tube, racing quietly from the airport to downtown Vancouver in 25 minutes, bringing the prospect of fewer automobiles on the road and a cleaner environment. More than 80,000 riders that day settled into the cars' spacious well-lit interiors, and with the trains' new speed and efficiency, it seemed that all their needs had been well met.

Except one.

That unmet need is the topic of many public complaints the Courier later found (through the freedom of information law) emailed to the transit authority over the past three years. As one writer summed it up: "Dear TransLink. I know you make a big deal about 'listening,' however you appear to be deaf when asked when or where you are going to install toilets. I have had to rescue an older woman in dire need and totally embarrassed. Her trip spoiled, I called a cab and she went home, her day ruined, and she was neither the first, and I know definitely not the last. Every country in the world with a transit system has bathrooms or toiliettes. What are we, extra-human?"

The TransLink washroom issue has been low on the political radar, yet many riders are flushed with indignation over what they see as an obtuse and insensitive official attitude to the issue. Some call for public washrooms to be built, while others question such a need when staff-only washrooms are already present at all TransLink stations. TransLink management denies any serious problem exists. Yet even those who acknowledge a concern also cite two main obstacles: lack of money and political will to see a solution through. As the buck-passing continues between different levels of government, there seems no solution on the horizon, and for now, the signs reading "No Public Washrooms" remain posted on station walls.

In the grand scale of political affairs, some may regard the lack of transit washrooms as simply too distasteful or trivial to dwell upon. However, for any transit rider who has suffered from a long-unrelieved bowel or bladder (or have small children with this problem), from diabetes or a
sudden attack of diarrhea, the matter is anything but trivial. Deprived of their health, comfort and dignity, some as a last resort are compelled to relieve themselves furtively behind bushes or buildings, fearful of public exposure or official penalties for doing so.

Or so they told TransLink in emails. One writer talked of trying to aid the elderly with medical needs: "In New Westminster on one occasion when I used the elevator to transport an older person, I could not believe the urine smell inside the unit."

Later, at the 22nd Street SkyTrain station, "because of my prostrate problem I could not hang on any longer. When I stepped behind the bushes I was more than appalled at the amount of excrement."

Others made similar points:

. "I think the architects behind the grand plan assumed we all have excellent bladder control."

. "I recently walked the SkyTrain Trail from Clark Street all the way to New Westminster. A fantastic walk, and thank you so much for the trail, but there were no public washrooms, so I had to pee a couple of times behind a tree or bush or whatever could offer me a modicum of cover!"

. "I had to walk four blocks till I found a Starbucks that let me use the loo."

. "Caller and husband both seniors. They have medical problems and they cannot go for any length of time without a washroom break. They would like to see washrooms at SkyTrain."

. "I am an old lady, and we need to pee when we go out more often than others. It's not a world class city. I have been to London, Paris, Sydney, and all the major terminals have loos. Please install toilets. Even if you have to pay, it's worth it for a bit of relief."

To such complainants, the TransLink customer service branch emailed a standard reply: "The high cost of installing, yearly operating, upgrading, maintaining and personnel required to have washrooms was the reason they were not put into the Expo line back in the mid-80's, and continues to be the reason they will not be put into the stations. If a passenger has to go to the washroom, what do they do? They must find a public washroom at a gas station, restaurant, local business, mall, or go home, whichever is closest."

The once-active Transit Users Union was recently dissolved, leaving a gap in advocacy. Yet some politicians are alert to the issue. COPE Coun. Ellen Woodsworth phoned the Courier from Ontario to say: "I hardly ever call the media when I'm on holiday, but I feel so strongly that TransLink should deal with this problem. Seniors have called me to complain about the lack of washrooms, and their pain and humiliation. It may even be an election issue this fall."

In September 2006, Vancouver council passed a motion encouraging TransLink to build public toilets at major transit interchanges. Yet the Courier's Allen Garr reported: "Don't bet on any relief. According to a city staff report, the last time council asked TransLink for public pots to piss in was May 24, 2005. So far not even a tinkle of interest has been shown."
Last month Coquitlam council voted unanimously to urge the province and TransLink to change their policies to have public washroom facilities-available at any time-in the Evergreen stations in Coquitlam. (Some have also called for diaper-changing stations for new mothers.)

Yet TransLink has long maintained that having freely accessible toilets isn't part of its mandate, is too costly, is not part of its operational budget, and open bathrooms are prone to vandalism, rape, muggings, intravenous drug users and prostitution. These outlets would need to be watched constantly by security personnel, it says.

"It's not a priority for TransLink now," Doug Kelsey, TransLink chief operating officer, told the Courier. "Riders in need can go to nearby coffee shops and restaurants, who usually let people use their washrooms. I used to work at Starbucks and we would let people in. Most other cities' rapid transit systems don't have washrooms at all their stations either." He added there will be washrooms in the Gateway development when it opens at the Marine Drive transit station. Still, he is "willing to listen" to the public's input on the issue.

In their complaints to TransLink, riders proposed five solutions.

First, some asked, why pay to build transit washrooms when they already exist? Most riders—even those who have used the two older lines for the past quarter century—might be surprised to learn that all SkyTrain stations do in fact have washrooms on site. But these are well concealed, under lock and key and reserved for staff. Whenever the green jacketed attendants can be found, they can sometimes be persuaded to unlock the door to let a seriously needy rider into that washroom, on a case by case basis at their discretion. One letter writer to a local paper last year advised the general public to simply demand access to these staff washrooms, since taxpayers paid for their creation and so essentially own them.

TransLink spokesperson Ken Hardie said that through TransLink's Access Transit Advisory Committee, people with disabilities are provided an orientation to transit and as part of that process received information on access to staff washrooms. Hardie's standard advice to other riders is "Go before you go." Second, some riders suggest portapotties as a cheap and temporary relief, better than nothing at all, while other options are being studied. Hardie countered that portapotties are unsightly and smelly. During the Olympics, TransLink did install 12 portable toilets outside the Waterfront Station but have since removed them.

Third, as part of its long-term street furniture contract with CBS/JCDecaux, the city installed eight automated public toilets in the downtown area. These toilets are automatically cleaned and sanitized after each use, available to the public for free, and are in service year-round, 24 hours a day and seven days a week. The large toilets (such as the one at Main and Terminal) are wheelchair-accessible. There was no need for capital funds because the washrooms are installed at little cost by CBS/JCDecaux, which supplies them in exchange for the advertising on the side of the toilet's housing. Otherwise the machines would have cost $285,000 each. TransLink has shown no interest in this option.

Fourth, as Kelsey noted, some businesses do indeed generously grant access to their washrooms (despite posting signs discouraging it). The problem is that this access is purely voluntary, erratic
and arbitrary, and not available when that business is closed. For a partial solution—that is, only for the working hours—some propose public-private partnerships, whereby businesses such as restaurants could be given a small annual fee for guaranteeing their washroom availability to transit users, which in turn might prompt new customer loyalty, a win-win for all.

Fifth, to finance new washrooms, some riders say they are perfectly willing to pay a fee for using them. For example, Singapore has 750 paid toilets, London 678, and Athens 500. In San Francisco, anyone who can't afford the 25-cent entry fee can obtain free tokens from non-profit organizations. The only roadblock is that in 1975, Dave Barrett's NDP government passed the Public Toilet Act, which outlaws pay toilets in public buildings, and nobody has yet dared to repeal it.

This week, TransLink reported that its ridership numbers keep booming, with 114 million commuter trips in the first six months of this year, a record projected to surpass the 2010 Olympic year. Yet for now, the public complaints to TransLink on washrooms continue, such as this: "Has our culture stooped so low that I should have to piss in the street, or in my pants? We call ourselves a civilized city?" Concluded another: "Facilities have to be provided for the commuter, traveller, shopper, street people or homeless. If they were to knock on my door I would welcome them to use my bathroom—we are all human with the same requirements."