

# TRANSIT WOES ON THE REVERSE COMMUTE

## All roads lead to Rome, but trouble is not everyone works downtown

Jonathan Whitworth, the CEO of Seaspan, has a problem most businessmen would welcome: Employees' cars fill his company's parking lots. Business is good. Business is getting even better. Seaspan is riding a rising tide.



*JASON PAYNE* Most of the 1,300 employees at Seaspan's North Shore shipyard and offices drive to work because transit connections are poor and cumbersome.

At the moment, Seaspan's North Shore shipyard and office operations employ about 1,300 people. The company will add 300 new employees in the next two years. It won the federal government contract to build a new fleet of coast guard and noncombat navy vessels.

That will mean more employees driving to work. This, Whitworth does not want to see. He wants more of his employees to take public transit. The problem is, many of those employees can't take transit due to scheduling problems, or the connections to the North Shore are so poor and cumbersome that commuting by transit makes no sense.

The phenomenon bedeviling Seaspan — a problem increasing throughout the Metro area — is the reverse and cross-suburb commute. Instead of a mass flow of suburban commuters heading into the city centre, urbanites commute out to the suburbs, or suburbanites commute to other suburbs. Unlike Toronto or Montreal, or most U.S. cities, Metro Vancouver's commuting patterns are non-traditional and much more diffuse, and all that much harder to serve by transit. Look at a schematic map of traffic flows in Metro Vancouver and it looks like a multi-directional ganglia. (A good representation of this was generated by demographer Andy Yan for Bing Thom Architects, at [www.btaworks.com/2014/07/28/visualizing-commute-patternsin-metro-vancouver/](http://www.btaworks.com/2014/07/28/visualizing-commute-patternsin-metro-vancouver/))

At present, 70 per cent of Seaspan's workforce lives south of the North Shore, drawn mainly from Burnaby, Coquitlam, Surrey and Vancouver. (And Whitworth said he expects the rising cost of housing will force future employees to live even farther afield.) Many of those employees, Whitworth said, have to cross two bridges to get to work.

There is, of course, public transit available to them. SkyTrain, the Canada Line and the West Coast Express all converge at the foot of Granville Street, where workers could cross the harbour by SeaBus. But access isn't the problem. Timing is.

"For our tradesmen and women," Whitworth said, "at least in our shipyard division, which is quite large and getting larger, they have a shift time that starts at 6:30 a.m. So if they live south of the North Shore, they would be traditionally perfect folks to go on rapid transit, and then on to SeaBus.

"Unfortunately, the SeaBus doesn't run that early." (The first sailing from the south shore is at 6:16 a.m. and takes 10 to 12 minutes to cross the harbour.) "We would have to have the SeaBus starting at 5:30 a.m. or 6 a.m.

"Secondly, if you're not a shift worker, and you have a 7, 8 or 9 a.m. start, the good news is you could get rail into Vancouver and then SeaBus over to the North Shore. Then, you come across the problem that, unfortunately, the TransLink buses don't stop in front of our facility (on Pemberton Avenue, near the large sulphur pile on the North Shore). It's about a 20-minute walk from the nearest bus stop.

"So if you combine (all those factors), you're adding so much incremental time that our employees have decided it takes too long to get here. So, unfortunately, we have a lot of cars in our parking lot that, quite frankly, as CEO and as employees, we wouldn't care to see."

The result: Whitworth figures less than 10 per cent of his employees take transit.

This is a problem that goes beyond one employer and one suburb.

Look at a map of our rapid transit lines and they mirror, not the reality of Metro's diverse commuting patterns, but the traditional idea of commuting found everywhere but here. All roads lead to Rome, as it were, not Surrey or Langley or the North Shore.

"Until we take a more regional, comprehensive look," Whitworth said, "we're just going to have these problems forever."

Metro's mayors would argue that the \$7.5-billion plan they put forward in last year's failed referendum proposed that regional view. Better scheduling, more bus service and better connections between suburbs. Light rapid transit in Surrey and Langley. Road improvements for major commuting routes. And, yes, an upgrade and increase to the SeaBus service.

When asked, Whitworth said he was unable to vote in the referendum, but said he would have voted no, anyway.

Like so many other voters, he said he lacked confidence in what was then TransLink's management.

TransLink has new management now, and — I couldn't help but smile at the irony, one which illustrates an even greater irony — Whitworth will be meeting with that management in the next couple of weeks to try to find a solution to Seaspan's transit problems.

In the meantime, we've all lost a year.

## 20 Comment(s)

Pam of BCLA - Coquitlam Public Library (CDN)(PQ)

11 June 2016

04:50

My employer faces the same situation regarding transit, but voting yes in the referendum wouldn't have made much difference I'm afraid.

The amount of money that moonbeam's tunnel would take away from other projects and improvements meant that it would have still been the same for most other areas even with a yes vote. And the tunnel would have only moved people to another bus stop.

We have lost more than a year, Pete. We are losing ground every day that that tunnel is still being seriously considered. Write about the incredible waste of money that that tunnel would be, and how much the money earmarked for it could have accomplished. How about that, Pete?

eureka of BCLA - Richmond Public Library (CDN)(PQ)

11 June 2016

05:27

Pam it looks like you live in Coquitlam so you could care less about the tunnel, but us people south of the Fraser are tired of waiting in lineups to get to work and if there is an accident (which there frequently is) you are looking at up to 2 hours to get through the tunnel. I feel sorry for these semi's who have to crawl at a snails pace because they can only use the right hand lane thru the tunnel.

[Wet Coaster](#)

11 June 2016

06:05

Every city has bottlenecks so Vancouver is not as unique as it might think. I can attest to that having lived in Toronto and Calgary. Furthermore, the suburbs expand as the cost of housing jumps inside the city. But people sometimes change jobs and they have a much different commute. Most transit systems are more like spokes radiating out from the downtown. But if you have to commute around the periphery of the city, public transit makes no sense. Ring type subway service has considerable merit.

As it stands today, God help you if you live where I do in South Surrey and need to get somewhere to work.

Pam of BCLA - Coquitlam Public Library (CDN)(PQ)

11 June 2016

06:15

Eureka, I am talking about the moonbeam's broadway subway that I would have to help pay for, not the massey tunnel. The story is about Transit, not infrastructure.



[oor Wullie](#)

11 June 2016

07:13

I simply assume transit does not exist. Get a hundred down and buy a car.



[GMan](#)

11 June 2016

07:28

How many companies like Seaspan are there in Metro? If every City has a similar company, or a business park with a similar sized group of companies, we will have to create bus routes in a whole range of areas with good connections to every other area of the city. We will need to move relatively small numbers of people to relatively diverse areas.

Sounds like a massive money pit that will have vastly underused buses. Adding to the inefficient use of buses will be the fact that the shift workers will arrive at odd hours. If a regular bus ran hourly past the Seaspan drydocks how much use would it get after the morning shift started at 6:30? There could be an hourly bus that drove around with 2 or 3 passengers for the next eight to ten hours when the workers get off shift. Or maybe Translink would have to hire extra drivers to make one shuttle trip to the Seaspan yard and then park the bus until the next shift start/stop at an odd hour.

Sometimes cars are the most efficient way to move people.



[GMan](#)

11 June 2016

07:29

Wullie, but that would only get you to San Jose. :-)



[Ricketty Rabbit](#)

11 June 2016

07:30

Many voted "yes" in the referendum on faith that the transit plan was good, and to be good citizens, unlike the free riders who drink their share of the beer, then hide in the washroom when the bill comes.

But many voted "no" because they feel Translink is inefficient, and some because the Mayors' plan included some very questionable gigantic investments. Add to that the less expensive but very annoying conversion of main traffic routes to dedicated bike lanes when the converted lanes go from carrying thousands of passengers per day in cars and buses to hundreds per non-rainy day on bikes, and far fewer when there's rain in the forecast.

My take is that we didn't lose a year. We pushed back the huge capital expense of the Broadway tunnel. And as long as we don't build it, there's a chance saner heads will prevail.

The Mayors have a duty to ensure public investments in transit are cost-effective. There ought to be an authoritative body of experts that examines plans for such mega-investments for their sanity and cost-effectiveness. But there isn't. Instead, the plans are determined behind closed doors with who knows what horse trading and collusion. It's time for a change.



[VanIsle](#)

11 June 2016

07:31

So why doesn't the Seaspan CEO change the shift start time to 7:00 am? Surely a half hour isn't going to make that much of a difference to his operation.

[Litho](#)

11 June 2016

07:38

How about the \$55 million Moonbeam wasted on the Arbutus Greenway. That money could have been used for Translink.

What a complete waste of money.

[Lynn Kumpula](#)

11 June 2016

07:58

I think the Seaspan example shines light on the inability of Translink to relate to the immediate world around them. I am a big fan of rapid transit, but bus routes, timing and connections have been huge problems for commuters for many many years. In large cities that Vancouver is constantly being compared to, like London or New York, or Toronto, all have solved their transit issues. People from these cities either walk, bus, train, or use rapid transit. All modes of transportation are being tweaked and are used regularly by commuters.



[The Green Bastard](#)

11 June 2016

08:23

normie, that reminds me of good old Ralph Williams...

[peanut gallery](#)

11 June 2016

09:04

So, why doesn't Seaspan contract a park and ride service with Translink to serve their workforce and specific hours of operation?

As for our Mayor's priorities ... The City's portion of the Arbutus Greenway just happens to include the terminus of Gregor's massive money pit.

[comomark](#)

11 June 2016

09:43

The aircraft manufacturers, like Boeing, see a point to point system, not a hub system. The 787 is made for this purpose, even though hubs still exist. The high cost of baggage transfer and delays in people transfer are mitigated by this approach.

I would say operations like uber, google, lyfte, etc. are offering a similar model. Mass transit may become quite different when observed through computer dispatched custom transit of 5 or 10 persons.

Old style 'brute force' solutions create their own issues, especially when crafted so finely to solve 'today's' problems. Bridges and tunnels are perfect examples. The Port Mann bridge moved the traffic congestion 14 km closer to the City. now the back up is at Burnaby lake, not Guilford. The Hastings underpass, the most expensive project of the day, jams both ways, nearly every day.

Transit, the 'hammer' sees everything as a 'nail'.

Someone needs to stop digging and bridging, sit in a quiet room, and think.



[Ricketty Rabbit](#)

11 June 2016

09:51

Great comment, comomark. The world is about to change dramatically with the advent of very fast and mobile commuting. Many will struggle with exactly what that means, but basically, it means that "Skytrain" and its ilk are part of an old, soon-to-be outmoded concept. Let's not spend \$2B on obsolete technology, shall we?



[Stryder](#)

11 June 2016

10:49

Anybody read the article in Common Ground -

<http://commonground.ca/2016/06/the-unaffordable-subway/>

Not In Our Name of VPL Library

11 June 2016

11:28

Good article, thanks Stryder. :-)

Many people, including many 'Yes' voters, don't like the proposed Broadway Corridor subway. I still believe it won't get approval despite the tremendous fuss and hysteria spun around it. I made my opinion clear more than a year ago and I still believe the "subway" is dead in the water, a red herring tossed around by transit opponents.

Astute as always, Pete writes "In the meantime, we've all lost a year." And more time continues to be wasted, GVRD falls behind in its infrastructure development, while people continue to chatter and whine about the same unconstructive topics ad nauseam.

11 June 2016

11:59

NION, I think RHW has a lock on "whine". :)



[RHW](#)

11 June 2016

12:38

Sorry to disappoint you daryl but you didn't notice the move to weepers and losers. As for your literary lover, <http://www.nion.ca/>



[GMan](#)

11 June 2016

18:36

Good article Stryder, but he has the funding plan wrong. As more people switch to transit from cars more funds will be needed to subsidize the system. Carbon taxes and gasoline taxes will decline with less cars being used and the system will end up being under funded.

Property taxes are meant for providing civic services. They also don't shrink when people get out of their cars.