

Good morning members of the Social Services Subcommittee,

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to address you today on behalf of EPIC, The Local Community Food Centre's advocacy working group. As you may know, we held a Disability Justice Forum on February 23rd at which representatives at all 3 levels of government including Stratford Mayor, Martin Ritsma, came together with disability advocates to talk about how we can come together to end disability poverty in our community! We are here to advocate for one of the solutions discussed that the municipal government can implement to help make that ambitious dream a reality. We are asking the City of Stratford to make free public transportation passes available to all recipients of the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW). We believe that this initiative aligns with the principles of social justice by which EPIC and The Local stand and has the potential to greatly improve the lives of individuals facing disabilities and income barriers in our community.

To support our proposal, we conducted a survey among 75 community members, and the results were quite enlightening. According to our findings, 68% of respondents stated that they would utilize public transit more frequently if it were more affordable. This demonstrates a clear desire and need for accessible transportation options among our residents.

Additionally, 80% of respondents expressed that they would use public transit more frequently to access grocery stores, farmer's markets, food banks, and community meals. It is crucial to emphasize the importance of affordable transportation when it comes to meeting basic needs, especially in terms of accessing sufficient, safe, nutritious, and culturally diverse food, something we, at EPIC and The Local, consider a basic human right. By providing free public transportation passes, we can ensure that individuals facing income barriers have increased opportunities and dignified options to nourish themselves and their families, regardless of their financial circumstances.

Furthermore, our survey revealed that 63% of participants believe that improved access to public transit would decrease their sense of isolation. This directly impacts quality of life and mental health, as 67% reported that it would have a positive effect on their mental well-being, and 65% believed it would foster a greater sense of belonging. We should consider the impact on our local police

department as well. By addressing these social determinants of health, such as isolation and mental well-being, we have the potential to reduce the number of mental health calls received by our police, alleviating pressure on their resources and allowing them to focus on other areas of public safety.

It is important to note that the voices driving this advocacy effort come directly from those with lived experiences. Among our survey participants, 36% are recipients of ODSP or OW, and 32% self-identify as low-income. By listening to their needs and amplifying their voices, we are working towards creating a more inclusive and equitable community.

Now, let's address the economic aspect of this proposal. It is reasonable to question how such a program could be sustainable for the city. However, we argue that the cost to the city would be minimal, if not nonexistent. Buses often run with empty seats during off-peak hours, meaning that providing free transportation passes to individuals who currently face barriers would not result in additional costs for the city. By filling those empty seats, we can ensure that public transportation remains efficient and accessible for all residents.

Moreover, increasing access to public transportation has the potential to yield cost savings in other areas. As mentioned earlier, addressing social determinants of health, such as isolation and mental well-being, can lead to a reduction in mental health-related police calls and interventions. This not only benefits the individuals directly affected but also eases the strain on our police resources. Additionally, when individuals have increased access to community events, farmers' markets, and other activities facilitated by public transportation, they are more likely to lead healthier lifestyles. This, in turn, can lead to a healthier community and potentially reduce the burden on our healthcare system.

And we shouldn't overlook the environmental aspect of this proposal.

Encouraging the use of public transportation for residents of all income levels as an alternative to personal vehicles aligns with our commitment as a community to sustainability. By increasing the accessibility and affordability of public transit, we can reduce the number of single-occupancy vehicles on our roads, decreasing traffic congestion and carbon emissions. This not only benefits our environment but also contributes to the overall well-being of our community.

As Canadian urban designer and 8 80 Cities founder, Gil Penalosa, once said, “The sign of an advanced city is not when the poor have their own cars, but it is when the rich use public transportation.”

So to further support our proposal, we would like to draw upon evidence from reputable organizations such as the Tamarack Institute and 8 80 Cities. These organizations have conducted studies that provide compelling arguments from a social justice lens for making public transportation as freely available as possible to ALL residents, but in particular, those who are marginalized, those with disabilities and, those with income barriers.

According to the Tamarack Institute, accessible and affordable transportation is a key factor in reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion. In their research, they found that individuals facing income barriers often experience limited access to transportation options, leading to reduced employment opportunities, restricted access to essential services, and increased isolation. By providing free public transportation passes to ODSP and OW recipients, we can break down these barriers, enabling individuals to access employment, education, healthcare, and social activities, thereby improving their overall well-being and potentially even breaking the cycle of poverty that traps far too many of our neighbours.

Similarly, 8 80 Cities, a nonprofit organization focused on creating vibrant and inclusive communities, has highlighted the importance of accessible transportation in promoting social equity. Their research shows that affordable and reliable public transportation options can increase social connectivity, enhance community engagement, and foster a sense of belonging among residents.

Moreover, studies conducted by these organizations and others have demonstrated the positive impact of accessible transportation on mental health and overall quality of life. The Tamarack Institute's research has shown that individuals with limited transportation options often experience higher levels of stress, social isolation, and mental health challenges. By providing free public transportation passes, we can enhance mental well-being, reduce feelings of isolation, and promote a greater sense of belonging among vulnerable populations in our community. This not only improves an individual's quality of life but also contributes to the overall social fabric of our city.

Coming back to the economic feasibility of this initiative, studies by organizations like 80 Cities have indicated that investments in public transportation can yield significant economic returns. Accessible and affordable transportation options can improve access to job opportunities, increase workforce participation, and stimulate local economies. By removing financial barriers through the provision of free public transportation passes, we can empower ODSP and OW recipients to access employment and education, contributing to their economic stability and reducing reliance on social assistance programs in the long run.

In conclusion, by making free public transportation passes available to all ODSP and OW recipients, we can address issues of social justice, improve access to food and essential services, enhance quality of life, reduce isolation, and promote mental and physical well-being for some of our most marginalized and vulnerable residents. This initiative has the potential to generate economic benefits by maximizing existing resources, reducing pressure on our police and healthcare systems, and fostering a healthier community. Furthermore, by encouraging the use of public transportation as an alternative to personal vehicles, we can contribute to environmental sustainability.

We have submitted the full results of our survey along with the many comments from community members who have strong views about the weekend On Demand service that you might like to have a look at and also an expression of interest for subsidized transportation from low-income seniors and families with children who use the busses to get to school.

We kindly request that you carefully consider our proposal and take into account the survey results and arguments presented today. Together, we can make Stratford a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable city for all residents.

Thank you for your time and attention.