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THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

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Brenda Johnson had a brilliant idea. The project manager at Environment Hamilton wanted to increase awareness about the HSR day passes, so she asked herself a simple question: What will it take to get me out of that car and get me into the bus?

Answering the question led to the development of Passport Hamilton, a program that gives transit day pass purchasers a discount on admission fees to a number of Hamilton attractions and recreation spots. The program benefits both riders, notably low-income families, and the participating venues. That's what they call win-win.

There has been considerable discussion concerning the Hamilton Street Railway and the city's move toward rapid transit. There's a sense of urgency in the conversation, fuelled, in part, by rising gas prices and complicated by climate change and global warming. Municipal planners are supportive of transit improvements, and provincial and federal governments are helping with the cost.

A rapid transit feasibility study was undertaken by the public works department in November 2007. The public consultation update was released in May 2008, recommending that Hamilton staff continue with the feasibility study, focusing on light rail transit over bus rapid transit. This has been good news for those who support it, and I am one of them. But I remain apprehensive nonetheless.

The citizens of Hamilton are standing at the brink of an exciting time in transit planning. We have before us an opportunity to create a whole new way in which we use and support transit in this city. We don't yet know what our new system will look like, some of us can't even conceive of it, yet it has the potential to transform not only how we move around our environment, but also how we view ourselves and how we interact with our environment.

Whatever system we adopt, it is clear that any move to a rapid transit system will demand a system-wide rethink of how we use transit and how we can use it better.

Public information sessions have been held to discuss the rapid transit proposals and, for the most part, they have been well attended. The discussion has largely focused on rapid transit as the way to both improve economic fortunes and increase ridership.

But what about all the people who don't take the bus now and who don't see this as their issue? What would it take to get them to change their minds?

Not everyone who can use transit will use it. What I want to know is: What will it take for the guy who drives from the east Mountain to his job at U.S. Steel to take transit? What about the Ancaster mom who wants to go shopping at Lime Ridge Mall? What will light rail mean for those who take transit, but not the train? What will it take to get people to take transit? This simple question has not been asked.

So I ask you, Hamilton, what will it take for you to take transit?

Let your imagination go. In the best (and worst!) of all worlds, what would cause you to leave your car at home? Would it be a bus stop within a block, maybe two? How long would you accept as transit travelling time? How many transfers would you be willing to make? What about current services? Are the buses comfortable? Are the seats big enough? Are buses ergonomically correct? What about those ads that cover the windows? Do you want to sit or are you comfortable standing? What about space for packages, backpacks and boxes? What about bikes, strollers and scooters? Where do you want to go? What do you want to do while you're getting there? How much do you want to pay? Do you want free service, nominal fares or full user-pay? What kind of environment do we envision 20 years, 30 years down the road? Is what we're doing now going to carry us forward?

Public consultation is a time-consuming process and can be costly, both in presenting information and in designing surveys and feedback mechanisms.

Asking the right question is crucial. In this day of instant messaging and Internet democracy, participating in the planning and decision-making process has never been easier. City councillors can be e-mailed, phoned, snail-mailed or pigeon-holed in their offices.

You know where to find them. Tell them what you think.

Margaret Shkimba lives in Hamilton.