Beat: Travel

Public Transit Safety Concerns

Amid Covid-19 Pandemic

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USPA NEWS - As the number of Covid-19 cases continues to rise each day, public transportation workers, as well as passengers, express concerns over the spread of Covid-19 throughout transit systems around the world.
At this moment, the number of Covid-19 cases in Canada is 6,280. The breakdown by province is as follows: British Columbia 884, Alberta 621, Saskatchewan 156, Manitoba 72, Ontario 1,355, Quebec 2,840, New Brunswick 66, Prince Edward Island 11, Nova Scotia 122 and Newfoundland 135.

Halifax Transit, which operates 67 conventional bus routes and 2 ferry routes, is the largest public transit system in Atlantic Canada and has 312 buses and 5 ferries in their fleet. On any given weekday, Halifax Transit has a ridership of 94,475, however, since the arrival of the Covid-19 virus ridership has dropped by nearly 50%. As a result of the declining numbers, Halifax Transit cut service by 30% which would make regular weekday service the same as service on a Saturday.

On Sunday, March 22, Nova Scotia's Premier Stephen McNeil declared a State of Emergency in order to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Nova Scotians were told not to leave the province and only leave home for essential items and services. Any business or employer that remains open must practice the 2-meter social distancing rule, anyone who leaves their home must practice the 2-meter social distancing rule and gatherings of more than 5 people are prohibited.

Halifax Transit vehicles have exempted from the social gathering and physical distancing rules as buses are considered to be an essential service, which has many bus drivers expressing their concerns to their union. Kenny Wilson, president of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), Local 508. said in a news release, "We are seeing buses fully loaded with passengers forced to sit side by side, without any physical distancing at all. People will get sick. This level of bus loading will not flatten the curve. The membership as a whole is completely stressed out and is feeling fearful, anxious and worried.“

As a solution, the ATU is urging that only essential workers be allowed to travel by bus during the COVID-19 outbreak. The ATU is also requesting a 24-hour pause of bus service in order for proper cleaning and sterilizing of the transit fleet. Mayor Mike Savage said, "Transit operator's safety is top of mind, but this is uncharted territory for everyone. Masks have been issued to all transit operators, and I think it´s important to know that out of respect for the people who are operating the buses right now we´re working very closely with public health and following the directions of public health on this in terms of what is safe.“
To address the overcrowding on their buses, Halifax Transit pointed out that the social gathering and physical distancing rules do not apply to public transportation however, the two-meter rule is still being encouraged and that they will be looking at putting larger buses on routes where overcrowding is a problem.

To add to the general anxiety, a staff member at Halifax Transit's Burnside maintenance facility has tested positive for COVID-19. In a news release, transit director Dave Reage said, "Halifax Transit was informed of the diagnosis on the evening of Wednesday, March 25th. Workers were sent home immediately, and the morning shift has been told not to come in on Thursday so that "thorough" disinfecting of the facility can be completed. Based on an assessment of the circumstances, Public Health has indicated there is no risk to transit riders or to the general public." Reage went on to say, "Public Health has advised that the Burnside Maintenance Depot can remain operational and staff who have not been contacted by Public Health can report to work at the direction of Halifax Transit."

All three levels of government are telling people to stay home if at all possible and if people must go out to practice social distancing. Premier Stephen McNeil had this to say in today's Covid-19 briefing, "The reckless few, shame on you. If you can´t do your part, law enforcement will do it for you." I have called Justice Minister Mark Furey, and asked him to direct law enforcement to escalate their efforts from education to enforcement." This was directed at people who are choosing to ignore the social distancing and social gathering rules. McNeil thanked the majority of Nova Scotians that are following the rules and said that the people that are not following proper protocol are putting us all at risk.
Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who remains in self-isolation, is echoing the same message, "Stay home!"

We will continue to provide coverage of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic while we remain in self-isolation.

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:
United Press Association, Inc.
3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168
Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA
(702) 943.0321 Local
(702) 943.0233 Facsimile
info@unitedpressassociation.org
info@gna24.com
www.gna24.com