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# Vancouver

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### FEATURES: JUNE 2007

## The Magic Bus

The only problem with Vancouver's buses?  
We need more of them

*By Tyee Bridge*



Illustration by: **Lou Beach**

THE STARS ARE STILL OUT as Dave Asselin crosses Hudson Street under the Arthur Laing Bridge. Two new trolleys glide out of the Vancouver Transit Centre. Asselin lives in a condo kitty-corner from the centre, which makes his morning commute to work about two minutes on foot. Some days he does the 3:57 stand-by, also known as the "3:57 throw-up," and wakes up at 3 a.m. to cover the first dropped shifts. Today he's not in until 5:30, which has given him time to brew a thermos of organic coffee.

A big guy with a reddish-grey moustache and a Coast Mountain vest studded with union and safety committee pins, Asselin is a 49-year-old former Canadian Navy officer. His father was a Member of Parliament who used to commute 400 kilometres to Ottawa, returning to Sherbrooke, Quebec, to spend weekends with the family. Asselin joined the Navy in 1980, after getting a biology degree at the University of Ottawa. During his six years in the service, he was attach-posted to the United States as a navigator for Arctic and Antarctic maneuvers aboard the USS Ohio, a 560-foot Trident nuclear submarine. "We were doing little games up there with the Russians. The captain would say, 'Put me on top, near the Pole,' and we'd come straight up, crash right through the ice."

For the last 17 years he's plied smaller craft as a Vancouver transit operator. He can eyeball a 60-foot articulated bus through angled construction zones with four inches on either side. Experience brings perks along with technique: as a senior spare-board operator, Asselin gets his pick of the routes left by sick and vacationing drivers. Today he's assigned to the 25 UBC-Brentwood, which delivers students from the Millennium Line to BCIT and from the Nanaimo SkyTrain station to the ivory towers over Wreck Beach. A nice route, he says, with a decent amount of allotted running time. No stress trying to make your stops on schedule.

Our bus is parked on the far side of the VTC yard by the north arm of the Fraser, where a tugboat is drifting downstream with a gravel barge. Sunrise makes gold wisps of cloud over the airport. Bus

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#V3230, one of about 1,300 in the TransLink fleet, is a 15-year-old New Flyer diesel, with a capacity of 77 passengers. Clocking an average of 70,000 kilometres a year, it has over a million clicks on the meter. It's still running well—Asselin's "pretrip" tests everything from pull cords to air brakes—but it's due for replacement. Asselin hopes the replacement diesels will be less eventful than the new trolleys. He was one of the first drivers to blow the whistle on the power-steering failures of the Winnipeg-built coaches. "You'd be driving along with a full standing load of 70 or 80 people, going through an intersection where the light was turning amber, and then your power steering locks up," he says, taking a sip of coffee. "Not good."

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**"The bus begins to fill up with students, most isolated by iPod earbuds or poring over textbooks, but conversations start up among people who were, a few stops ago, strangers."**

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We take the scenic route out to Brentwood, along Joyce. As the empty bus warms up—the tires will soften in about an hour, he says, making the ride less bumpy—we get a dawn vista of clear blue sky and North Shore mountains. It's one of those Vancouver moments when regional gratitude wells up, a solid argument in favour of roomy and efficient transit. We're cruising along gaily, not stuck in gridlock, and all is right with the world.

Before we pick up our first passengers, Asselin describes the less sublime side of life as a bus driver. Once, after picking up a woman and her mother on Hastings, he had to slam the bus to a halt and help keep the young woman, in the midst of a grand mal epileptic seizure, from hitting her head on the steel stanchions. On Kingsway, not far from Mount St. Joseph hospital, he administered CPR to an elderly heart attack victim, and last year he was called in to "defuse"—counsel and calm—the driver who struck and killed a young basketball star from North Vancouver. (The driver was exonerated, and the stricken family stated publicly that he was not to blame for their son's death.) Asselin's most nerve-wracking experience came on a trolley run near Main and Hastings years ago. "I picked up a bunch of people, and one of them was a guy in his mid-twenties wearing a black leather jacket. He gave me no fare, no change, showed me nothing, so I called him back. 'Fare's a dollar-fifty,' I said. He came back up, opened his jacket to the side and said, 'I don't have to pay, OK?'"

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Tucked inside was a .357 Magnum with a silencer. After hitting the silent alarm, Asselin began calling out the stops. “Microphones in the ceiling start recording everything and sending it to T-Comm (Transit Communications). There’s a code we use so they know someone on board has a gun.” At one stop Asselin stood up, as if to adjust a visor, then leapt off the bus while cops swarmed in for the take-down.

The stories are not all grim. He once turned in a diamond-ruby brooch worth \$10,000, and later received his karmic reward in the form of an abandoned red leather purse. Inside was \$5,000 in crisp cash, along with little packets of white powder. “I turned the whole thing in, put a claim in for the five grand.” The police kept the cash for fingerprints, but the company cut him a \$5,000 cheque.

Our first load of passengers gets on at Brentwood Town Centre at around 7 a.m. Asselin greets them pleasantly—Hello, Good morning, Thanks, How are you—and the bus roars off, swinging to a stop every two blocks. A construction worker gets on, wearing a green mackinaw, battered jeans and workboots. He seems to know the Sikh woman in blue blazer and business skirt across the aisle, who asks him how he feels today. “Oh, sore like always. I lift about four ton a day anyway.” The bus begins to fill up with students, most isolated by iPod earbuds or poring over textbooks, but conversations start up among people who were, a few stops ago, strangers.

Coast Mountain Bus Company employees signed their latest four-year contract the night before our run, the vote tally of 1,147 in favour, 683 against scrawled in black marker on a reception-area flip-chart: a 63 percent majority. Asselin voted for it, as it was a fair contract with plenty of side-benefits, though, like representatives of the Canadian Auto Workers Union, he feels the real problems with TransLink weren’t addressed in the negotiations. Ironically, TransLink officials agree with him.



With 17 years’ experience as a city transit operator, Dave Asselin has seen it all. His most nerve-wracking experience came when a passenger refused to pay the fare and, when Asselin called him back, gestured to the .357 magnum tucked inside his jacket.

Illustration by: **Jeff Neumann**

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Starved for money by the provincial funding scheme, Canada Line construction expenses, and the Ministry of Transportation's focus on the \$3-billion Gateway project, TransLink is 500 buses short of where the GVRD's 1994 strategic transportation plan said it would be in 2006. Over 400 new buses are on order, but most are replacements, and will only expand the fleet by 100 vehicles. Gas prices, congestion and ecological concerns have brought ridership to an all-time high; buses in Vancouver are crammed with standing loads. This means stress for drivers and poor service for customers. "The system is overloaded," says Asselin. "There's a shortage of buses, a shortage of drivers and, with the traffic situation, buses are slowing down. It's harder and harder to get to your terminus at the assigned time." Drive-bys of loaded buses are common during peak hours, infuriating students, commuters and anyone else waiting at a bus stop.

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**"TransLink is 500 buses short of where the  
GVRD's 1994 strategic transportation plan said  
it would be in 2006."**

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Sure enough, within 45 minutes Asselin's Brentwood-UBC bus fills up to the red line, and we pass clumps of people waiting at the stops. TransLink planners estimate that in 2004 there were 206 million bus boardings, equivalent to about 93.5 million trips by automobile. This doesn't translate directly (in the absence of buses people might walk, cycle, or stay home) but it gives an idea of the system's importance. Buses keep a lot of single-passenger auto traffic off the pavement.

But to meet Premier Campbell's 2020 greenhouse gas reductions, TransLink officials say ridership on their low-emissions system—trolleys, like light rail, run on clean hydroelectric, and per-capita diesel emissions are insignificant—will have to more than double, from a current estimate of 165 million trips a year to about 400 million. Boosting the bus fleet to meet this demand might seem prohibitively expensive, when a single trolley costs around \$1 million and a new diesel \$370,000. Transportation experts like Ian Bruce of the Suzuki Foundation, however, say it's not. "For one-third of the cost of the Gateway expansion, we could boost our capacity by 500 buses, which is where it should be anyway, and expand rapid transit light rail out to Surrey and Langley." A public transit funding commitment proportional to that in Quebec—where a mix of federal and provincial funding guarantees transit officials \$1 billion a year over 10 years—is also critical for long-term planning, says Bruce.

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The situation for transit users here will probably get worse before it gets better. Transportation Minister Kevin Falcon's recent restructuring of TransLink promises to increase transit fares, and also pulls the agency out from the GVRD's Livable Region Strategy guidelines. This means regional planners will have little voice in decisions about transit infrastructure. "It's a power grab," says Bruce, "that overrides the regional government's growth plan, because the GVRD knows Gateway will degrade public transit service and the livability of our region."

The restructure follows a year-long review of TransLink by a Falcon-appointed tribunal. One of panel's stated goals was to "ensure that the province will have effective input into, and oversight of, TransLink activities and decisions as they affect provincial interests." Translation: to make sure that upstart TransLink board members won't vote against provincial trophy projects like the Canada Line. Falcon has lobbed insults at TransLink—"dysfunctional" is one of his favourites—ever since the board twice voted against the then-named RAV project. While the Canada Line is a good long-term piece of light rail infrastructure, and offers a snazzy image to Olympics dignitaries, it was far less important to TransLink than buying several hundred new buses and building the Evergreen Line.

Falcon's Gateway project intends to address Port Mann Bridge congestion—ironically, the same traffic snarl TransLink wanted to solve before provincial authorities wrangled it into building the Canada Line—by twinning the bridge and expanding highway capacity. But increasing freeway lanes only boosts single-passenger auto traffic, and discourages people from using transit. The fewer people who use transit, the less political muscle there is for making it efficient and pleasurable. If we want to reduce greenhouse gases, pouring more asphalt is exactly the wrong direction. "Cities that have gone with highway expansion, like LA and Atlanta, have seen the results," says Bruce. "People advocating Gateway can expect to spend more time sitting in their cars and less time with their families."

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**"Asselin's bus makes ten times as many stops  
as a single passenger vehicle, but his bus is,  
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Asselin's bus makes ten times as many stops as a single passenger vehicle, but his bus is, per capita, ten times more cost-efficient. More buses would be good for Asselin personally—more routes, more variety, more potential work—but he's also aware of regional ecology. "We do play a large role in reducing air pollution," he says. "I've always been proud of that. It's why I love driving trolleys so much." Vancouver's trolley system—along with Edmonton, one of only two remaining in Canada—runs even more cheaply than the diesel fleet. The annual BC Hydro bill for trolleys is about \$1.8 billion, or about 16 cents/km per bus.

Just before 8 a.m. we pick up a load of students near Lord Byng Secondary on West 16th Avenue. We're close to UBC and running right on schedule. But in the melee of construction that makes driving in Vancouver so ulcer-inducing these days, getting stuck in traffic is unavoidable. He turns onto Westbrook Mall near UBC, and three minutes from campus a road grader shuts down the entire northbound side. "Of course they have to do this at eight in the morning, not midnight," he grumbles.

After ten minutes or so, the students realize they're going to be late. Several demand to be let out. The grader is almost clear and Asselin pretends not to hear, but a few leap off before he shuts the doors. He steps on it, delivering the remaining students to class. They're cranky, but Asselin himself is unruffled. "That's the way it goes sometimes," he says. After 17 years in traffic, dealing with a thousand customers per shift, he handles stress as nimbly as his coach.

On the way back to the VTC, Asselin tells a favourite joke, one he heard ten years ago from a six year old. "The kid runs up from the back of the bus, wants to tell me something. So I pull over, set the parking brake, sit back, and tell him to go ahead. 'Why did the dinosaur cross the road?' he says, and I say, 'I don't know, why did the dinosaur cross the road?' 'Because chickens hadn't been invented yet!'"

As transit fares and standing loads increase, passengers watch buses cruise by their stops, and construction turns the city into a cut-and-cover war zone, comic relief might be the only way for a frustrated ridership to manage their own stress. "After a while driving, you know the routes, you know how the lights change, and you get a sixth sense about what motorists will do," Asselin says. "But if there's one thing that's kept me sane over the years, it's a sense of humour."

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