

Translink: It's the policy, that policy won't change, and there's no one you can speak to about it.

by kevin harding - Tuesday, October 04, 2011

<https://politicsrespun.org/2011/10/translink-its-the-policy-that-policy-wont-change-and-theres-no-one-you-can-speak-to-about-it/>

Pardon me for a rant about my commute. And about Translink.

I hardly think it's acceptable for a public organization that [trumpets public consultation](#), [taxes us](#), is [governed by an unelected appointed board](#), and so on, to say "it's the policy, that policy won't change, and



there's no one you can speak to."

I'm currently living in the far eastern suburbs of Vancouver - as I try to move closer into the city. It's quite a change from living in the downtown core of Toronto, and then on the slightly eastern periphery of the downtown core. Perhaps one of the biggest changes is the difference in transit service - in Toronto, I could step outside my door, or walk down the street, and there'd be streetcars and subways. Rarely more than a 3-15 minute wait.

It was some kind of transit heaven, out there. Rumbling, grumbling streetcars. Murder-on-your-ears subways. But they worked, more often than not.

Enter a change of situation for me. I finished a graduate degree, was offered a pretty good job back in Vancouver, and wanted to move to be closer to a person incredibly important to me. I have a place to live, temporarily, while I pay off debt incurred as a student, and so on.

However, this entails a commute through Vancouver's public transit system. One that I've often had an incredibly rough relationship with. Say what you will about the mountains, oceans, and rainy weather (and I've missed it, over the -35 magic that is most of the year in Toronto, with the sole exception being the +50 summers) and say what you will about the TTC (and boy, did Toronto like to complain about that system), Vancouver's [Translink](#) is absolute and utter crap once you're out of the Vancouver/Burnaby zone.

And if you have a problem - and you dare to phone Translink and complain about it - you'll be told what I was told tonight, that the source of your problem is a faulty policy, and... "that policy won't change, and there's no one you can speak to about it." And I hardly think that's acceptable for an unelected public organization that taxes us and claims to value public consultation. And I think, perhaps, we need a change.

Here's the story. I take the [West Coast Express](#) into and out of Vancouver for my day at work. That's actually a lovely part of the commute. The train is like the GO Trains in Toronto, and it's nearly always on time and on schedule. It's the connections that are problematic.

Tonight, I took the train from Vancouver back to the eastern suburbs. According to Translink's customer service Twitter - which is often helpful - there's a "slow track" order in place in east Vancouver/northern Burnaby which is having the effect of marginally delaying the train. Marginally. Maybe 2-5 minutes. It's actually pretty damned hard to find a bus in Vancouver that's only 2-5 minutes off schedule - normally they're more than that.

However, this is apparently a problem with a bus that I need to transfer to in order to, you know, get home. This bus **is supposed to meet the train**. That's what we're told. It'll be there. It's also the only bus to get home - unless I want to walk 3-5 kilometers alongside a highway in the rain at night in dark business wear. It doesn't normally stop at the station, instead these runs meet the train. Only these runs. The next one is an hour later.

Tonight it didn't show up. A relatively common occurrence, this is, sadly. And thanks to Translink's new NextBus application, all twelve of us who were standing there, waiting for the bus that wouldn't arrive, could see that the bus had skipped the station stop and was on its merry way.

So I phone Translink to lodge the traditional complaint that I assume is statistically counted but otherwise ignored. The customer service agent checks the NextBus system, and yes, the bus is gone.

"Was your train late?" he asked. "Yes," I said, "as they all have been, by a minute or two, for the last two weeks."

"Ah. That might be the problem."

How is it a problem? I asked on Twitter, where Translink maintains an account. I have been told in the past that these buses meet the train - it's what they're to do. Tonight, the Translink twitter person even said that the bus drivers had been texted, that the train was late, that they should wait. But they didn't.

So I get passed to the next echelon of Translink's customer service. This actually helpful and patient complaints office representative (not a job I would ever want) explained that the official policy is for buses to wait "**three minutes**" for the train. *That's it*. This hasn't normally been a problem since the bus itself is normally five minutes late, but not tonight. And given that **all** trains are late, I think this policy needs to be addressed and looked at and maybe revised. The bus needs to meet the train. There isn't an alternative.

Here's what the customer service representative told me:

"Three minutes. It's the policy, that policy won't change, and there's no one you can speak to about it."

Here's where my rant about my commute turns into one about Translink and its governance. Translink is a crown corporation with taxation abilities that has a quasi-elected advisory board and a government-appointed board of corporate lawyers and other notable people. Stephen has argued in the past that it's taxation without representation, and here's a painful example of it.

The policy is for the bus to only wait three minutes for the train it's supposed to meet. That's it. The policy is problematic when the train is late, stranding anywhere from 12-20 people without any options. Who can I speak to about this?

No one. And the policy won't change anyways. So sayeth Translink.

Now, I know that this complaints-taker is only an employee with no policy powers. But I **specifically** asked to speak to someone about the policy and bus service connecting to the train. And I was told that there's no one I can speak to. And that's completely unacceptable for a public organization that trumpets consultation as one of its principles.

How are Translink services, which are supposed to be responsive to public demands and the public it serves, going to be improved if I can't speak to someone about the policies and services? Translink's model is to take a complaint, pass it on, and say that it's up to someone else and their discretion as to whether or not they call me back.

Apparently the complaints policy is even like this: the customer service rep takes the complaint, reiterates the policy, and since they've explained the policy, there's no need for someone to call me back.

But what if the policy needs to be changed? **"That policy won't change, and there's no one you can speak to."**

This is problematic on so many levels for Translink. Even having the organization partially 'advised' by an indirectly elected board isn't making it accountable enough. For that, I completely blame Kevin Falcon and the BC Liberals (or is their new name the BC Christy Liberal Party?) for their happy restructuring adventures that removed mayors from substantive governance. There's no political connection to the governance of the organization, so there's no accountability.

The [principle of consultation](#) is a complete and utter charade. It seems, instead, that Translink is only willing to accept consultation through its own channels and through its own methods. People offering suggestions or wanting to speak about policies are not permitted to do so. Worse still is the seeming "blame the customer first" approach to customer relations, where the first thing that it seems that Translink customer service reps do upon a passenger asking why a bus is missing is to suggest that the passenger was late.

[Nancy Olewiler](#) is the [Chair of the Board of Translink](#), in addition to being the Director of the School for Public Policy at Simon Fraser University. I would hope that she would agree that a public organization that taxes and isn't democratically accountable shouldn't trumpet public consultation on one hand if on the other they say "it's the policy, that policy won't change, and there's no one you can speak to about it."

In Toronto, the TTC is governed by elected city councillors. The governance and operations of the TTC are political. There's no doubting that. And they're much better than Vancouvers. Sure, there are problems when a whackjob mayor takes over and kills projects that the city needs, but that speaks to the broader political climate in Toronto as a whole, a climate that the city is now painfully regretting. But even Toronto's indirect political accountability makes the TTC more responsive.

Perhaps we need to elect Translink's board of directors, like we elect our school boards. A thought, perhaps.

This particular rant has a different chapter. After being put through to a customer relations manager to complain, and leave a voicemail, I received a return telephone call, a promise to speak to someone about it, and a promised return call, along with a suggestion that the problematic policy itself may be looked at. The manager said that mine wasn't the only complaint this evening about this issue. Sadly, it seems that the only kind of democratic administration that Translink recognizes is a democracy of complaints and voicemail ballots.

This needs to change. And perhaps Translink's governance should be the first change.