

JAMES: TransLink service not on par with its charter

[Elizabeth James](#) / contributing writer

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Just
ASKING
Elizabeth James



"The TransLink Customer Service Charter is our promise of quality service. We're committed to giving you a service that's efficient, safe, reliable and comfortable."

– translink.ca

Unfortunately for TransLink, despite the "best minds" taxpayers underwrite to the tune of half a billion dollars, reality often doesn't measure up to the good intentions laid out in its Customer Service Charter.

Leaving aside the frequent service interruptions on SkyTrain, two recent experiences involving bus service to/from the North Shore highlight the **need to improve communication and co-ordination throughout the system.**

On the reasonably calm morning of the big windstorm, I decided to visit the PNE.

After 10 years of not seeing the fair, I heard entry would be free until 1 p.m. So rather than drive and pay \$20 to park, I walked to Park Royal to take the PNE special.

An empty bus arrived on time. I boarded, paid the fare and sat down. We waited a while for more passengers. No one arrived, so the driver started the engine and pulled into traffic.

At that point, he called dispatch and said, "I have one elderly lady on board, that's all." Then, after a moment of listening, "OK, just thought I'd let you know."

Forgiving him the unnecessary adjective, I expected the bus to travel eastward, picking up more passengers along Marine Drive on our way to the Ironworkers' Memorial Second Narrows Crossing.

Not so. The driver and I rode a regular-size Blue Bus up to the Upper Levels Highway and directly down to the fair, for a \$1.75 fare!

On arrival, I made note of the West Vancouver sign, so I'd know where to board the return bus.

After only two hours of strolling, with a gale force wind blowing tents, signs and displays in every, dangerous direction, I decided to abort.

Unfortunately, there was no bus to be had.

What I didn't know until later was that the bus, likely still empty, was stuck in traffic on The Cut due to an accident or fallen tree.

The problem was, no one thought to communicate that to the driver of a Phibbs Exchange-bound bus that was sitting, empty, about six metres away from me. So although I almost hopped on board, I decided to be patient and wait for the West Vancouver ride.

Wrong move. I left the fairgrounds at 1:10 p.m. and eventually made it to Park Royal exactly three hours later on another Phibbs-bound vehicle plus a transfer to a bus that wound its tortuous way throughout North Vancouver.

Yes, it was a tough day throughout the Lower Mainland but we're supposed to be ready for emergencies like that and all transit buses have two-way communication.

A simple call from the stalled bus on The Cut, plus a call from dispatch to the first Phibbs-bound driver sitting at the PNE, would have made for more efficient service.

Now, while that story is mostly about inconvenience and unnecessary TransLink operating costs, the next tale has more serious implications for passenger safety.

It happened three to four weeks ago and involved a North Vancouver woman who prefers I don't mention her real name.

Age 24, "Anna" doesn't drive. She works varying shifts at a Burnaby location. Sometimes her parents drive her there but often they take her to Phibbs where she picks up a bus and transfers to the SkyTrain, which takes her to work. The same applies to her return trip when she takes the SkyTrain to Joyce Road and transfers to the Phibbs bus.

This time, Anna says she finished work at 10:30 p.m. Transit was on schedule and, along with five others, she arrived at Phibbs shortly after 11 p.m.

"The Mountain Highway connection was already there, so I boarded, crumpled my transfer to wrap my gum, and became one of about 20 passengers waiting for the bus to depart," she said.

After about five minutes, Anna says the driver left his seat and told everyone to get off the bus because, although his replacement hadn't shown up, his hours were at their allowable limit.

Leaving, he then pointed across the parking lot and said, "There's my own bus now."

Anna says she didn't stay around in the dark to see how the problem was resolved. "I knew my younger sister was on her own way home by cab from her Vancouver job, so I texted her to drop by Phibbs to collect me because my bus was already 10 minutes late when I ditched it," she said.

As in my case, Anna said the worst thing about the experience was the lack of communication.

"They may not have had all the answers to our questions, or known how long we would have to wait, but they could have at least made us comfortable by allowing us to stay warm and a little more in control of the situation."

What Anna did not say was that at that time of night had the bus even made a timely connection, the walk to her home from Mountain Highway would have taken about 15 minutes along not well lit, tree-lined roads.

With "service" like this, is it any wonder TransLink finds it difficult to attract ridership or to make ends meet?

After 16 years with the multi-disciplinary Perinatal Programme of B.C. and later in various endeavours in the growing high-tech industry, Elizabeth James now connects the dots every second Wednesday on local, regional and provincial issues. She can be reached via email at at rimco@shaw.ca (<mailto:rimco@shaw.ca>).

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