

May 18, 2022

Her Worship, Mayor Karen Elliot
District of Squamish

Honourable Jordan Sturdy
MLA West Vancouver - Sea to Sky

Honourable Harry Bains
Minister of Labour

Honourable Rob Fleming
Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure

Re: Transit, Parking and Transportation Infrastructure

Dear your Honours Elliott, Sturdy, Bains, and Fleming,

The confluence of rapid population growth in the District of Squamish (DOS) with a transit strike now in its fifteenth week has compelled the Squamish Chamber of Commerce (SCC), Tourism Squamish (TS) and the Downtown Squamish BIA (DSBIA) to share with you our serious concerns about the impact of transit and transportation on the local economy. The three partners urge immediate and long-term action to address critical shortfalls in the transit, parking and walking/cycling infrastructure of Squamish: a deficiency with a growing negative impact on businesses, employees and customers.

Public Transit Strike

Squamish is growing at an unprecedented rate. The recently released Canada Census 2021 data indicated that Squamish's population increased by 22% between 2016 and 2021. With this has come a development boom that includes a high number of location-locked service industry jobs. Approximately, one in four Squamish workers are employed in sales and service occupations.

Many sales and service workers rely on public transit to get to the businesses that employ them, as well as for their day-to-day needs. Workers already struggling with the high cost of living in Squamish are now faced with the choice of a daily taxi charge (up to \$50), walking along roadways without sidewalks or finding potentially hazardous methods to get where they need to be.

Our collective members have, over the course of the pandemic, faced major challenges recruiting and retaining staff. The local transit strike represents yet another strain. Business already short staffed by COVID-19 and affordability challenges, now cannot be sure their staff can make it into work.

The social and economic impact of the transit strike on a community already strained cannot be understated. In a recent survey, two in three businesses (65%) stated that the transit strike had a negative impact on their business, with 30% stating the transit strike had a *significant* negative impact. The negative impact of the strike was felt most significantly when considering local customer access and employees. The negative impact of the strike on customers from outside Squamish was lower, with over one in two stating no impact, likely due to the higher instance of visitors coming to Squamish using private vehicles, and not all businesses serve visitors.

Beyond the transit strike, there remains a need to improve transit, especially regional transit. One in two businesses surveyed (51%) expressed dissatisfaction with *regional* transit prior to the strike (18% were satisfied). Comparatively, 27% were dissatisfied with *local* transit prior to the strike, while 35% were satisfied. There is clearly significant room for improvement with both local and regional transit, but especially regional transit.

Shared Mobility

Ridesharing is somewhat active in the Squamish community via Poparide and social media platforms, along with car sharing via two hybrid carshare vehicles operated by Modo. While ride-hailing operator Whistle! is available in Whistler, operators such as Uber and Lyft have yet to enter the Squamish market. Private transit operators have limitations placed on their routes. The transit strike has demonstrated the missed opportunity to provide cost-effective transportation alternatives to workers and residents.

It is our upmost desire to see a resolution to the public transit strike. Our community cannot continue for more months without public transit. Currently, some businesses are shuttling staff or providing taxi subsidies. These options are not possible for many small businesses and are not sustainable. An interim solution could be a co-operative program where local businesses can sign up their employees to be picked up and dropped off at designated locations based on common work schedules. At a time when businesses should be focused on pandemic recovery, Squamish instead faces new logistical challenges.

Parking

The Squamish community has very limited employee parking, especially downtown. Our organizations are receiving correspondence from businesses who are facing significant challenges with parking, with concerns around the availability, proximity, and duration of parking. Street parking in the Squamish downtown is often blocked by ongoing construction. Businesses are now faced with no public transit, limited parking and overzealous parking enforcement, then tickets – and tows – for downtown employees parking longer than two hours.

In a recent business survey, nearly 70% of businesses were dissatisfied with parking in Squamish. Dissatisfaction was equally high when considering all audiences (local customers, employees, and customers from outside Squamish). Several suggestions for improvements have been made by businesses, including the need for more parking stalls, a parkade and to discontinue the provision of parking variances to new developments. The opportunity to adapt the principle of “rails to trails” for parking infrastructure has also been highlighted in discussions.

Active Transportation

Active Transportation, or human powered transportation, includes cycling, walking, and rolling. To reduce the need for personal vehicles and support active transportation, Squamish needs sidewalks and streetscapes that favour pedestrians, along with city-wide bicycles routes that are convenient, safe alternatives to driving a car. The partners support the implementation of Squamish's Active Transportation Plan.

Snow Clearing

The previous winter demonstrated the impact of climate change on transportation. Squamish must be prepared for recurring record snowfall events with faster, more effective road and sidewalk clearing if the community wishes to avoid more disruption and personal injury.

Recommendations

The Squamish Chamber, Tourism Squamish and Downtown Squamish BIA represent hundreds of businesses in the Squamish community. Together, we are actively supporting business, economic growth and economic diversification. The partners believe we can address several key infrastructure issues with urgency.

The partners recommend the following:

1. The District of Squamish, Sea to Sky communities and the Province of BC work together to create and implement an integrated Local and Regional Transit System.
2. The District of Squamish implements and funds an action plan based on the findings of the June 2021 Transit Future Action Plan Public Engagement and the April 2021 Space Needs Insights for Business, with a focus on service hours and frequency of bus transit to ensure the workforce can get to their place of employment.
3. The District of Squamish actively attracts and supports businesses involved in alternate forms of transportation (air, marine, bike, private shuttle, car sharing, ride-hailing), including infrastructure improvements such as more stalls for carsharing and secure bike storage.
4. The District of Squamish explores solutions to parking, with a focus on the creation of dedicated employee parking hubs and employee transit solutions.
5. The District of Squamish reviews their approach to enabling parking variances on new developments.

Additionally, the partners support the undertaking of an updated corridor rail study and encourages the provincial government to prioritize regional and economic benefits in transportation investments.

The Squamish Chamber, Tourism Squamish and Downtown Squamish BIA will:

1. Support the implementation of an integrated local and regional transit system.
2. Support the implementation of Squamish's Active Transportation Plan.
3. Work with interested businesses to strategize on potential solutions to address the lack of public transit during the strike.
4. Survey members to understand the impact of the public transit strike and subsequent requirements

for transport related business insight.

5. Support the exploration of “rails to trails” (or an adaption thereof) to increase parking and active transportation options.
6. Support businesses that provide alternative forms of transportation (e.g. private shuttle, car sharing, ride-hailing, marine) and support opportunities to attract more operators to Squamish.
7. Encourage businesses and stakeholders to find alternatives to personal vehicles and parking (e.g. free and discounted transit passes, carpooling).
8. Encourage Community Amenity Contributions that improve Squamish’s transit and transportation options.

As the community of Squamish continues to grow at a rapid pace, transit and transportation are becoming more important for the success of our economy, and in creating a connected and thriving community. A combination of actions is likely required. There are many opportunities to improve transportation, including local and provincial government investment in infrastructure, the creation of public-private partnerships and attracting more private operators.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Annabel Majendie
President, Squamish Chamber of
Commerce



Kirby Brown
Chair, Tourism Squamish



Adrian Blachut
President, Downtown Squamish
Business Improvement
Association

CC:

Honourable Ravi Kahlon, Minister of Jobs, Economic Recovery and Innovation

Honourable Nathan Cullen, Minister of Municipal Affairs

Honourable Melanie Mark, Minister of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport

Rob Ringma, Senior Manager, Government Relations, BC Transit

Walt Judas, CEO, Tourism Industry Association of B.C