

Ottawa must make permanent pledge to fund public transit growth

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We have made big strides on transit. Now let's make it permanent.

Canadians want to spend less time commuting and more time with their families. Our economy thrives when cities are built to attract new businesses and skilled workers. We all want to ease congestion — to boost productivity and reduce climate-changing pollution.

Cities planning for future transit needs, like the Downtown Relief Line proposed to ease crowding on the existing Yonge subway line in Toronto, require a solid commitment of funding from Ottawa. (Randy Risling / Toronto Star file photo)

All these essential needs intersect at one point: better public transit.

You will be hearing a lot from Canada's mayors in the coming weeks about how the 2019 federal budget can better serve citizens at the local level. From common sense proposals about governments working together, to keeping Canadians safe from the effects of our changing climate, to following through on urgent housing commitments — many of these challenges are urgent.

But mayors know that transit is also a top priority for families and workers. We are the ones closest to the voters who ride the subways, buses, and trains that get them to work and back, or who are stuck in painfully long commutes every day.

Our cities are responsible for the efficient movement of close to one third of our nation's population. All three of us were recently elected with a mandate to deliver better transit systems for the citizens we serve. Simply put, our nation's appetite for more mass public transit is growing.

Unfortunately, the pressure to deliver on citizens' transit needs is growing beyond both our cities' current financial capacities and the lifespan of the ambitious Investing in Canada Plan. Federal funding in public transit is a good step forward, but it only covers a minor portion of annual public transit expenditures. Cities need to meet the portion required by federal programs, and the additional operating expenses related to those projects while maintaining our current assets and the expenses that come from regular growth.

The transit projects happening in our communities right now were years in the making. The next phase of projects will require similar years of planning. They require the certainty and stability of a municipal-federal commitment in order to begin with confidence.

That means acting now — not one or two federal election cycles from now.

To keep our growing cities and suburban communities moving, each of us is in the midst of planning the next generation of sustainable and efficient transit. All of these projects are about serving families, workers and our economy better.

In Montreal, that vision, developed in partnership with the metropolitan region actors, includes the Pink Line. Residents expect new solutions to the challenge of not only traffic congestion but also a saturated subway network system and congested bike paths, which is hurting the economy of a metropolitan area of more than 4 million people.

Recently, Montreal established a new municipal office and committee of experts to begin work on the Pink Line. It's a project that will not only improve Montreal's economic potential and livability, but also ensure the city remains a leader in the battle to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. And though the Pink Line may seem like a faraway endeavour, the reality is that work is starting now.

In Vancouver, work is beginning on the Broadway Subway expansion, helping boost productivity in B.C.'s second-largest employment centre while reducing congestion on the busiest bus route in all of Canada and the United States. Now, with renewed city leadership bringing the prospect of linking the expansion west to UBC and east all the way to Langley, the time is right for municipal and federal governments to think boldly and connect businesses, workers and students right across the Lower Mainland with transit infrastructure that works.

In Toronto, Canada's largest city and growing by the year, transit investment tops the list of urgent public debates day in and day out. The Relief Line subway will help the City of Toronto make huge strides in giving its residents a more reliable, comfortable, and efficient way to get in and out of the city's core. The Relief Line is just one part of the transit network plan that will rollout improved rapid transit across Toronto to help catch up to the city's rapid growth.

To do urban transit well, planning for the future phases needs to be enabled now.

We are asking our federal partners to help us build on the progress made through the Investing in Canada Plan through a permanent federal commitment to fund public transit growth across Canada.

There are big challenges on the horizon for Canadians and their local governments, as well as big opportunities. Now, not closer the tipping point, is the time to commit to building the backbone of Canadian cities that work for the long-term. We call upon Prime Minister Trudeau and Finance Minister Morneau to keep that in mind as Canadians look toward a new federal budget in 2019.