

October 05, 2007

All 3,000 Coast Mountain Bus Co. drivers have been ordered to take refresher driving courses following a deluge of complaints from the public and Vancouver police and a huge increase in accidents.

The number of preventable accidents involving Coast Mountain buses has jumped by 43 per cent in the past four years, according to documents obtained from Coast Mountain under freedom of information legislation.

Other documents showed the major complaints from the public and police include:

- Drivers deliberately running yellow and red lights and using the "honk-andrun" tactic -- drivers leaning on their horns to clear out intersections when they run yellow or red lights.
- Drivers bullying other road users by cutting them off or forcing them out of their lane using the "Thanks for the brake. Please Yield: It's the law" sign on the rear of the bus as justification.
- Drivers hogging the road, preventing other motorists from passing.
- Speeding buses.
- Drivers talking on cellphones or listening to Walkmans or MP3 players while at the wheel.

A preventable accident is described by Coast Mountain as "a contact between a motor vehicle and anything, where the driver of the vehicle did not take

reasonable action to avoid a collision."

In 2003 Coast Mountain -- which operates most of TransLink's buses in Metro Vancouver -- recorded 290 preventable accidents. In 2006, that rose to 415.

Non-preventable accidents increased by only 16 per cent in the same period, from 1,124 to 1,307.

Overall, the total number of collisions increased 21 per cent in 2003-2006 -- from 1,466 accidents, including 52 involving pedestrians, to 1,777 including 55 involving pedestrians.

Coast Mountain operated 1,116 buses in 2003, and was running 1,252 by the end of 2006.

There was a time when Vancouver bus drivers were generally regarded as the safest on the road, reliable and courteous, who could be counted on to obey all the rules.

But the new statistics combined with concerns by Vancouver police and city officials, plus the volume of complaints from the public, point to a deterioration in driving standards.

It is something Coast Mountain says it is attempting to reverse. The company blames the problem on perhaps five per cent of its drivers.

This summer, all 3,000 company drivers, regardless of their driving records, were ordered to take a two-day refresher course aimed at promoting safe driving practices. The program will cost more than \$500,000 a year and is still being developed by Coast Mountain.

Late last year, Vancouver police asked for a meeting with the bus company in response to public complaints and concerns from the department and city hall.

No outside agency keeps track of transit driving standards. The Insurance Corp. of B.C. said it was unable to provide current statistics on deaths and injuries in accidents involving buses.

Vancouver police don't keep track of the number of tickets issued to bus drivers, and no one in the 80-person traffic section is specifically assigned to bus issues.

However, minutes of a Coast Mountain meeting with the police last December included these comments:

- "Operators have been seen to be inattentive to their driving because a fair number are seen talking on cellphones or listening to Walkmans or MP3 players. Operators

have been observed not taking corners wide enough, doing it one-handed, not seeing pedestrians, crosswalks or traffic lights."

- "The big one is running yellow and red lights. It has become known among city workers as 'honk-and-run.' "

- "Speed is a big issue. Traffic enforcement is currently doing an enforcement project on Granville St. Enforcement will take place when buses are seen to be speeding excessively. Two coaches had been clocked at 100 km/h and 90 km/h on city streets recently."

- "Yield to buses only when [they are] pulling out of designated bus stops and only when it is safe to do so. Some operators have been observed forcing themselves into traffic during lane changes without consideration to the traffic around them, which forces cars into oncoming traffic."

- "Operators need to be more aware of pedestrians, particularly in the downtown core. ... Last year VPD investigated 98 incidents where pedestrians had been hit by buses [all buses, not just transit buses]."

As a result of the meeting, a notice was sent to drivers in January headed "Safety Starts With You." It listed the main police concerns.

Meanwhile, from 2003 to the middle of this year, approximately 19,000 residents complained about the way buses or services were being operated.

The Sun asked for access to letters of complaint, but because of the sheer volume, the newspaper settled for a sample of 50 received within the last year on the topic of how buses were being driven.

Insp. Andy Hobbs, who heads the VPD traffic section, says the vast majority of bus drivers are professional and doing a good job.

"They are serious about their responsibilities to get the public around the city in a safe manner as well as protecting the public that isn't actually on the bus," Hobbs said. "But there is an issue with a minority of drivers."

He said the "honk-and-run" phenomenon is common.

"We've all seen it. It's something that shouldn't be condoned or done. When you stop people for running lights, the typical argument is it wasn't safe to stop, or, 'I didn't have enough time,' or 'It's a full bus with people standing and I don't want to slam on the brakes.'

"However, the reality is, yellow lights are yellow for a substantial time and if you are going the speed limit you have enough time to stop safely. So I don't accept the argument it's not safe to stop. We do take enforcement action when we see that," said Hobbs.

"And I'd like someone to explain to me why a bus should be exceeding the speed limit. We asked the bus company how much of an issue is it for drivers to be on time and on schedule, given the problems they can have in traffic, and unless I'm mistaken we were advised there weren't repercussions for being late.

"So there's no excuse for going through a yellow light . . . or for cutting vehicles off because you think you have this arbitrary, all-encompassing right to pull into a lane -- because you don't. That's not what the law says," said Hobbs. "The 'Thanks for the brake' bumper stickers are cute and catchy but they're a little bit misleading and probably have led -- in a minority of cases -- to a bit of misuse," said Hobbs.

While Section 169.1

of the Motor Vehicle

Act says drivers

have to yield to

buses when the bus

is attempting to pull

away from a stop,

this right is trumped

by Section 169.3,

which says, "Despite

subsection 1, a bus

driver must not move

a bus into the

travelled portion of

the highway unless it

is safe to do so."

"And that's the key,"

Hobbs said. "The

bus driver must not

pull into traffic unless

it is safe to do so.

That means that if

you are travelling at

50 km/h and are a

car length behind a

bus that then signals

to pull out, you don't have to slam on the brakes so the bus can pull into the lane," said Hobbs. "Bus drivers do not have carte blanche to just pull into traffic. They have to do it when it's safe to do so. And most operators realize that and don't do it. But there are some that do," he said.

Of the 50 complaints lodged with Coast Mountain Bus that were given to The Sun, 22 were from drivers who had been cut off in traffic by buses pulling into their lane.

It's even happened to Hobbs while he was off-duty. He said he was driving alongside the rear wheel of a bus when it suddenly moved into his lane. To avoid a collision, he was forced over the centre line into oncoming traffic. The bus just kept going.

Hobbs said the December discussion with the company was "constructive and helpful."

Stan Sierpina, Coast Mountain's vice-president of customer service, says the company puts safety above all else. He said he told a graduating class of drivers recently that "Safety is job one I told them if you have to speed to keep on a schedule, that's wrong, and you have to bring it to our attention so we can fix it," Sierpina said.

As for the rise in preventable accidents, Coast Mountain's Mike Madill, vice-president of regulatory and consulting services, said drivers have to report every accident and "a vast majority" were were minor. "It's concerning to us that this type of thing happens but it probably happens a little more because of all the reroutes," said Madill, referring to 100 bus routes in the City of Vancouver that have been disrupted by Canada Line construction and other roadwork in the past year.

He said Coast Mountain started its driver refresher course because, "Things change, society changes and demands on operators change and we want to continue to equip our operators and drivers with the skills and tools they need to be successful in their profession."

He said the company started planning the program about 18 months ago.

Some of the accidents can be attributed to an increase in service hours of 14 per cent from 2003 to 2006, he said.