



*The following Op-Ed was submitted to the Times Colonist on February 18, 2021 by Emily Lowan, UVSS Director of Campaigns and Community Relations.*

Students are tired of taking a back seat when it comes to transit. Post-secondary students are the largest single demographic of transit riders in Greater Victoria, and yet we have little or no say in how the transit service runs and whether it serves the needs of us, the riders. This needs to change and, right now, we have a unique opportunity to do so.

A token non-voting seat on the Victoria Regional Transit Commission was established in 2016, which currently rotates between the University of Victoria Students' Society and the Camosun College Student Society. But let me be clear -- a non-voting seat isn't enough, it isn't real inclusion and participation.

During my term as the Director of Campaigns and Community Relations for the University of Victoria Students' Society, I've spent countless hours preparing research and advocacy documents for a meeting, only to be promptly patted on the head and sent on my way. Instead of establishing a real working relationship with students, decision-makers tend to "hear our concerns" and then try to run out the clock on the student appointees term. This patronizing and tokenizing approach allows decision-makers to check us off their list for consultation, while blatantly disrespecting student's needs and priorities.

On February 23rd, the Victoria Regional Transit Commission (VRTC) will be voting on a motion to send a letter to the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, in support of a student voting seat on the VRTC. The University of Victoria Students' Society (UVSS), the UVic Graduate Students' Society (GSS), the Camosun College Student Society (CCSS), the Royal Roads University Student Association (RRUSA), and Unifor Local 333 (representing BC Transit bus drivers in the Greater Victoria area) are all strongly in favour of a voting student seat on the VRTC. A voting seat would allow these critical stakeholder groups to be meaningfully represented in transit decision making, and help promote a transit system that is based on the needs of transit users and operators.

Transit commissions across Canada have increasingly been recognizing the value of having citizen transit riders sit as decision-makers on their boards. Some of the largest cities with the

most complex transit systems -- Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal and more -- have citizen voting seats on their transit commissions. Victoria is lagging behind.

The majority of people making decisions about transit in Greater Victoria don't actually use the system themselves. Most of the Transit Commissioners aren't personally affected by the decisions made at the VRTC -- they aren't the ones who are left waiting at a bus stop when service hours are reduced, they aren't the ones feeling claustrophobic on an overcrowded bus, and they aren't the ones left stranded late at night after work. Transit users bring valuable experience of the transit system and the needs of riders. If we want a transit system that is effective and efficient, we need to meaningfully include the experiences of transit users in decision-making.

From climate change to building a stronger economy and more resilient communities, there is a great deal to be done. As we rebuild a greener and healthier future, an effective transit system will be at the heart of every real solution. Post-secondary students know far too well our future is at stake; as we move forward, the Transit Commission needs us on board.

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