



Hurry Up And Wait: The Absurd Realities Of Captive Calgary Transit Riders

A downtown-centric system leaves many in the cold.

BY XIMENA GONZÁLEZ
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Monda Mahmoud can't wait to buy a car.

Since moving to Calgary in 2019, she's relied on Calgary Transit to run errands, access city services, and meet with friends.

But the limitations imposed by a mediocre transit service in Ranchlands, the northwest neighbourhood where she rents an apartment with her partner, persuaded her to get a driver's licence this summer.

"It's not practical to depend on transit a hundred percent," Mahmoud said. "It's very limiting when it comes to the places you can go... and exhausting."

Currently, four bus routes serve Ranchlands, but only one route goes beyond the adjacent neighbourhoods of Hawkwood, Dalhousie, Arbour Lake and Silver Springs.

This makes it difficult to get to a different quadrant in Calgary without going downtown first.

While Mahmoud considers herself lucky for having three bus routes nearby, and a bus stop right across the street from her apartment, it can take her up to 45 minutes to get to the nearest Superstore by transit.

By car, the trip takes only seven minutes.

"Since I started using transit in Calgary to commute and to get around, one pressing question comes up again and again," Mahmoud said.

"Who is transit designed to serve?"

***It's very limiting when it comes to
the places you can go... and exhausting.***
- Monda Mahmoud, Bus Commuter

The pursuit of 'choice riders'

In Calgary, there are two primary types of transit users: those who can easily get to a CTrain station by driving, walking, or wheeling, and those who, without an alternative, depend on bus service to get anywhere.

And those with limited choices are are most deeply impacted by service cuts.

David Cooper, a former Calgary Transit planner who now runs his own transit consultancy, says that whenever Calgary Transit had a bad budget year, the agency would always spare the downtown service while cutting non-peak bus service elsewhere.

"It was not a great way of really planning transit, because there are many options to get downtown," said Cooper, noting that while white-collar workers have choices available to them, others don't.

"If you're working two jobs or you're a newcomer to the country, and you're trying to access the employment pool or people are trying to take evening and weekend classes... they were being penalized, because it was really the pursuit of what I would call the 'choice rider.'"

***Not everyone works downtown, not everyone
works from nine to five.***

- Monda Mahmoud, Bus Commuter

Almost half of all jobs in Calgary are concentrated in areas well-served by transit, including downtown. However, only about one in ten Calgarians live in a Primary Transit Network area—where, prior to 2019, transit came every ten minutes, for at least 15 hours per day, seven days a week.

For Mahmoud, the "unspoken agreement" between Calgary Transit and its ridership seems one-sided: users are required to pay fares and plan ahead. In return, Calgary Transit is expected to provide frequent and reliable service—but it doesn't.

Instead, she said, "I have to find ways to adapt to it."

"Folks are forced to adapt and mold their schedules, just to be able to use transit," Mahmoud said. "Not everyone works downtown, not everyone works from nine to five—people work throughout the day, [sometimes] folks work overnight."

It's no accident that as overall ridership decreased during the pandemic, essential

workers continued to use transit almost as usual, despite considerable service cuts and a recent spike in safety concerns.

The calculations of a long commute

Chelsea Elsasser, a caretaker specialized in seniors with a disability, moved to Calgary from Edmonton two years ago.

Every weekday at 8:30 a.m., Elsasser starts her commute by walking 10 blocks from her home in Forest Lawn to the route 43 bus stop on 36 Street SE.

"I always give myself at least half an hour in case the bus comes early," Elsasser said. "[Otherwise] I have to wait another half an hour."

Once her bus arrives at Deerfoot Meadows, she transfers to the MAX Teal BRT, where hopefully she doesn't have to wait long for her bus to arrive, and heads west to the Rockyview Hospital—Elsasser's final bus stop.

But her commute isn't finished yet.

If I take an Uber it'll only take 15 minutes—20 minutes tops, if there's traffic. But on the bus it takes me two hours.

- Chelsea Elsasser, Bus Commuter

The last leg of her trip is on foot again, as she walks for up to ten minutes from the hospital to her final destination in Kelvin Grove, where she provides at-home care to two elderly women.

Elsasser starts work at 10:45 a.m., and if she doesn't miss any of her bus transfers, she arrives at work by 10 a.m.—but she can't risk being late.

"I'd rather be super early," she said, contrasting how much faster her commute would be if she drove. "If I take an Uber it'll only take 15 minutes—20 minutes tops, if there's traffic. But on the bus it takes me two hours."

At the end of her work day, Elsasser repeats the same route in reverse, making it home after 8:30 p.m.

"I don't have a life," she said.

Although taking the LRT would make for a slightly shorter commute, Elsasser avoids taking the CTrain since she was attacked at the Marlborough station in 2020 by a group of masked individuals who mugged and beat her up during rush hour.

"I will take longer to get to work and get home just for that reason," she said. "It's a little more safe."

Elsasser's long commute used to be possible on a single bus: the 72/73 circle route, which made a big loop that connected distant neighbourhoods like Brentwood to Forest Lawn and Kelvin Grove.

But Calgary Transit discontinued the route in 2018 when the MAX Teal BRT was introduced.

On November 2, the day of the season's first snowstorm, Elsasser's MAX Teal bus arrived at the Deerfoot Meadows stop nearly an hour late. "I left 20 minutes earlier than I normally would, and I still ended up being 30 minutes late [to work]."

You can't live in the northwest and take transit to work in the southeast.

- Corey Hales, Transit Commuter

Adapting to inconvenient service

For many regular Calgary Transit riders, transit service isn't the most appealing option, but out of necessity they do what they can to adjust their lives to the inconvenience.

Since selling his vehicle about seven years ago, Corey Hales has relied on transit to get around the city. But renting in the northwest community of Hawkwood, far from the city core, means access to transit is limited, and it can take him up to an hour to get to his new job downtown.

"I have to be at the bus stop fairly early," he says, noting that even though the Crowfoot Station is just a 10-minute bus ride away, missing the route 138 to get to the train station means waiting half an hour for the next bus.

"If I miss it, then I'm going to be late for work, and most jobs have been unsympathetic."

For this reason, avoiding a lengthy commute by transit was a key component of Hales's job search. "Prior to getting this one job [downtown], the only places that showed any interest in hiring me would add an extra two hours of transit every single day," he said. "You can't live in the northwest and take transit to work in the southeast."

***The number one thing people will respond to is frequency.
That's the number one way to improve ridership.***

- Willem Klumpenhower, Transit Analytics Lab, University of Toronto

Planning beyond ridership rates

This situation isn't unique to Calgary, however. Across North America, investment in public transit tends to cater to the preferences of those who have multiple transportation choices, and downplay the needs of "captive riders" such as students, seniors, immigrants, and low-income folks because they will continue to use transit regardless of the service's convenience.

Willem Klumpenhower, a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Toronto's Transit Analytics Lab, says the focus on ridership volumes and fare revenue has caused many of the issues afflicting public transit riders across Canada.

The luxury of choosing where to live in the entire city is not that common.
- Monda Mahmoud, Bus Commuter

"The number one thing people will respond to is frequency," Klumpenhower said. "That's the number one way to improve ridership. But we fall into this spiral of saying, 'Well, nobody's riding it, so let's make it worse.' [Cities] need to take this step the other way, which is to offer a complete [system] that may look like it's too much—and then people will rise up to use it."

"Often, transit planners react to what we think the need is," he said. "Rather than realizing that you can actually... look for a vision for the city you want."

In an ideal world, Mahmoud would like transit routes to be efficient and reliable when going to places outside of downtown—especially for those who, like her, can't afford to live in a more central neighbourhood. "The luxury of choosing where to live in the entire city is not that common," she said.

Ximena González is a freelance journalist who writes about urban affairs for The Sprawl. Her work has also appeared in The Globe and Mail, The Tyee and Jacobin.

With files from Jeremy Klaszus