

Pete McMartin: Is TransLink finally getting its bearings with Compass Card?

While rollout has been a fiasco, the smart card system emerged out of a great clamour from The Public

BY PETE MCMARTIN, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST APRIL 8, 2015



Compass Card readers such as this one on a Vancouver city bus are in place ahead of the rollout of the entire system.

Photograph by: Mark van Manen, PNG

FareGate — I'm copyrighting that if nobody else has used it — has been with us now for just over a dozen years, when way back in 2002, a TransLink study came to the conclusion that any justification for installing fare gates on SkyTrain was — and I'm paraphrasing here — a lousy idea full of crap.

Too expensive.

Cost way more than the negligible problem of fare evasion the gates hoped to address.

The TransLink board rejected fare gates again in 2005, for the same reason.

But by then, fare evasion had become an issue. The Public — the same one so enraged with TransLink today — believed that more than 25 per cent of all riders were evading fares, costing the system hundreds of millions of dollars.

TransLink insisted the cost of fare evasion amounted only to four per cent of total revenues, but no one was listening. A great clamour arose that Something Be Done.

Something was.

In 2007, then Transportation Minister Kevin Falcon announced the province would pay the capital cost of installing the fare gates, which led to the 2009 federal and provincial governments' announcement that they would jointly fund fare gates, which led to TransLink's \$171.3-million budget for the installation

of fare gates and Compass Card technology.

Imagine: All of this put into motion by the picayune crimes of scofflaws.

Then came the rash and stupid promise by TransLink the work could be done in two or three years, when it couldn't. And then came the \$23-million rise in the original budget — half of that due to inflation, the other half due to “additional implementation requirements” (read “glitches.”)

Which is to say, between the collective and self-inflicted deafness of the Public, the destructive political expediency of the provincial government, and TransLink's complacency in making a promise it knows it couldn't keep, we have arrived at Boondoggle -- today's favourite word of TransLink's critics.

Would they have spoken up earlier in 2002 and 2005, when TransLink insisted there wasn't a problem. I count myself among the remiss.

So, here we are, at the present.

As of December 2014, TransLink had spent \$143,363,000 of its revised \$194.2-million budget, leaving it with some \$50.8 million to spend. TransLink maintains it expects no increase in that budget. Take that for what you will.

TransLink maintains that the three-zone fare structure and tap-out requirements of its system have stretched the limits of the Compass Card technology, which has led to complaints of slow or non-existent recognition by the system's Compass Card readers.

In response to that, TransLink has completed two software updates since mid-2014 which its engineers claim has improved response times, and has facilitated the furthering expansion of the smart card rollout to targeted groups. I wouldn't know about improved response times: I'm not in one of the targeted groups.

Contrary to what many believe, the Compass Card system is actually in service. TransLink's engineers say there are over 150,000 working “taps” a day, and the system has registered over 60 million transactions so far. (TransLink had just under 360 million boardings in 2014.)

By the end of the summer, TransLink promises to have a total of 200,000 Compass Cards in circulation, with the next targeted groups to be more university students and West Coast Express riders. Take that promise for what you will.

Who will receive them after that has yet to be determined — possibly transit riders restricted to a single municipality, possibly transit riders who commute through all three zones. The operative mode, though, is go slow now that the end is nigh, or, at least, nigher: TransLink doesn't want to overload the system with the projected total of 800,000 Compass Card users if there are still glitches to work out.

And, when that glorious day arrives, the fare gates that now stand open will close and transit riders will need a working Compass Card to open them.

And while none of this excuses the continuing problems of TransLink to get the system up and running, it will have been over a dozen years from the day TransLink insisted to us there was no problem to address, which the public refused to heed, to today, when you can't hear for all the shouting from the public that the problem is TransLink.

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