

Community

transport/public transit/general information

Taking a back seat to BC Transit

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Loyal Cascade Coach Lines passengers say they enjoy the comfortable seating and fast service to Vancouver.

News photo by Simone Parnis

Passenger loyalty keeps coach line rolling

By Karin Mark
Staff Reporter

Not everyone is profiting from the new transit system. Meet Robert Dubois, owner of Cascade Coach Lines. Cascade is a charter bus service that passes through Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows on its runs between Abbotsford and Vancouver.

Before B.C. Transit came on line locally Dec. 16, Cascade provided the only Maple Ridge to Vancouver trip in the area. But the advent of the more inexpensive transit system has taken its toll. "It's bad news," Dubois said from his Chilliwack office in early January.

"Our day stuff is completely gone — it's just a regular disaster. "Until Dec. 16, our phones were ringing like crazy. After that, there was nothing."

To cope with the problem, he recently applied to the Motor Carrier branch to drop three of his day runs.

He said at least four to five drivers will be laid off once he receives approval.

For the moment, Cascade's peak-hour commuter runs are still holding their own.

Getting off a Cascade bus from Vancouver one evening at the Maple Ridge depot, local resident Janice McAub voiced her loyalty to the charter service.

"I won't change. It's a long enough trip to Vancouver without

any extra time added on," she said.

Cascade's commuter trips to Vancouver have minimal stops and transport people from Maple Ridge to downtown Vancouver in about an hour and 20 minutes. The same B.C. Transit trip takes about 15 minutes more.

"Besides, they have lights to read by and comfortable seats where you can rest your head. You can't

sleep on a regular bus, your head keeps bobbing."

Another loyal Cascade rider, Louise Soucy, said the difference in price — about \$20 to \$25 more per month for Cascade — is worth it for the comforts.

"For the small savings it's not worth it to be uncomfortable, certainly not for the average commuter."

Dubois said he doesn't blame commuters for switching to the less expensive service.

"We have to charge GST, B.C. Transit doesn't have to," he said. "But if I was a customer and I could ride for \$2.75, I'd ride it."

B.C. Transit's peak-hour multi-zone fare is \$2.75. Cascade charges \$4.05 on individual trips, but sells books of ten tickets for \$36.60.

The loss of day and weekend service is the main problem. While Cascade used to carry from 25 to 50 day passengers to Vancouver each day, it now carries under 10.

Numbers for weekend trips have been cut in half.

"If the commuter runs drop off, it's an automatic shut down."

He said all his problems come down to one thing: he wasn't cut a piece of the government pie when BC Transit decided to provide local service.

When people wanted bus service on the north side of Fraser River in 1984, he bought the routes, he said. When people wanted more day runs, he added them on.

He provided a much-needed service when no other companies would provide it, but as soon as transit came in he was forgotten. He wasn't even considered for the rural and local service Independent Bus now provides, he said.

If he was able to tax local residents and was subsidized by the government, he said would be able to provide cheaper service too.

Dubois said he has had no response to his letters and phone calls to government officials.

What would satisfy him? "If they were to come to me and buy the section out, buy the business or give me a subsidy for runs that don't pay."

However, he said, "I'll probably be shutting it down before I sell — who's going to buy it now? Everyone is actually scared."

Economy, not BC Transit, to blame for taxi slump

Business is slow for local taxis, but B.C. Transit might not be to blame.

Jeff Soul, who manages Maple Ridge and Meadow Ridge Taxi, said: "Certainly there are people at every bus stop, but I don't know if we can only blame transit for the slow down."

"I think the economy is more of a problem than transit," he said. "People are more concerned about their jobs rather than paying money for a cab."

Business is more than 20 per cent down from

before Christmas, and slower than when the GST was implemented, Soul said.

The taxis have lost a lot of their early morning, late afternoon and Saturday service.

As a result, the company had to take two cars off the road earlier this month. That leaves a 12-car fleet to cover Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows.

But Soul doesn't predict a quick end to the company. "I'll be around for a long time. We're just going to keep plugging along."

Wheelchair-equipped buses arrive

The real BC Transit minibuses are here.

Since BC Transit started locally Dec. 16, 20-passenger vans have been servicing rural and local routes in Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows.

A month later, five 24-passenger Link minibuses have arrived and are at work.

The wheelchair-equipped minibuses are the first to be used in the Vancouver Regional Transit System.

The 8.7 metre (29-foot) long buses, made in California, are more manoeuvrable, user-friendly and suited for the local rural passenger demand and capacity.