



Notice of Motion

A Step Towards Free Transit for Middle and High School Students

Moved by: Commissioner Dianne Saxe

Seconded by: Commissioner Paul Ainslie

Recommendation

Commissioner Dianne Saxe, seconded by Commissioner Paul Ainslie recommends that:

1. The TTC Board direct staff to report back at the next regular meeting on opportunities to provide free transit to Middle School and Secondary School groups making field trips during off peak hours.
2. The TTC Board direct staff to report back at the next regular meeting on opportunities to provide a quantity of free youth transit passes to registered charities operating in Toronto which will use the passes to incent high school attendance by underprivileged youth.

Summary

For the last decade, the City of Kingston has provided free transit passes to high school students, combined with bus visits to high schools each September to introduce Grade 9 students to using transit independently. Dan Hendry introduced the policy and is still its champion.

The Kingston Transit High School Bus Pass Program is simple but powerful. It has proven that with encouragement, mastery of transit tools and a bus pass, students gain independence and confidence that improves their lives and, in turn, their communities. In Kingston, it increased high school ridership from 28,000 rides in 2012 to close to 600,000 (pre-Covid) rides annually.

The Kingston Transit High School Bus Pass Program has been brilliantly successful, recognized worldwide, as contributing significantly to three major objectives: increasing transit ridership, reducing social inequalities, and combatting the climate crisis. Once high school students acquire the habit of using transit, they carry this pattern into their adult lives. As a result, Kingston transit ridership is up 75%. The program has been particularly transformative for lower income students, who become able to access part time jobs and social and cultural facilities across their city. Free transit also facilitates timely school attendance and increases participation in enriching after school activities.

The program has garnered international attention, including [a Federation of Canadian Municipalities Sustainable Communities Award and guidebook in 2018](#), a TEDx talk entitled [“Throwing Our Car Culture Under the Bus”](#) and recognition as one of the ten solutions to focus on for climate change by [Al Gore's Climate Reality Project](#).

The Kingston success has now led to a national program called [Get on the Bus](#), which includes charitable fundraising through the [Small Change Fund](#).

The Toronto District School Board has [strongly urged the TTC to adopt a similar program in Toronto](#). The need is even greater here given the larger number of low-income residents and new arrivals.

Once Toronto adopts a commercial parking levy, I will be working to have some of the funds devoted to making transit free for students attending public middle and high schools in Toronto. However, little or no revenue is expected from this source until 2025.

In the interim, this motion seeks to advance two small steps in this direction.

School Trips

First, students over the age of 12 cannot ride the TTC without payment, even on school trips. A significant percentage of Toronto's approximately 100,000 high school students cannot afford the fare, especially for “discretionary” activities across the 600 square kilometers of our city, such as school trips to the Toronto Zoo, the ROM, the lakeshore, or even to City Hall. Thus, school trips accessible to all students are only possible if the school charters a bus. Due to the high cost of charters, such trips are few.

The educational and cultural benefits of such trips could be greatly facilitated if middle and high school groups could use the system for free, as they can in Kingston. There would be little or no marginal cost to the TTC if such trips take place only outside peak hours. I have reached out to representatives of the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto Catholic District School Board, who are very supportive of the initiative.

Piloting free school trips can help build ridership familiarity amongst youth and relieve teachers and schools of a key obstacle to widening the horizons of Toronto students through visits to shared civic spaces.

Student passes for charities

Some Toronto charities, such as [Pathways to Education](#), have demonstrated that they can considerably increase high school graduation rates among underprivileged students by a combination of support and incentives, including transit tickets that facilitate high school attendance. A small step towards free transit for high school students would be to distribute a limited quantity of free youth passes to such charities for use in their programs. These charities would make the best possible use of a limited number of passes because their programs already combine student outreach, coaching, and other kinds of supports, and have a track record of life-changing successes.

The motion asks staff to explore both of these concepts and to make recommendations for how and to what extent they can be implemented, within existing financial constraints.

Date: September 14, 2023