

Modernize Burlington Transit

Better Service. More Riders. Less Costly Underutilization.

Burlington Transit needs a fundamental rethink.

The traditional transit model is built around large buses travelling fixed routes according to fixed schedules. That model works well on busy routes and at busy times.

But too often in Burlington, particularly outside peak periods, we see large buses travelling with very few passengers.

That represents **massive and costly transit underutilization**.

At the same time, thousands of Burlington residents who could benefit from transit don't use it because the service doesn't conveniently take them where they need to go, when they need to go.

Technology now gives us an opportunity to change that.

My objective is to progressively modernize Burlington Transit around a much more flexible model using **smaller, electric, on-demand vehicles**, dynamically matched to passengers and destinations — while retaining conventional high-capacity service where ridership warrants it.

Instead of asking residents to organize their lives around the bus, we should increasingly **organize transit around the passenger**.

The Financial Challenge

Burlington Transit provides approximately **3.6 million passenger trips annually**.

For 2026, its operating expenses are approximately **\$37.8 million**, with a **\$26.6 million net operating funding requirement** after fares, grants and other revenues.

That means taxpayers provide a very substantial subsidy to operate the system.

Transit is an important public service and some level of public funding may always be appropriate.

But a \$26.6 million annual funding deficit also represents one of Burlington's largest opportunities to improve municipal productivity.

Simply continuing to add large buses, routes, frequency and operating expense to the existing model is unlikely to solve the underlying problem.

We need substantially more people using the service.

The Opportunity: Transit When and Where You Need It

Imagine opening an app or making a telephone request and asking Burlington Transit for a trip.

Technology identifies other passengers travelling in the same general direction, dynamically determines the most efficient route and dispatches an appropriately sized vehicle.

Rather than walking a considerable distance to a fixed bus stop and waiting for a scheduled bus that may not take you directly where you need to go, the service comes much closer to you and delivers you much closer to your destination.

It combines some of the convenience people associate with ride-hailing with the shared economics and public-service objectives of municipal transit.

For people without smartphones, telephone booking and accessible alternatives would remain essential.

The objective isn't simply to replace every conventional bus with a smaller vehicle.

It is to **match the vehicle and service to actual demand**.

Busy corridors and peak periods may continue to require conventional buses. Lower-demand areas and periods may be much better served by smaller vehicles operating dynamically.

Why Electric and Why Smaller?

A 40-foot bus makes sense when there are enough passengers to fill it.

It makes considerably less sense when there are only a handful.

Smaller electric vehicles have the potential to reduce energy use and operating costs while making it economically practical to provide more flexible service.

They can also be deployed differently.

Instead of designing a network primarily around routes established in advance, technology can continually match available vehicles to actual passenger demand.

The key is not simply changing the propulsion system from diesel to electricity.

Electrifying an underutilized large bus does not solve underutilization.

The bigger opportunity is redesigning the service itself.

Where Could 10,000 Additional Daily Trips Come From?

Burlington Transit currently provides roughly 10,000 passenger trips per day.

I believe we should set an ambitious objective:

Can a fundamentally more convenient transit system attract another 10,000 passenger trips every day?

That would approximately double current ridership.

There are several large groups of Burlington residents who rarely or never use conventional transit today but could have a compelling reason to use a more convenient on-demand service.

Seniors and Older Adults

Burlington has a growing older population.

Many seniors drive today because conventional transit isn't sufficiently convenient. Others gradually reduce or stop driving and become increasingly dependent on family, friends, taxis or other transportation.

An easy-to-use on-demand service could help older adults get to shopping, recreation, appointments, community activities and visits with friends.

That provides more than transportation.

It supports independence and social connection while reducing dependence on family members and caregivers.

Young People

There is another large group with exactly the opposite problem.

Young teenagers are old enough to travel independently but too young to drive.

Parents consequently spend enormous amounts of time driving children to sports, recreation, jobs, friends and other activities.

Imagine a safe, convenient public transit service that a 13-, 14- or 15-year-old could use much more easily.

It would give young people greater independence and give parents some of their time back.

It would also introduce a generation of Burlington residents to public transit much earlier in life.

Last-Mile Commuters

Burlington's GO stations and other employment and transportation nodes create another major opportunity.

Many commuters drive because getting from home to the station — or from the station to the final destination — isn't convenient enough by conventional transit.

On-demand transit could make that last-mile connection considerably easier.

For some households, a reliable connection to GO could even reduce the need for a second vehicle.

Everyone Else

The opportunity isn't limited to those three groups.

Residents going shopping, attending recreation programs, visiting friends, travelling to restaurants, going to work or simply moving around Burlington could become occasional or regular transit users if the service became sufficiently convenient.

The question we should ask is not:

“How do we get more people onto buses?”

It is:

“What transportation service would be sufficiently useful that substantially more Burlington residents would choose to use it?”

That is a fundamentally different way of thinking about transit.

Council Has Already Taken the First Step

This isn't simply a theoretical idea.

Council has already directed staff to develop a **two-year on-demand transit pilot**, intended to complement the fixed-route system, improve efficiency, increase ridership and reach residents who do not currently use transit.

Staff are expected to report back by the end of 2026.

I support the pilot.

But I believe we should be much more ambitious about what we are trying to learn from it.

The objective shouldn't simply be to determine whether a small on-demand service can operate successfully in one part of Burlington.

We should use the pilot to help answer a much bigger question:

Could on-demand technology ultimately transform the economics and convenience of Burlington Transit?

Better Transit Can Also Help Traffic

Burlington has another transportation problem: congestion.

We cannot build our way out of every traffic problem. In a mature city, there are practical limits to how many roads can be widened.

The most effective way transit can contribute to reducing congestion is not by telling residents they should leave their cars at home.

It is by providing a service good enough that they **want** to.

Every additional resident who chooses transit for a trip represents one less potential vehicle trip on Burlington's roads.

A substantially more convenient system could therefore contribute to both mobility and congestion reduction.

Better Transit Can Be Better Environmental Policy

There is an environmental benefit as well.

But that benefit depends on utilization.

Running large, lightly occupied buses is not automatically an efficient environmental outcome simply because they are public transit vehicles.

The objective should be to move substantially more people while using vehicles appropriately matched to demand.

Combining **electric propulsion, smaller vehicles, dynamic routing and dramatically greater utilization** creates the opportunity for a transit system that is both financially and environmentally more efficient.

The \$26.6 Million Opportunity

I believe Burlington should establish an ambitious long-term objective:

Work toward eliminating — or coming as close as reasonably possible to eliminating — Burlington Transit's \$26.6 million annual operating funding deficit while providing residents with better service.

That cannot be achieved simply by cutting transit.

The opportunity comes from the opposite direction: **make transit so much more useful that substantially more people choose to use it.**

More riders generate additional fare revenue and make better use of vehicles, drivers and the infrastructure taxpayers are already funding.

Smaller vehicles, electric propulsion, dynamic routing and matching vehicle capacity to actual demand could also improve the cost structure.

However, 10,000 additional trips do not automatically eliminate a \$26.6 million deficit. Additional service costs money and not every additional passenger produces a full fare.

That is precisely why the concept needs to be tested and measured.

If the economics demonstrate that the entire deficit cannot reasonably be eliminated, then our objective should be to reduce it as much as possible while simultaneously improving mobility.

Either outcome would represent substantial progress.

Measure Everything

A transit transformation of this scale should be driven by evidence.

I would establish clear performance measures, including:

Ridership. Are substantially more residents actually using transit?

Cost per passenger trip. Is productivity improving as ridership grows?

Taxpayer subsidy per passenger trip. Is the burden on taxpayers declining?

Vehicle utilization. Are we reducing costly empty seats?

Fare revenue. Is increased ridership improving transit's financial performance?

Wait and travel times. Is the service genuinely convenient?

Customer satisfaction. Do residents prefer the new service?

Accessibility. Does the system work for seniors and residents with mobility challenges?

Vehicle and operating costs. Are smaller electric vehicles producing the expected efficiencies?

Then apply a simple rule:

If it works, expand it. If it doesn't, change it.

My Priorities for the Next Four Years

I will support:

1. Implementing and rigorously evaluating Burlington's on-demand transit pilot. Use it to determine how much demand exists and what operating model works best.

2. Progressively introducing smaller electric vehicles. Match vehicle size to actual passenger demand rather than assuming every trip requires a conventional large bus.

3. Designing transit around passengers. Use technology to provide service where and when residents need it rather than relying exclusively on fixed routes and timetables.

4. Targeting major new groups of riders. Specifically design services attractive to seniors, young people, last-mile commuters and residents who rarely or never use Burlington Transit today.

5. Setting an ambitious ridership objective. Determine whether a redesigned system can generate approximately **10,000 additional passenger trips per day**, potentially doubling ridership.

6. Dramatically reducing costly underutilization. Make vehicle utilization a core measure of transit performance.

7. Reducing the taxpayer subsidy per passenger. Greater ridership and more efficient service delivery should progressively improve the economics of transit.

8. Working toward eliminating the \$26.6 million annual funding deficit. Treat this as an ambitious long-term productivity objective, measure progress transparently and determine how close a fundamentally redesigned system can get.

Better Service and Better Value

Too often municipal debates assume that improving a service necessarily means spending more money.

I don't accept that assumption.

Technology is changing what is possible.

Burlington has an opportunity to redesign transit around the needs of the people we are trying to serve.

If we can provide residents with transportation that is more convenient, attract thousands of people who don't use transit today, reduce massive and costly underutilization, improve mobility for seniors and young people, make GO connections easier and reduce the taxpayer subsidy, everyone benefits.

This is the kind of transformation I believe Burlington needs over the next four years.

Don't simply spend more operating the same system.

Redesign it. Attract more riders. Match vehicles to demand. Measure the results. And provide Burlington residents with better transit and taxpayers with better value.

Paul Sharman

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