

# Transit Challenge 2019

By Ottawa Transit Riders and Free Transit Ottawa



**FREE** \_\_\_\_\_  
**TRANSIT** - - - -  
**OTTAWA** \_\_\_\_\_



### Why the Transit Week Challenge?

In 2019, Free Transit Ottawa organized a Transit Week Challenge that took place from Monday, February 4<sup>th</sup> to February 10<sup>th</sup> 2019 as a way to bring focus to transit issues within the city.

Elected councillors were invited to rely on transit for one week – to experience the city the way many people in Ottawa already do every day. The Challenge represented the daily reality of Ottawa’s transit dependent residents: students, commuters, low income bus riders, and others without access to vehicles.

Participants were encouraged to share their experiences on social media – a number of them were enthusiastic - tweeting pictures of crowded buses, disabled fare boxes, and selfies with constituents.

A post-challenge survey was also administered.

The Challenge had three goals:

- First, it encouraged city of Ottawa councillors to experience the difficulties of relying entirely on transit for all trips.
- Second, it gave city residents a way to interact with their councillors and voice their concerns.
- Finally, the timing of the Challenge was planned to influence the 2019 draft budget.

### Participants

Below are the 2019 participants from the city of Ottawa Council. The citizen councillors of the Transit commission were not invited to participate. Bolded names were members of the Transit Commission. Active participants signed up for the challenge and posted evidence of their experience. Inactive participants indicated a willingness to take the challenge, but provided little or no evidence of their experience. Non-participants declined to take the challenge.

Approximately 69 citizens also participated, posting their experiences on social media such as Twitter.

Active Participants	Inactive Participants	Non-Participants
Councillor Meehan	Councillor Blais	Mayor Watson
<b>Councillor Brockington</b>	<b>Councillor Hubley (chair)</b>	Councillor Harder
Councillor Menard		Councillor El-Chantiry
<b>Councillor McKenney</b>		Councillor Chiarelli
Councillor Luloff		Councillor Darouze
Councillor Dudas		Councillor Moffat
Councillor Egli		
<b>Councillor Gower</b>		
<b>Councillor Kavanagh</b>		
Councillor Leiper		
<b>Councillor Cloutier (vice-chair)</b>		
<b>Councillor Sudds</b>		
Councilor Brockington		
Councillor Deans		
<b>Councillor Tierney</b>		

## Results

The majority (17) of city of Ottawa councillors were active participants and shared critical feedback on their experiences via social media and the post-challenge survey. A number of other politicians (Joel Harden for example) and several media personalities also took part.

Feedback came in every day on social media. Councillor Dudas saw a mother with her stroller give up after waiting for a bus that was more than 20 minutes late. Councillor Meehan declared that she had “failed” when she discovered at the last minute that her bus route would take her more than two hours to get across the city for a stop at the Humane Society. *(For the record, this was not a failure, but an excellent example of the issues that the challenge was meant to highlight)*. Sharing a day in his life commuting from Stittsville, Councillor Gower experienced a 75 minute journey with sidewalk-less bus stops, soaked feet, and late arrivals. Councillors McKenney and Meehan were honest about having to break the rules of the challenge due to tight schedules that Ottawa’s transit system simply could not accommodate.

Vanier councillor Mathieu Fleury reported being on a packed bus that could not accept any more riders. He supported the challenge and posted details about his experience on his ward news bulletin:

<https://mathieufleury.ca/transit-week-challenge/>

Disponibile même en français: <https://mathieufleury.ca/le-defi-dune-semaine-en-transport-en-commun/>

Catherine McKenney reported that they had to find an alternative way to get to an interview when the 85 failed to show up.

Councillors Theresa Kavanagh and Shawn Menard were vocal in their expectations for transit: City councillors seeing transit through new lens after 'tough' week-long challenge: **City councillors seeing transit through new lens after 'tough' week-long challenge** <https://www.ottawamatters.com/local-news/city-councillors-seeing-transit-through-new-lens-after-tough-week-long-challenge-1238642>

The Vice-Chair of the Transit Commission, Jean Cloutier reported waiting 25 minutes after missing a tight connection, but overall expressed satisfaction with service.

The Challenge also received push-back from the Mayor and several councillors. Both Mayor Watson and Councillor Harder complained that due to their busy schedules, they were unable to rely on the existing transit system.

Councillor Harder stated that she “Cannot commit to a full week.”

Some agreed to the challenge, but did not share their experiences. Chair of the Transit Commission Councillor Hubley accepted the challenge but tweeted only once, was not active in talking to media, and did not complete the post-challenge survey. Councillor El-Chantiry noted that there was no transit available in his ward. With each councillor who refused the challenge, another insufficiency in Ottawa’s transit system was highlighted.

## Survey

Formal responses were also collected through a post-challenge survey, which half of the active participants completed. Based on the survey, councillors indicated that stops were generally accessible and close to home, and they were able to make transfers. However, most experienced difficulty with accessing schedule updates and finding secure and well lit shelters. They also noted that the schedules were unreliable and buses were not always frequent.

The survey also highlighted ongoing problems with the outlook on transit at city hall. All participating councillors used OC Transpo for commuting, but only four used it for personal travel and one for shopping. For transit to be an effective and accessible alternative to vehicles, it cannot be designed solely around commuters. Transit should be able to connect people with social events, personal travel, shopping, hospitals, museums, inter-city travel, and more.

Most councillors were also unable to comment on accessibility for people who use wheelchairs or other mobility devices.

## **Moving forward**

The 2019 Challenge demonstrated that there is significant public support for improving transit.

At the end of the Transit Challenge 2019, Free Transit Ottawa made three demands:

1. An immediate fare freeze;
2. Commitment to a free transit pilot project; and
3. Creation of a Task Force on Ridership including participation from the Ottawa Transit Riders, bus drivers, and ParaTranspo users.

Lessons learned in 2019 will be applied to future Transit Challenges.