

Local Railway Items from Area Papers - Beacon Hill Bullet

01/12/1972 Ottawa Journal Beacon Hill Bullet

Carson Grove gets bus service

Carson Grove residents will have a commuter express service downtown daily, as of Monday.

Capital Coach Lines Co. Ltd. Has been transporting 800 passengers daily from Beacon Hill, Blackburn Hamlet and surrounding area to downtown Place de Ville for the past 18 months.

Now the service is being extended to the new community of Carson Grove, located north of Ogilvie Road west of Blair Road..

The service takes about 30 minutes, said Colin Churcher, spokesman for the North Gloucester Transport Committee, which ran the original service until last June, and now acts as an advisor to Capital Coach.

Mr. Churcher said the now-familiar yellow school buses displace about 550 cars from the Queensway daily. This reduces traffic congestion by more than 15 per cent, he estimated.

Buses will leave the Carson Grove area at 7.45 a.m. and return at 5.12 p.m.

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Gloucester bus service inaugurates new run

A shoestring bus service started by North Gloucester commuters has turned into a 15-bus system carrying 800 people each way daily.

Even its newest route, an express service from Carson Grove, started off on a successful note today with 44 people riding the 48-passenger school bus provided for the run.

Colin Churcher, of the North Gloucester Transport Committee, said studies show the service has eliminated about 550 cars from the daily rush hour. "We asked the regional transit commission to provide this kind of bus service, but they couldn't give us the service we wanted at a reasonable cost," he said. "Our system will eventually be taken over by the region.

The system started a year ago with the committee renting buses from Capital Coach Lines Limited, but last June it was turned over to Capital to operate.

"We were a non-profit organization making a profit for the first six months," Mr. Churcher said. "We used the profit to subsidize off-hour bus runs. "But now Capital Coach is completely responsible for the service, and presumably they're making money at it."

The express service inaugurated today leaves Carson Grove at 7.45 a.m. from the Ogilvie-Blair intersection. A return bus leaves Place de Ville at 5.12 p.m.

Cost is 50 cents a ride or 12 rides for \$5..

PUTTING A BULLET IN TRANSIT

David Reevely

Ottawa didn't always treat mass transit as a glum duty the city executed on behalf of the down-and-out. There was a time, when even the inner suburbs were yet unfinished, when proper bus service was so important that underserved commuter communities went out and got it for themselves.

The pioneers of Beacon Hill, for instance, in what was then north Gloucester. Their trouble in 1971: Beacon Hill was outside the range of the Ottawa Transit Commission. Never mind that that part of Gloucester was little more than a dormitory for Ottawa workers, the commission wasn't interested.

So the people of Beacon Hill organized their own express bus route, working with \$200 in startup money from the local community association. Duncan Ellison and Colin Churcher, transportation economists who worked for the federal government, took the lead in finding a school bus line willing to serve them. They did all the planning, sold tickets, drew up a schedule, and the first bus rolled out on July 5, 1971.

And it was a raging success, with the "Beacon Hill Bullet" service rising from a few dozen passengers, impressive in itself, to 700 within months. The National Film Board sponsored a 15-minute documentary on the Bullet, called, with 1970s charm, *A Bus For Us*, a DVD copy of which I got to see last week.

The bus collected people around the neighbourhood, then cruised downtown along the Queensway to drop-off points along Albert Street. In the evening, the bus took people back. As more people signed up up to 80 per cent of the downtown-working population of Beacon Hill, according to organizers, the kind of participation modern transportation planners only dare to contemplate when they're stoned more buses were added.

For this express service, regular passengers paid 35 cents a ride (\$1.90 in 2007 dollars, just the cost of a regular bus ride today). In about six months, the nonprofit organization had pulled in \$150,000 in fares and had \$10,000 in its kitty, in big, strong 1971 dollars.

"I remember the first day we operated our bus, I think we had 50 people on it," John Charlebois president of Capital Coach Lines, which took over the system fully once it became too big for volunteers to operate, says on the film. "This would never have happened if we'd operated it on our own. We might have had one (passenger) to start with.

It would've taken over a year to bring it up to 50 or 60 passengers."

Not two years after it started, the Beacon Hill Bullet was such a success it had been absorbed by the new Ottawa-Carleton Regional Transit Commission. As a film, the 15-minute documentary is, frankly, a grim act of cinematic craft. It's all people talking to the camera, interspersed with lingering shots of a school bus cruising and the driver's hand working the mechanical lever to open and close the front door. If everyone in it weren't so palpably pleased with the situation, the short movie could be a case study from the Brezhnev School of Propaganda Film.

But as time capsule, *A Bus For Us* is grimly funny. The challenge with Beacon Hill, we're rightly told, was that jurisdictional matters aside, its low density and winding streets made transit inefficient to operate there; either you stop every 100 feet or you can't collect enough people to make a regular route worthwhile. Yet commuters travelling long distances don't like buses that don't go a block without letting one person on and another off. They'd much rather take private cars.

This was obvious in 1971, when Beacon Hill was still being built (you can see framed-in townhouses out the window of the bus in a few shots), yet in the 36 years since, there's been very little change in the way we allow new neighbourhoods to be constructed. From Kanata Lakes to Fallingbrook to the proposed subdivision in South Manotick, the mistakes are the same. Now heavily subsidized bus routes wind their sad way along suburban collector roads, always on the brink of elimination because they make no economic sense.

Even with heavily subsidized routes, ridership from the east end (still, the transit-lovingest part of town) tops out at about 30 per cent. The split where Highways 417 and 174 meet is a daily disaster area, the most plaque-clogged of Ottawa's transportation arteries.

The hard part, for the Bullet system, wasn't getting people from the edge of Beacon Hill into downtown it was collecting them all in the first place. We could plant 30,000 jobs in the middle of Orleans and that would help congestion on the Queensway, but still we would struggle with low population density and inefficient street layouts. Stittsville, with its more traditional grid layout, would probably cope much more easily.

The Beacon Hill Bullet lives on, after a fashion, in the No. 24 bus, which toodles around the neighbourhood before gliding onto the Queensway for a few runs each morning, and back in the afternoon.

For the pioneers of Beacon Hill, communal transportation had been second nature in their previous downtown dwellings; for many, the scheduled Bullet service replaced the inconvenience and waste of car pooling. They'd bought cars, perhaps, but very much wanted to avoid having two just so a working man and a stay-at-home mom could each have some independence; if he took the bus, she could keep the car.

Today, the second car is what's second nature.