

Report Card

on the Greater Vancouver Transit Authority
(TransLink) 1999 - 2005

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as a Public Service ---

LETTER
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TransLink's Failing Grade

The creation of the Greater Vancouver Transit Authority (TransLink) in 1999 was supposed to usher in a new era of greater accountability, regional priorities and environmental stewardship. With control over transit transferred from the province to the region there would be greater regional input and democratic process in decision making. And the integration of the regional road network and public transit in the hands of the same governing body was supposed to allow for regional development and prioritization of transit consistent with the Liveable Region Strategic Plan (LRSP). While neither the Liveable Region Strategic Plan nor the mission statement for the newly created GVTA had much to say about the Greater Vancouver's low-income transit dependent communities, the focus on expanding transit, and particularly the focus on more buses as the top transit priority in the LRSP, was seen as a positive step for bus riders.

Six years later the reality of TransLink stands in sharp contrast to its promise. Most of the promised transit improvements following the 2000 fare increase ("it's amazing what you can get for a quarter") never materialized. TransLink's neoliberal agenda of privatization, high user fees and service cuts came into the open in 2001 when Directors used a supposed 'financial crisis' as an excuse to lock-out bus drivers, slash services and raise fares again. Since then TransLink has not purchased the buses sorely needed to replace and improve the aging fleet, nor to lower or at least freeze the skyrocketing fares. Instead TransLink moved to raise the fares yet again, to pour the money taken from starving the bus system - and from sucking resources out of low-income transit dependent communities - into the \$2 billion privatization project known as the Richmond-Airport-Vancouver (RAV) line.

The impact of six years of TransLink in our region has been to redistribute resources away from low-income transit dependent people - disproportionately women, people of colour and Aboriginal people - and into the pockets of Canadian big business. The fare hikes have not resulted in better service for transit dependent low-income communities who are suffering from high fares, long-waits, and chronically overcrowded and unsafe buses.

In this report card on six years of the GVTA, TransLink fails by virtually all measures. TransLink has put corporate profits and a regional business agenda ahead of transit-dependent communities, ahead of the environment, ahead of clean air and health for our region, and ahead of accountability and democracy.

Accessibility: Transit as a Public Service ----

TransLink's mission is to operate "...an integrated transportation system that moves people and goods safely and efficiently...". TransLink, as a publicly funded transportation system, has the responsibility to uphold its mission by providing accessible, affordable and reliable transit for people living in the GVRD.

Economic Accessibility ---- F

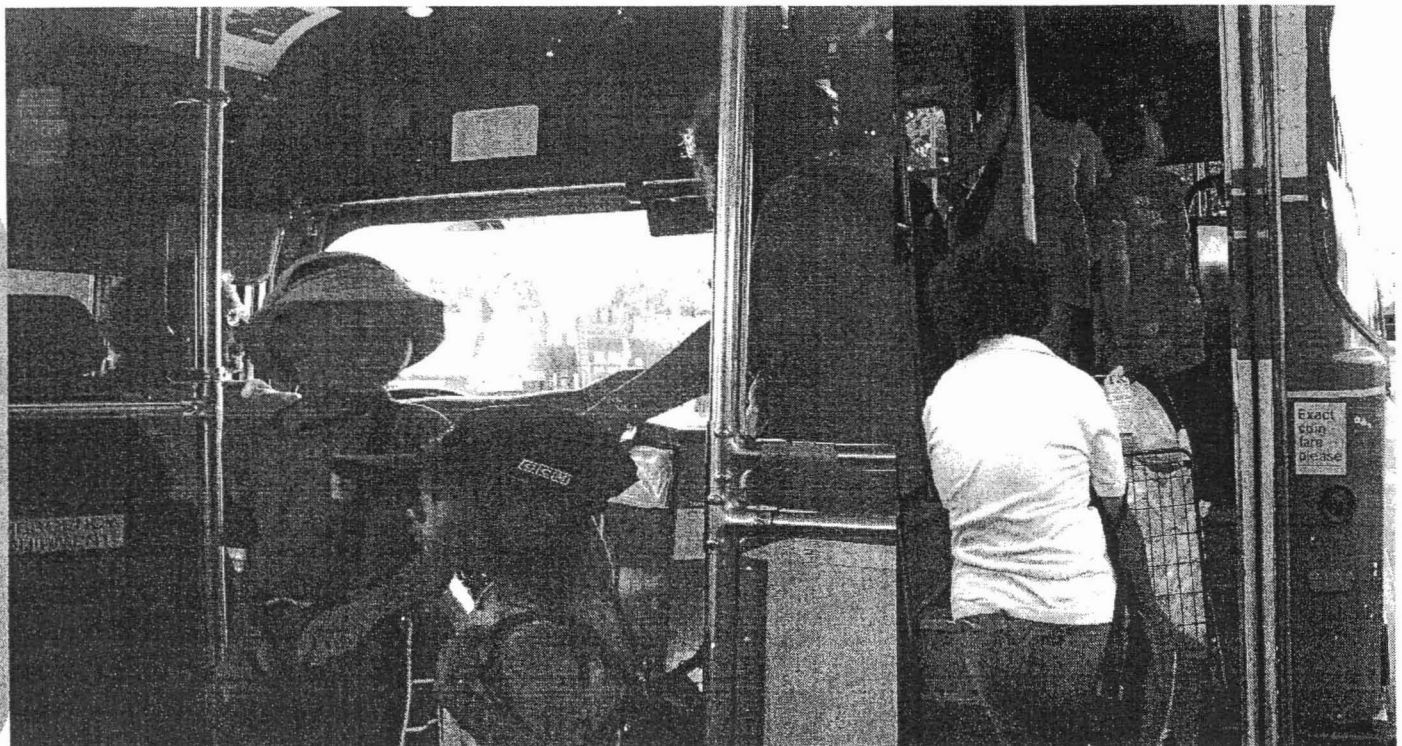
Since TransLink was created in 1999, there have been three fare increases. During the previous 12 year period, between 1987 and 1999, there were only two fare increases. (see page 4 for more details) Compounding the rising fares is the restrictive 90 minute transfers that are too short for riders to complete multiple zone trips. Although the popular U-Pass averages to be an affordable \$20 to \$23 a month for UBC and SFU students, many working class students attending other education institutions do not have access to the U-Pass. Not only should an equivalent U-Pass be available to all students, but an affordable pass should be available to all riders. Children in our region pay the highest fare in Canada with a one-zone fare costing \$1.50 (1). The combination of fare increases, short transfer times and high children's fares makes our transit system unaffordable for riders.

Physical Accessibility ---- D

TransLink has ordered 228 new accessible trolley buses to fulfil their three-year plan (2); however, the trolley buses were supposed to be replaced five years ago with kneeling trolleys (3). Currently some of the busiest routes in Vancouver, such as the #8 Fraser and #3 Main routes, are not accessible. TransLinks failure to prioritize accessible buses makes using public transit unnecessarily more stressful and time consuming for people in wheelchairs and parents with strollers.

Reliability ---- C-

Bus service is often unreliable; old trolley bus breakdowns have become more frequent (4). On suburban routes such as the 502, 314, 326 and 329 , buses come once every hour or half an hour on weekends. TransLink has been promising new buses and an expansion of service with every fare increase. However, TransLink's plans are slow to be implemented and bus riders continue to be stranded by unreliable bus service.



High Fares:

Private Profits Placed Before Bus Riders' Health

Transit is a public service meant to serve people who need it, but instead TransLink is running our transit system to make profits through a user-pay system. The ideology of users fees such as bus fares, is a step towards privatizing public transit, an essential public service. Specifically fares act as a form of hidden, regressive taxation that takes money from those who can least afford to pay and lines the pockets of private corporations and rich people.

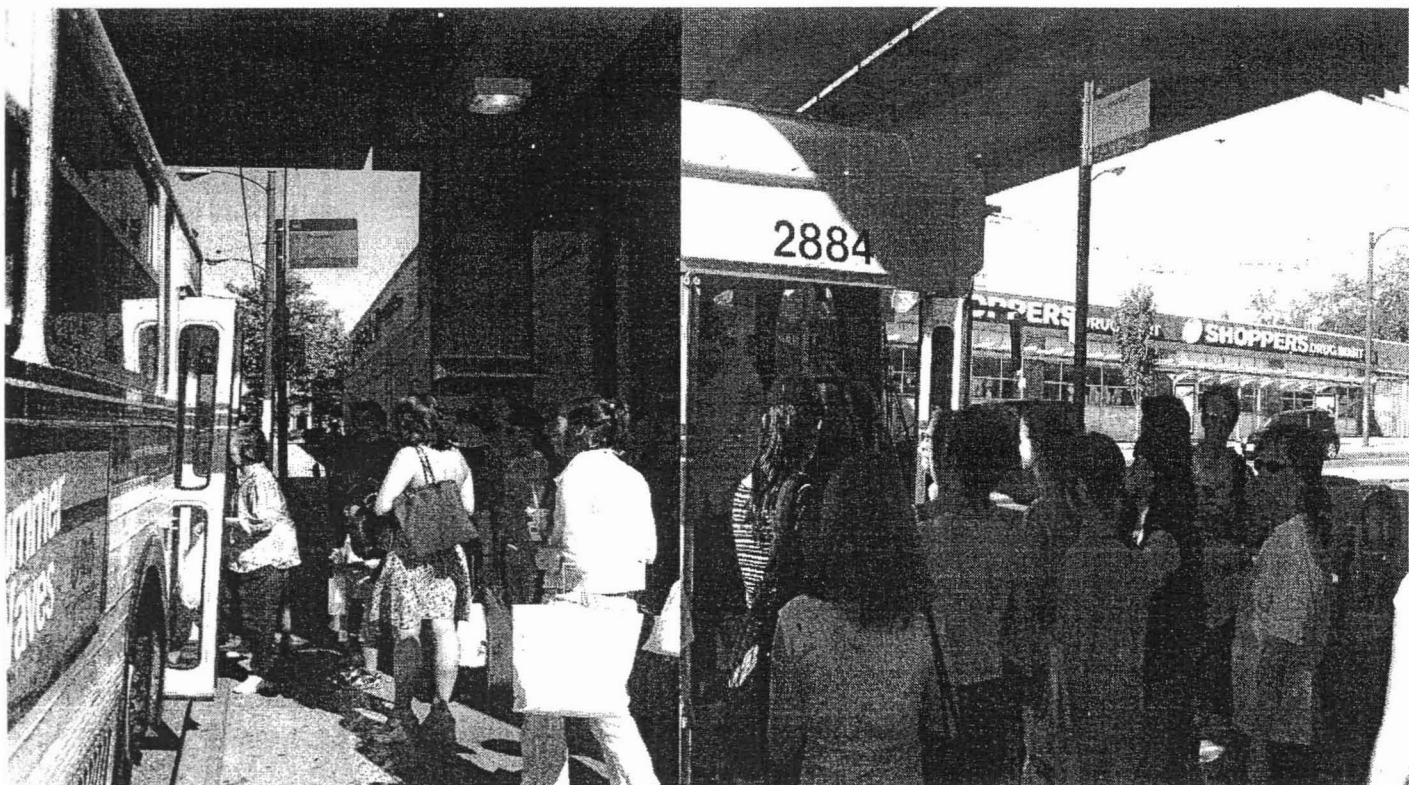
History of Fare Increases

Year	1-zone	2-zone	3-zone
1993	1.50	2.25	3.00
June 2000	1.75	2.50	3.50
April 2002	2.00	3.00	4.00
Jan 2005	2.25	3.25	4.50

Working class communities who are marginalized in low wage jobs are being forced to pay fares to finance TransLink's transit system. In 2004 bus riders paid 40% of TransLink's operating costs through our 'user fee' fares. Not only do riders pay a disproportionate total of TransLink's operating budget, but the burden of financing the public transit system has substantially increased since the creation of TransLink in 1999.

TransLink continues to use revenue gained from fare increases to fund projects that do not meet the basic needs of bus riders. TransLink's consecutive fare increases are guided by a neoliberal ideology of privatization that serves the interests of the rich and threatens the health and mobility of transit dependent communities. As fares increase to fund billion dollar projects such as the Richmond Airport Vancouver line (RAV), riders are unable to afford transit to access schools, jobs, social and commercial centres. TransLink's misplaced financial priorities are the main barrier of a first class transit system that could serve the needs of working class communities.

The move towards privatization of the transit system exposes TransLink's long-term neoliberal agenda: profitability and 'economic' development in the interests of regional elites at the expense of working class communities' health.



The RAV Line:

The biggest barrier to a healthy, affordable and accessible transit system.

Following the path of most mega-project rail lines, the projected cost of RAV continues to escalate even while hidden costs are transferred to Translink and ultimately bus riders.

Throughout the world, public services are under attack and being taken over by private corporations. Privatization involves increasing user fees, as public services are treated as commodities to be bought and sold on the marketplace. For working class people internationally this has meant the cost of essential services such as water, electricity, transit, health care and education have increased. Often these increases are coupled with cuts in service as companies “streamline” to ensure optimal profit.

SNC Lavalin, the company awarded the contract to build, operate and maintain the RAV line is a Montreal-based multi-national corporation which is already involved in water and health care privatization schemes internationally. SNC Lavalin has also profited from the war and plunder perpetrated by the United States Government by filling contracts to supply US occupation forces with bullets and now lucrative “reconstruction” contracts.

In the Lower Mainland, bus riders are faced with the inevitability of further fare increases and service cuts to the bus system as a direct result of the RAV project. “Non-essential” elements not included in the \$1.9 billion dollar price tag will inevitably come out of Translink’s budget. Already Translink is on the hook for \$10.26 million dollars to double-track between proposed Bridgeport and Cambie stations and will pay \$720,000 in debt servicing alone for this cost.

(2) Possible future stations at 33rd ave, 57th ave and Capstan Way will be costly given that the City of Vancouver will pay \$29 million in capital costs alone for the 2nd Ave station (3) Translink will also be financially responsible for ensuring that the RAV line reach ridership projections, guaranteeing SNC-Lavalin’s profit for the full 30-year term of the contract. Given that 9 out of 10 rail projects overestimate passenger forecasts on average by 106 % (4), Translink could be severely indebted. Service hours on North-South routes including Cambie, Main and Oak will be reduced forcing riders to undertake additional transfers and re-route onto the RAV line to artificially boost ridership. (5)

When Translink prioritizes unnecessary and expensive mega-projects such as RAV over the bus system which 75% of bus riders use exclusively, they attack bus riders’ right to independence, mobility and our right to healthy communities. Our region needs a first-class, affordable and clean-air transit system which will work for everyone. This means prioritizing bus service as the real backbone of the system.

June 30th, 2004: After two votes to cancel, Translink approves the RAV line on the condition that any bids over the approved budget of \$1.35 billion would go back to a vote.

December 1, 2004: Translink approves SNC Lavalin/Serco’s “Best and Final Offer” with a projected cost of \$1.72 billion dollars. To reduce the funding gap, responsibility for some project elements are transferred back to Translink totaling approximately \$70 million (1). These include the building of bus loops, replacing trolley overheads on Cambie, supplying ticket machines and paying for insurance, and a police unit. Additionally, elements of RAV deemed “not essential” by SNC-Lavalin will be borne by Translink at a later date. A reduction of \$42 million dollars in the cost of construction is later revealed to be the result of SNC Lavalin’s use of “cut and cover” method along Cambie.

August 2, 2005: Construction costs escalate by \$180 million putting the “final” price tag for the RAV project at approximately \$1.9 billion dollars.

Environmental Justice and Community Health ---- **D** -

An affordable, accessible, clean-air transit system is an integral part of achieving the health of communities, particularly for transit-dependent people. While Translink has pledged to "plan and deliver a transportation system that promotes the health, safety and security of employees and the public" the lives of working class people in the Lower Mainland have only been further constrained under Translink's policy decisions.

Inequalities in health largely stem from an unjust distribution of political and economic power under capitalism. Allocation of funds to public services is one way in which the health effects of this social injustice are partially alleviated by providing essential services which would be otherwise unaffordable. Under Translink, the public transit system in the Lower Mainland has undergone an abrupt turn towards a corporate agenda of privatization. Neo-liberal policies such as service cuts and fare increases are detrimental to the health of working class communities.

Air quality --- C

Facing a funding shortage in 2001, Translink decided to cut costs by using low-grade diesel in its entire diesel bus fleet. Cleaner high-grade diesel had been utilized since the early 90's and was finally reintroduced in November 2002 only after many complaints from bus maintenance workers and the general public (1). With close to 80% of all busses using diesel fuel, Translink has been slow to implement the demand for clean-air technologies (2). Translink is currently undergoing a demonstration project which will test various hybrid, compressed natural gas, electric and biodiesel buses. If Translink uses new technologies for expansion buses and for replacing 470 old diesel buses as promised in its 10-year outlook (2), significant gains in air quality could be realized.

Promotion of Community Health --- F

Restoring the Night Owl buses was a basic step in ending the sleep deprivation, fatigue, stress and unsafe conditions that thousands of cleaners, security guards and restaurant & bar staff faced when this service was cut from October 2001 until March of 2004. Three fare increases in the past five years have exacerbated the struggles of those who depend on bus service the most. Paying unaffordable fares means having less money for food, clothes, shelter and medical services – the basic pre-requisites of health.

Public Transit Conditions --- E

Worsening conditions on the bus reflect Translink's financial priorities of putting expensive rail projects like Skytrain ahead of the bus system. Increases in service hours in the past 3 years have largely gone to Skytrain service or to Community Shuttle routes within the outlying municipalities (3). In June 2005, Translink reported that 58 routes exceeded their own Transit Service guidelines for overcrowding (4). Urban, working class-communities serviced by the #3, #8, #9 & #20 bear the burden of having no choice but to board dirty, unreliable and crowded trolley buses contributing to increased stress, hostility and risk of ill-health. The criminalization of poor people, people of color and Aboriginal people on Skytrain has intensified over the past year as well. Increasing fines for non-payment from \$42 to \$173 dollars as well as arming "Skytrain Police" only deepens the stress and humiliation of riders forced to "fare evade" due to unaffordable fares.

- 1) November 22, 2002 Translink Meeting, Item 4.5: Diesel Fuel Review, pg 6.
- 2) May 22, 2005 Translink Meeting, Information Report 1.43: Development of Fleet Emissions Policy, pg 5.
- 3) 4) June 22, 2005 Translink Meeting, Item 4.5: Transit Capacity Study, pg 2.
- 5) June 22, 2005 Translink Meeting, Item 4.5: Transit Capacity Study, pg 7

Social Justice, Equality and Democracy

As the publicly funded institution responsible for providing public transit in our region, TransLink has a responsibility to consider how its policies will impact groups facing social, economic and political marginalization in our region; no-wage and low-wage workers, communities of colour, women, people with disabilities, and low-income seniors. TransLink should pursue a policy framework which promotes economic equality and democratic rights for everyone in our region.

Addressing Poverty and Economic Inequality

TransLink has taken some steps in recognizing this right and working to meet the needs of transit dependent people by allocating 1.5 million dollars to reinstate night owl service.

Unfortunately, this small step in the right direction has been compromised by giant leaps in the wrong direction. TransLink's decision to raise fares in 2005, the third fare increase in 5 years, continues a move to redistribute the cost of the public transit system onto the backs of those who can least afford to pay, transit-dependent bus riders. TransLink is taking money out of the pockets of low-income people and families in the form of fare increases (\$40 million over three years with the most recent fare hike) and handing it over to rich corporations and stockholders in the form of lucrative contracts on rail, roads and bridges.

Democratic Process

TransLink's record stands in sharp contrast to their supposed commitment to "accountability, communication and consultation". In practice, TransLink has used its "public consultation" process as a means of legitimizing decisions which are overwhelmingly opposed by transit dependent communities.

Since 2001 TransLink has held three "public consultations" on: the 2001 service cuts; the 3 year plan and 10 year outlook; and the 2005 fare increase. In each case bus riders and organizations representing low-income people, seniors, people with disabilities and students, strenuously objected to policies that continue to pour billions into roads, rail and other capital intensive mega projects while undermining bus riders rights to mobility by cutting service and raising fares. And in all three cases TransLink proceeded exactly as planned with its pro-corporate policies.

When it comes to real debate TransLink has consistently shut down or ignored its critics, particularly the Bus Riders Union which as a grassroots organization of transit-dependent people has consistently opposed TransLinks pro-corporate neoliberal agenda. On two occasions TransLink Chair Doug McCallum has banned the BRU from speaking at TransLink meetings, summarily stripping transit dependent people of the right even to voice dissent on policies such as inadequate service and high fares. In September 2004 TransLink agreed to receive a presentation on the BRU Women In Transit report, but has subsequently failed to respond in any way to the recommendations made on the basis of 10 months of broad consultation with transit dependent women.

Promoting Equality

By shifting the economic burden for transit away from more progressive sources and onto the shoulders of bus riders TransLink is exacerbating inequality in our region because women, people of colour and Aboriginal people are significantly over-represented among low-income transit dependent people. Rather than pursuing a policy framework which would allow for greater economic, social and political options for marginalized people, TransLink is moving in the opposite direction - taking more money out of working class communities and spending billions on projects which benefit large corporate contractors and a small number of 'choice' riders.

At the same time TransLink has moved to increasingly criminalize and punish those who are unable to pay the exorbitant user fees. By tripling fines for 'fare evasion' to \$173 and arming its new "Transit Police" with semi-automatic hand guns, TransLink is upping the anti in its war on the poor, and contributing to increased disenfranchisement of poor people in our region. This trend is even more concerning because extensive experiential data collected by the BRU and other grassroots and service organizations suggest that people of colour and Aboriginal people, and youth in particular, are the main targets of this campaign of surveillance, harassment and violence.

Who we are:

The Bus Riders Union is a grassroots organization struggling to expand the social and economic rights of bus riders. We have been organizing since 2001 and now have over 800 members with an average of 10-20 members joining each week. Our campaigns focus on winning concrete gains for the transit-dependent. The return of the Night Owl buses in March of 2004 was only achieved through the hard organizing work of an 18-month BRU campaign entitled "Night Owl Buses: End the Curfew Now!" The documentation of the experiences of hundreds of janitors, security guards and restaurant/bar workers struggling to get home without bus service was integral in forcing Translink to reinstate full night owl service. The Women in Transit (WIT) project, an 8 month participatory action research project (PAR), highlighted the struggles of transit-dependent women under the indignities of inadequate and unaffordable service. The campaign to stop the January 2005 fare increase culminated in a full-day Fare Strike on January 14th, 2005 in which 5000 bus riders refused to pay an increased and unjust fare.

The Bus Riders Union Basis of Unity

The Vancouver Bus Riders Union represents the mass transit and public health needs of the transit dependent. The Bus Riders Union fights to put the needs of transit dependent people, overwhelmingly working class, and disproportionately people of colour, at the centre of public policy.

We organize because affordable, reliable and environmentally sound mass transit is a human right. Human and environmental needs must be the leading social, political and economic priority. We openly challenge the agenda to privatize public services for private profit. We seek to build a democratic, multi-lingual, multi-racial, gender balanced organization whose leadership and membership reflect the racial and gender make-up of bus riders in Greater Vancouver.

We are committed to the fight against racism, class oppression, sexism and the oppression of immigrants. This work includes defending and expanding the social, political and economic rights of the disabled, gays, lesbians, the elderly, youth and other historically oppressed communities in the struggle for economic democracy and the redistribution of wealth.

Contact the Bus Riders Union for more information, to become a member or to get involved in our campaigns!

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Sources

Fare Increase

- 1 - Orsini, Henry. *Kid's Transit Fares Across Canada*. Vancouver: Henry Orsini, 2004.
- 2 - Three Year (2005-2007) Implementation and Financial Strategy, GVTA Board Meeting Agenda December 8, 2004, Pg 5.
- 3 - Women in Transit Report. BRU.
- 4 - OTB research BRU.

R.A.V. Line

- 1) December 1, 2004 Translink Meeting Richmond Airport Vancouver Project - Summary of Best and Final Offer Proposal Stage and Proceeding to Preferred Proponent Stage, pgs 16-21.
- 2) July 20, 2005 Translink Meeting. Item 4.3. Richmond Airport Vancouver (RAV) Project - Double Tracking in Richmond, pg 3.
- 3) February 16, 2005 Translink Meeting. Item 4.2 Richmond Airport Vancouver Project - Priced Options, pgs 2-4.
- 4) Flyvbjerg et al. How (In)accurate Are Demand Forecasts in Public Work Projects?: The Case of Transportation. Journal of the American Planning Association. Vol 71 (2); Spring 2005.
- 5) RAVP Bus Network Strategy. Feb 2003. http://www.ravrapidtransit.com/en/reports.php#ridership_revenue