

# TransLink fare collection a mess

**It's not fair:** Free riders face small risk of getting caught, while authority seeks tax increase

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**B**efore casting your ballot in this spring's transit and transportation plebiscite, I encourage voters to ride the bus, SkyTrain or Canada Line without proof of purchase and gauge the effectiveness of revenue collection and ticket enforcement.

As you will discover, fare collection on our transit system is one of the least enforced services in the world, especially on the SkyTrain and Canada Line. The number of people who ride without purchasing a ticket is staggering, evident by both casual observation and by the large number of offenders receiving tickets from Transit police.

I wrote to TransLink in 2010 with my growing concerns over free riding because TransLink wanted to increase fares to compensate. I said that TransLink allows free riding at its expense, given the complete lack of incentive and enforcement. A TransLink representative responded: "I would hope doing the right thing should be enough" and to "let our conscience be our guide" in a letter further addressing morality and parental lessons.

I was also encouraged the Smart/Compass card system was "on target for launch to the public early 2013."

I have been recording instances of Transit police enforcement against my daily commute for over 1,000 days, riding the SkyTrain in the morning from Metrotown to Burrard station and returning in the evening.

In all these years, I was asked to provide proof of purchase by Transit police only five times. If that seems low, TransLink's last independent audit in 2008



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According to TransLink's last independent audit, less than one per cent of rides involving fare evasion result in tickets and less than 10 per cent of the issued tickets are paid.

supports my experience, stating "there is a low likelihood of being caught by Transit police. It is estimated that less than one per cent of rides involving fare evasion result in a ticket to the rider; and even when caught, there is little pressure to pay, with less than 10 per cent of tickets issued by Transit police currently being paid." With such colossal neglect of enforcement, it's no wonder the attitude around tax increases tastes so sour to the public.

The onus of responsibility falls squarely on TransLink. Relying on an irresponsible honour system to operate a publicly-funded transit scheme exposes TransLink's unaccountability with its revenue collection and enforcement. Add to this the failed Compass Card system, two years overdue and grossly over budget,

and the future looks bleak.

TransLink would have us believe the perception of fare evasion is 10 times worse than reality, which they indicate is four to six per cent of users riding for free. Many users have prepaid tickets, transfers from a bus ride, or other passes. Conversely the enforcement perception is inflated because regular TransLink employees don't have the authority to issue tickets. TransLink's internal audits of fare evasion rely largely on Transit police simply asking people if they have proof of purchase, ticketing those who haven't, and comparing the numbers. This is demonstrably inaccurate and unreliable, and exposes opportunity to further abuse the system.

So how do users avoid a fine? Suppose the Transit police issue

one ticket per officer at a time. Typically they are writing tickets non-stop during their shift, surrounded by caught offenders. Meanwhile, casual to experienced fare-evaders simply recognize the opportunity and walk on. Officers are so busy writing tickets they are unable to check anyone else. Several times I've purchased a pass, only to wave it in front of an officer who is busy writing a ticket for someone who was busted. The presence of Transit police is almost a guaranteed free ride, with only the amateur or unlucky offenders getting caught.

Another trick is to look at users who may be holding their ticket after displaying it to officers. If someone is at a bottleneck area of a station and has their ticket out, chances are they were

just asked for it. Officers often stand within line of sight from the ticket kiosks, so in all cases simple observation is enough to avoid the clumsy attempts to catch offenders.

Further undocumented fare evaders can be gleaned merely by watching the number of people who have their head up and notice Transit police and then turn around midway to buy a ticket. Most offenders seem to be tourists or disenfranchised youth, who are unlikely to pay.

Regular free riding doesn't begin with malicious intent. For many users it often follows a short period of riding with an invalid pass and realizing "I could have been ticketed every day, but nothing happened. Should I bother buying the next pass, when it's so easy and I've come this far without consequence?" The thousands of dollars saved after years of free riding becomes a bigger incentive for most people than "doing the right thing" as TransLink hopes.

Despite the back-and-forth between the Yes and No campaigns, it should be clear the plebiscite is about both improving transportation capacity and TransLink's responsibility and accountability.

None of this condones stealing. In light of the 2013 report about the 2.7 million times bus riders evaded fares in Metro Vancouver, and that TransLink estimates its revenue loss due to fare evasion is about \$18 million per year, voting to increase taxes to support a system that doesn't enforce its revenue collection is absurd. As the Compass card gates collect dust following the failed launch date of early 2013, taxpayers should be conscious of the ability of TransLink to deliver on its targets before we put good money after bad.

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