

Translink's road warriors
Driving a bus can be as scenic as a trip up to Grouse Mountain or as hellish as the Downtown Eastside. It all depends on personal choice and where you are on the peg board

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CREDIT: Stuart Davis, Vancouver Sun
Bus driver Todd Hancock has been behind the wheel for Coast Mountain Bus Company for 12 years. His No. 19 bus takes him from Metrotown to Stanley Park along Kingsway.

It doesn't get much better than sitting behind the wheel of the No. 236 bus, Lonsdale Quay to Grouse Mountain, if you're a bus driver.

It's a route to put a smile on your face.

But if you find yourself driving the No. 8 bus or the No. 20 -- the inner city Fraser and Victoria routes -- chances are you don't have a lot of seniority. Drivers consider those to be some of the most stressful routes in the Greater Vancouver transit system.

The 236 runs from harbour-side North Vancouver to alpine forest, past one tourist attraction after another: the Lonsdale Quay Public Market, the Capilano suspension bridge, Cleveland Dam, the Capilano fish hatchery, the Grouse Mountain gondola ride.

Traffic is usually light and it's a short route, maybe 25 minutes each way. That means the bus is easy to keep on schedule so the driver has a few minutes at each end of the loop to relieve himself, grab a sandwich, stretch his legs.

That's not the case, much of the time, on the trolley routes that pass through downtown Vancouver or the trolleys and articulated buses that ply the busy Broadway corridor.

"There's a lot of overcrowded routes out there," said Jim Houlahan, a driver for more than 30 years and now a vice-president of Canadian Auto Workers Local 111, which represents bus operators.

"Sometimes you're dealing with a lot of frustrated people," Houlahan said. "You're operating an overcrowded bus. It's always a full standing load.

"Sometimes you'll be late because you're picking

up so many people, so you get to the end of the line and it's time to go again."

The Broadway trolley from Boundary Loop to Broadway and Alma, for example, is scheduled for 48 minutes one way.

"But the reality is that it now takes 55 or 57 minutes. So you get to the end of the line, maybe there was an eight minute break there but you were four minutes late arriving, so you've just got time to run like hell to the can and come back, and away you go again.

"There's people out there, even on weekends, that are in the seat four, five, six hours without any break. Maybe they have time to run to the can and that's it. That has health impacts for our people, and the operators know which routes are like that."

Every three months when drivers sign up for routes, the ones with the seniority get first pick, and most of them take the quiet suburban runs.

It may take 25 or 30 years of driving to accumulate enough seniority to get the 236, or any number of other low-stress suburban routes on the North Shore, in Surrey and Langley or in White Rock. Houlahan had 31 years when he drove an early-morning shift on the 236 last year, before going on leave to work for the union.

"For me out on Grouse Mountain, there's no significant issues of overcrowding or angry, frustrated passengers that I have to deal with," he said. "The schedule is relatively realistic and the clientele is a lot friendlier."

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The No. 5 Robson is far from the toughest route, but it does get crowded.

During the morning rush, every seat is taken within two or three stops of its starting point at Davie and Denman in Vancouver's West End. A couple more stops, and the aisles are full.

At the next three or four stops heading into downtown on Robson, commuters are often left standing at the curb while full buses zoom down the street. The crush on the bus eases around Burrard Street, but then the downtown traffic begins to choke the streets and the bus inches along to Seymour, where half the buses in the city seem to be fighting for road space now that the Granville Mall is blocked by Canada Line

construction.

But some drivers get a taste for the trolley, even though the Flyer buses in the current fleet are harder to drive -- they're wider and heavier and the power steering can be tricky -- than the old Brill trolleys that were phased out in the early 1980s.

Others avoid the inner-city trolleys like the plague, said Todd Hancock, a driver with 12 years of seniority. "There's too many turns on those routes, and the streets are too narrow."

Hancock and many other drivers with low or mid-seniority live in the suburbs, where they can afford to buy homes and raise families. But they can't work there because the suburban routes are taken by the senior drivers.

He'd rather drive a diesel, but his choices are limited. For now, Hancock wants to be at home during the day so he can see his kids and have dinner with his family before driving an evening shift.

So he's operating the No. 19 along Kingsway between Metrotown and Stanley Park. It's a trolley and it goes downtown, but he considers it to be the best of the bad routes.

"The Kingsway always has good time-out at Metrotown and at Stanley Park," Hancock said.

"A lot of the junior routes are really tight on time, and the junior guys will try to adhere to the schedule. The senior guys know that if they need a little time to get their mind right at the end of the line and go to the washroom, they'll take it. You need to make sure that you're ready to go for another run."

Like many drivers, he grumbles about the scheduling department at Coast Mountain Bus Company: "It would be good for them to sit behind the wheel and see how long they can keep their bladders full."

The Fraser and Victoria routes are at the bottom of Hancock's list. They're long, crowded runs that are hard to keep on schedule and they pass through some of the rougher sections of the Downtown Eastside.

"I hate to offend anybody out there," Hancock said, "but it's the clientele on the route."

He is almost surprised that he has never been spat on or assaulted by a passenger.

"A lot of drivers have been. I'm pretty much hard-line on enforcing the fare, and that's not what we're recommended to do out there. I have a hard time letting one passenger pay his money and then the next guy behind him comes on for free.

"If anybody gets hit it should be me, but it has never happened. I've been called names by everybody up to 90-year-old ladies, but I've never been swung on or spat on or anything like that.

"It happens. There's a lot of stress out there and people snap pretty quick."

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More buses would fix a lot of the overcrowding and stress problems, everyone agrees.

A two-hour round-trip route can be operated with 12 buses to provide service every 10 minutes, in theory. But to create a cushion at each end of the line to make the schedule reliable, 13 buses works better. That gives every driver 130 minutes to complete the route, and a five-minute break -- in theory -- at each end.

But that can break down when traffic is bad or the passenger load increases, and 14 buses would create a 10-minute cushion at each end of the route.

Trouble is, TransLink and its operating company, Coast Mountain, are chronically short of buses because TransLink is chronically short of money.

There are just under 1,300 buses in the fleet now, but as recently as 2000, TransLink was planning to have 1,600 by this year.

The fleet expanded by several hundred buses in 1999 and 2000 after TransLink was created by the provincial government, finally putting the reins of the regional transportation system in the hands of the region. Then came the financial crisis: The NDP government of the day backed away from the controversial vehicle levy that was supposed to provide the money for TransLink to buy buses, finance rapid transit and build roads.

Short of money, TransLink cut back service and postponed buying more buses. What followed was the crippling bus strike of 2001, and bus-buying slowed to a trickle.

>From 2002 to 2004, the number of bus passenger boardings per year grew from 160 million to 191

million while only a handful of buses was added to the fleet.

By last summer, TransLink staff were reporting overcrowding on 58 bus routes, and the TransLink board of directors hurriedly approved plans to increase service hours and accelerate future bus purchases. The first of the new buses begin arriving at the end of this summer, and they will be used on the most crowded routes first.

But it will take until 2008 before all 58 overcrowded routes get a measure of relief.

It's a working-condition issue for the drivers, Houlahan said.

"Can I provide the service as advertised and not have to deal with frustrated people and get enough time to at least relieve myself at the end of the line?

"Or am I going to be dealing with full standing loads of fed-up passengers?"

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Not even the most senior drivers can get the routes they'd really like, unless they're willing to take a 20-per-cent pay cut.

Most of the drivers would prefer the shorter, less crowded suburban routes. But many of those routes are now served by smaller community shuttle buses in an effort to save money and free the bigger buses for busier routes.

The shuttle routes are operated under separate contracts, although most of the contracts are held by Coast Mountain Bus, which also operates the main fleet.

Shuttles require less training and a less demanding class of driver's licence than conventional buses, and shuttle drivers' wages are about 20 per cent less than what conventional bus drivers earn.

Once a year, drivers on both sides of the line can sign up for routes on the other side. Whether they get the routes they want depends on seniority, and the most senior drivers rarely opt to take a 20-per-cent pay cut in order to drive the quiet suburban routes they would prefer.

A few older drivers have switched to the shuttles as a first step towards retirement, Coast Mountain spokesman Doug McDonald said. But they are outnumbered by shuttle drivers upgrading their licences and applying to drive in the main

fleet, and the wage premium that comes with it.

Before the switch to shuttles, Houlahan said, older drivers would use the suburban routes to ease their work loads and reduce the stress as they approached retirement.

That's gone now. Across the system, 10 per cent of the most desirable routes are now served by shuttles, and the percentage is higher at the suburban transit garages.

"In Port Coquitlam, over 22 per cent of their work has been converted," Houlahan said, "work that 30- and 35-year employees used to do and waited 30 years to do. That's the work that they lost."

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Drivers' personal circumstances also affect what routes they choose.

Houlahan used to work a split shift, driving during both rush hours and getting a seven-hour break in the middle of the day, when he'd ride his bike, walk the dog, take a nap, even play a round of golf before going back to work.

One just-retired driver worked night shifts for 36 years, Coast Mountain spokesman Doug McDonald said.

Another drove nothing but trolleys for 30 years. Some find suburban routes monotonous and prefer to pilot the big B-Line buses through the traffic on Broadway. Some schedule shifts so they can take courses during the day. Some work as many weekends as they can.

And some are disillusioned with bus driving.

Todd Hancock, whose father drove buses his whole working life and loved it, has been accepted for training as a transit supervisor.

"My dad was happy staying in the driver's seat," Hancock said. "I'm never really too happy staying in one place."

"It's been 12 years and I find the job not stimulating enough. The conversations with passengers have died down; they all seem to want to go straight to the back these days."

"So I'm out of here."

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DRIVING FORCE

Total number of transit operators -- bus drivers
-- working for Coast Mountain Bus Co.: 2,600.

Percentage of operators driving community shuttle buses: 10.

Top wage for conventional transit operators: \$25.94 per hour.

Top wage for shuttle bus operators: \$20.76 per hour, 20-per-cent less.

Average work week for all operators: 37.5 hours.

Source: Coast Mountain Bus

THE FLEET

Total number of buses in the TransLink fleet at
the end of June: 1,265, including:

- 227 electric trolley buses.
- 701 40-foot standard diesel buses.
- 120 60-foot articulated buses.
- 75 express-highway buses.
- 14 40-foot compressed natural gas buses.
- 127 community shuttle buses.

Source: TransLink

Ran with fact boxes "Driving Force" and "The
fleet", which have been appended to the end of
the story.

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