

Bus Rapid Transit in Saskatoon—an idea that will move us forward

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In the coming days, the City Council is scheduled to vote on Saskatoon's proposed Bus Rapid Transit Routes. The Bus Rapid Transit system is part and parcel of accommodating growth in Saskatoon, and building our city in a thoughtful way for the benefit of current and future generations.

The BRT is an enhancement and modernization of our transit system that is not only timely but a solution that addresses multiple challenges in our city—efficient and reliable transit, connecting neighbourhoods, social inclusion, enhancing health and wellbeing, and environmental sustainability. In fact, there is no known downside to BRT enhancement. Without BRT, however, our city is likely to be stuck in the past, while other comparable cities in Canada move on to greater things.

Surprisingly, BRT has run into some resistance here. Not so much whether BRT is the right idea for Saskatoon at this stage of its growth, but on which routes, or segment of routes, busses should run. Some businesses in particular have raised concerns about loss parking spaces on the proposed bus routes. In addition to this, concerns have also been expressed about preserving certain aesthetic or heritage qualities of a business district. The potential short-term impact on businesses of BRT construction is also a concern.

When there is concern expressed, it is useful to look at similar experiences in other cities and to look at the available evidence that addresses these concerns. The research on the impact of BRT on business, adjacent property values, rental, and land development is emerging; some findings are particularly relevant. First, studies have shown that non-automobile customers spend similar or greater amounts of money on local businesses compared to automobile-based consumers. That should alleviate the concerns expressed about loss of parking spaces. Research has also found that store owners tend to overestimate the number of customers who arrive by automobile.

Some studies on the impact of BRT on property values have shown no increase, others up to 30% gain in property value. Value-added factors such as reliability and frequency of the BRT system are necessary features to see capitalization of the system's impact on nearby property values and on land development; this includes the value of business property. A study also suggests that properties located 5 minutes closer to stations exhibit premiums between 6.8 and 9.3 percent in the asking rental price.

In Ottawa, significant urban development occurred in concert with the implementation of BRT. The economic effects of this approach to urban development was assessed to be worth \$675 million.

In addition to the business-case, by better connecting people living in suburban neighbourhoods in Saskatoon to the downtown, other business districts, and to the University, BRT will attract new riders, which will ease the congestions we increasingly see on our streets. BRT is also socially inclusive, as it offers a reliable, more efficient and relatively inexpensive transportation option for a cross-section of people living in our city.

One of the most compelling and long-lasting benefits of BRT is the shift from the use of private vehicles to public and mass transit for transportation, positively affecting the environmental impact.

The idea of a modernized, better connected and inclusive public transit system is the right idea for our growing city of Saskatoon. To get the most benefit from a BRT-enhanced transit system, it needs to

serve major thoroughfares that are people-dense and business-heavy such as the proposed Broadway Avenue route and 3rd Avenue downtown. Rather than diminishing aesthetics, it increases the attractiveness of Saskatoon by enhancing street-life, walkability, accessibility and indeed livability of our city.

The question is not whether BRT should or should not be part of a modern Saskatoon, but how quickly we can go from an idea, to a plan, to a functional system. We have much riding on this.

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For more information on our research evidence synthesis, Bus Rapid Transit and Business Considerations, visit: https://www.teaminteract.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/RR_BRT-and-business-considerations_Jun2018.pdf.