

Trials of Transportation in the Rapidly Developing Community of Georgina

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Cet article raconte l'expérience des supporteurs locaux du transport en commun dans la petite localité de Georgina, quasi rurale mais en voie de se développer rapidement. L'auteure prouve que le projet "Transit Georgina" qui cherchait la solution idéale à l'urbanisation rapide et à la dépendance à l'automobile, a instauré un projet basé sur un paradigme du développement alternatif qui privilégie les amitiés et le partage au lieu de l'échange.

Every Friday, no matter the time of the year or the weather of the day, Maria takes her young family on a day-long outing. By 6:30 a.m., she is out of bed, feeding and dressing her three children, and laying out extra winter clothes for the journey. An hour later, she is tucking her two youngest front-to-back in a well-worn stroller. Then she urges her oldest child, who is four, to take up a standing position behind by perching on the stroller's undercarriage. Maria pushes the child-heavy stroller six kilometres to the main highway. From there, she hitchhikes a succession of rides—each time deftly moving children and stroller in and out, from vehicle to roadside and roadside to vehicle—finally arriving at her appointed destination, the Georgina Food Pantry, by 10:00 a.m. (10:30 on days when she has to stop along the way to change the baby's diaper).

Once at the food bank, Maria crosses paths with a dozen or more women who arrive there every Friday by the same or a similar mode of transportation. One of these women is Olga, an almost 75-year-old widow who immigrated to Canada from Russia three years ago to be close to her only son. Unfortunately, he fell on hard times shortly after her arrival. Now each week Olga walks the ten kilometre distance from their small living quarters outside of town. She makes this trip despite the impediment of a large gangrenous sore on one leg and the dangers of walking along a busy highway pulling a grocery cart. When asked about the difficulty of making her weekly trip to the food bank, Olga explains that day-long journeys for food or

other necessities are an everyday part of life for women in her native rural village, and she remarks on the similarities here in Canada.

In the still mostly-rural central Ontario town of Georgina—my home community for the past 25 years—people like Maria and Olga have few transportation options. Georgina, which stretches out along the south-east shore of Lake Simcoe, comprises the suburban nodes of Keswick, Sutton and Pefferlaw, and a number of small cottage and farm communities in their vicinity, as well as the Georgina Island First Nations Reserve located just offshore. The York Region Transit bus route, started in 2002, serves only the south end of Keswick. The GO bus, which connects Keswick and Sutton to out-of-town destinations, operates on a schedule that suits residents who commute to jobs out of town. In-town taxis are costly and beyond the reach of most. Hence, the private automobile is the transportation mode of choice. But for people like Maria and her children and Olga, who live along one of Georgina's many concession roads and who do not own a vehicle, this means lack of access to food, housing, schools, social services, recreational programs, and medical and dental care. It also means social isolation and its attendant risks for ill health and diminished life outcomes.

Lack of access to affordable transportation affects women disproportionately to men. A woman is more likely than a man to be the custodial parent following separation or divorce, which means women assume more responsibility for getting children to and from school, child care, before- and after-school programs, and visits with family and friends. A woman is more likely than a man to sustain herself through a patchwork of unstable, low-paying jobs, which means fewer women than men are able to afford a car or even bus fare. A woman is more likely than a man to leave paid work when a family member requires at-home care, which means women are more heavily burdened with caring for ailing or elderly loved ones and devising ways to get them to medical doctors and other

health practitioners. And a woman is more likely than a man to survive the death of a partner or spouse and live out her so-called "golden years" alone and dependent on Canada Pension Plan Survivor Benefits, unable to afford the high cost of taxis and other privately operated services in order to shop for groceries and other basic amenities. Not only do "women bear a disproportionate share of poverty worldwide... [they] shoulder an unequal burden in coping with poverty at the household level" (Chen 23).

Women's work in households, including their transportation work, is shaped by dimensions of rurality as well

have skyrocketed as people like Maria and Olga have migrated out of our town's better-serviced centres into outlying rural areas. As development planners and real estate brokers have feverishly staked claim to prized tracks of land, urban sprawl has produced qualitative changes in our rural landscape and built environment, including the further decline of the family farm and the erosion of subsistence living. The increased demand for land has steadily driven up the price of property, and more and more small landholders have turned to leasing their land and renting out their houses and outbuildings to make

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as gender (Side and Keefe 132). Women who reside in urban environments generally have a range of transportation-related options, such as inter-city buses and sidewalks, not available to women in rural areas. Thus, women's geopolitical location is another of the many social relational axes (like class, race, age, ability, and sexual orientation) which crosscut gender to produce women's differential positions of disadvantage and marginality.

But there are other forces in play. The intensification of the exchange economy, including the growing privatization of public services, is an integral part of the patriarchal agenda of economic globalization. This agenda is accomplishing the concentration of money and decision-making in the hands of fewer and fewer already powerful people, mostly white men of the Global North. Against the advances of this financially rich minority, the needs and views of the majority are largely ignored. In the rapacious advance of corporate capitalism, working poor women are severely disadvantaged, and working poor women living in rural locations are disadvantaged in particularly harsh ways.

The case of Transit Georgina suggests the possibility for a people-centred alternative economy, one derived from the human impulse for caring and gift-giving. In a dominant world order in which giving and receiving is "exploited and belittled everywhere outside the womb" (Vaughan 331), such an alternative economy begs the consideration of those committed to creating a more fully human world.

"Having it All" in Georgina

Over the past two decades, Georgina has developed in a way that has conspired against low-income and working poor people. Transportation needs in our community

ends meet or to turn a small profit. Small flats and rented rooms in old farm houses and converted barns and storage sheds now attract those who can no longer afford to live in areas of higher density where amenities and services are more readily available. But once situated in these outlying areas, the need for transportation to and from stores, schools, and services becomes a pressing part of everyday struggle.

The ongoing development and rapid (sub)urbanization of Georgina has another particularly vicious edge to it which has contributed to the soaring need for transportation. In the 1990s, the abandonment of social housing policy by all levels of government produced a crisis of housing in Ontario's urban core. Large numbers of homeless people were driven out of Toronto in search of shelter to the north. Georgina, which is located on the shores of Lake Simcoe, was known for offering comparatively affordable housing in the form of converted cottages and trailers. But with the development boom of the 1990s and the birth of the super-sized housing development in Georgina, this situation changed leaving many newcomers at heightened peril. As the cost of even the most marginally adequate housing climbed out of these newcomers' reach, the term "couch surfing," which captures the forced choice of continuous transient living and minimalist shelter, entered into our common parlance.

The rapid influx of working-poor house buyers in the past ten years has also contributed to the burgeoning need for transportation. Georgina has been shaped by developers' drive for profit accomplished through the lure of so-called "affordable, vacation-style living within an easy commute" of urban centres to the south. A giant billboard for a housing development in Keswick, within a few blocks of where I live, shows a man, woman, and two children stepping from a new townhouse into a boat and

promises buyers they “can have it all!” Unfortunately, in a town with few jobs, few sidewalks, few parks and recreation facilities, and where the few shops that do exist are remote from residences, “hav[ing] it all” means a heavy reliance on the private automobile. For many newcomer house buyers, it also means “inhumanely long car-commutes to work” (Jacobs 34) or being left at home caring for children without a family vehicle for transporting children to school, the library or swimming pool, or the family doctor. For many, it also means sharing living quarters with family or friends, or renting out a room or the basement in their home in a struggle to cope with “the radical disconnection” between the cost of housing and a modest income (Jacobs 33).

Growing Reliance on the Automobile

Although Georgina has always been a mostly-rural community, it has not always been as poorly served by public transit as it is today. Between 1907 and 1930, when the Lake Simcoe tourist and ice industries were at their zenith, the Radial Line, an intercity electric railway, allowed daytrippers and summer residents to travel north from Toronto to Lake Simcoe. The railway also provided a means for year-round residents and seasonal workers to travel between the small communities of Sutton, Jackson’s Point, Keswick, and Jersey, as well as to connect with Toronto and other destinations to the south.

After the demise of the Radial Line, there were a few short-lived attempts at providing some form of public transit in the more heavily populated areas of town. But unfortunately, our community, like so many others across North America, had begun the ill-conceived rush toward heavy reliance on the private automobile—and a concomitant unsustainable reliance on the world’s oil reserves. In April 1952, local officials approved a bus service for the Village of Sutton. Then in 1986, a local taxi company was contracted by the Township to implement a six-month trial bus service in Keswick. Ridership in both of these ventures turned out to be but a fraction of even the most conservative estimates of the time. It seems that, contrary to the popular wisdom of the day, either few people actually had trouble getting around or else few were inclined to rely on a bus. “They’d just catch a ride, or borrow a neighbour’s truck,” one long-time resident who remembers these projects explained to me. “Or they’d hitchhike. That was a reliable way of getting where you’d need to go, and still is for that matter,” he added.

Georgina residents’ growing reliance on the private automobile had been set in motion. By 1995, “97 per cent of the population own[ed] at least one car and approximately 65 per cent of the population own[ed] two or more” (Kennedy Planning and Consulting 30). Today, almost five years past the turn of the millennium, there are two or more vehicles parked in front of most places of residence. Many of these residences also display the der-

elict cast-offs of previous years parked in adjacent backyards and laneways—a reliable safeguard against the built-in obsolescence of the family car and the perils of being without transportation in a community almost devoid of stable, full-time jobs, and with few and scattered community services.

Working poor women have been particularly hard hit by this growing reliance on the private automobile and the automobile-centred culture it expresses and engenders. One worried and angry woman who delivers newspapers to supplement her income as a part-time school bus driver complained to me about recent decisions to close two pedestrian walkways in Keswick due to youth vandalism and the complaints of nearby property owners. This woman had taken her opposition all the way to Town Council:

They said it’s just a short walk to the end of the block anyway, so what’s the big deal? But they must never walk anywhere! “A short walk?” That’s ridiculous! They aren’t old; they aren’t carrying two kids; they don’t have their leg in a cast, so that’s easy for them to say! I used that walkway every day on my route, and I never saw anything bad.

It seems the needs of working poor women are largely invisible in a culture that privileges drivers and driving over people and neighbourhoods. As Susan Hawthorne states,

For the Powerful there is no serious consequence on one’s food intake in excessive consumption of petrol, electricity, rent, services and so on. But for the unemployed poor who may not know where they will sleep at night or how they will find sufficient money for the next meal, the consequences of every action loom large. (120)

The Transportation Club is Born

A heavy and growing reliance on the private automobile was the grounded material basis around which local supporters of expanded transportation service organized in early 1995. A small independent study had reported that this informal network was so effective that 78 per cent of residents actually had “little difficulty getting transportation” despite no in-town bus service, no train service, and very limited GO bus and taxi service (Kennedy Planning and Consulting 3). However, the remaining 22 per cent of the population, which has restricted access to the informal transportation network, is seriously disadvantaged. This group includes newcomers, sole support women with children, elderly persons, people with developmental disabilities, and people with acute and chronic illnesses and their caregivers. People who live in rural areas of town or on Georgina Island, the home reserve of the

Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation, are among the most seriously disadvantaged. While circumstances of advantage and disadvantage are multifaceted and do not break down in any simple, dualistic way, there are important qualitative distinctions in people's positions of disadvantage and marginality. For example, recipients of Ontario Works, Canada Pension Plan Survivor Benefits, or Veterans' Benefits, and their dependents, are among the most hard-pressed of all.

Local supporters' plan for addressing the rapidly growing needs for transportation in our town was two-pronged. First, we came up with an idea for relationship-building and abundance-sharing founded on the concepts of hitchhiking and "catching a ride" with friends and neighbours which were such a well entrenched part of the informal network of transportation in our town. We created a driver/rider matching system called "The Transportation Club." The Club connected people who needed a ride with someone who had a car and was willing to share it, along with their driving "know-how." The rider paid their driver a pre-set fee to compensate them for the cost of operating their vehicle. Some drivers were retired from paid work and receiving a pension; many more were unwaged or low-waged workers. But all of the drivers wanted to be of assistance to others in our community who were experiencing the alienating effects of living without ready access to a vehicle in our automobile-dependent society. Some drivers had experienced these effects first-hand; others had family members or close friends living under these circumstances. The Club advocated ride-sharing, sometimes taking as many as five riders in one vehicle. Word of the service quickly spread and ridership began to grow. At the same time, supporters embarked upon a plan to raise awareness about transportation needs in Georgina and how these needs were being reshaped by development and the interests of capital.

Initially, I ran the Transportation Club out of my home on an unwaged basis using "seed money" left over from a 1994 provincial grant to the Georgina Coalition on Social Issues, the community-based group that sponsored the development of the Club. I used the remaining \$3,500 to cover operating expenses, including the cost of obtaining a driving record and a criminal record check for each driver, and a separate telephone line in my home. When funds ran out, I continued to operate the Club from my home, sustaining it through local supporters' unwaged labour and monetary donations. When we started providing transportation service to community agencies and the two local school boards, we netted enough money for the Club to stay afloat on a month-by-month basis. However, there continued to be many operational challenges. For example, the "turn-around" time for being paid by the school boards and other agencies stretched anywhere from four to twelve weeks and more, which meant that we had to go "out of pocket" to reimburse drivers and cover operating expenses. Despite these challenges, by late 1997,

240 riders had signed on and the Club was providing up to ten rides a day.

It quickly became evident that this type of low-cost, door-to-door transportation service had the potential to make a tangible difference in the lives of working poor women, especially working poor women living in rural areas of town who have so few transportation options. More than a dozen women and children sharing rental accommodation at an old farmhouse along one of Georgina's concession roads were among the Club's first riders. During the first winter of operation, these women's prime destination points were the Region of York's social services building in Keswick, the Salvation Army clothing store in Sutton, and the Georgina Food Pantry in Jackson's Point. The women were now able to access all three of these locations in one half-day outing. Previous to this, travelling to just one location had been an all-day excursion made mostly or partly on foot, and rendered all the more difficult and risky by bad weather and lack of proper outerwear.

A Take-Over Bid

The years 1997 and 1998 marked a turning point for the Transportation Club. In early 1997, we attempted to secure another operating grant from the province and attracted the attention of the provincial Tories' Community Transportation Action Program (CTAP). CTAP was a "cross-Ministry" or "cross silo" program involving the Ministries of Transportation, Health, Social Services, and Education. CTAP bureaucrats worked with a handful of carefully picked consultants to design ways of integrating transportation service across the province in order to, as one official described, "create a single market" and realize "improved efficiencies" in community transportation (personal communication with Peter Coghill, Community Transportation Action Program, Province of Ontario, February 12, 1997). CTAP officials became intrigued by the amount of unwaged or volunteer labour the Club commanded, and saw the Club as a possible model for other rural communities across Ontario. Their plans included downloading the responsibility for local ambulance service onto the Club, which they renamed "Transit Georgina." They also designated Transit Georgina for takeover by a private sector operator. This operator would thereby gain access to the resources of our non-profit group, including a pool of cheap, flexible labour in the form of unwaged (i.e., volunteer) workers.

Local supporters' resistance of CTAP's take-over bid took a heavy toll. Not only did this resistance erode the long-term sustainability of Transit Georgina, it left riders like Maria and her children and Olga at risk of losing what little transportation service they now had. As we worked to subvert CTAP's project by sabotaging its surveying of local providers of community services, we allowed our transportation service to dwindle. By the fall of 1998, the

total number of drivers and riders had fallen off, and once again people living under conditions of social isolation found themselves without community support for their transportation needs.

Confronting the Limitations of “The \$5 Hustle”

Over the next five years, we repeatedly applied for funding. This work was time-consuming and exhausting, and it drained what little money and few other resources we had. We persistently identified grant opportunities

Transit, September 20, 2002), but we were undeterred.

In the fall of 2002, we submitted a funding proposal to the Regional Municipality of York requesting \$108,000 for ride subsidies and a six-month pilot project “dial-a-ride” service. This service would connect rural residents to existing public transit using Transit Georgina drivers, and the ride subsidy would make this connecting service available to riders for the cost of a usual bus fare. In the spring of 2003, the Region deferred our proposal to the next budget year.

For the next year and a half, we made quarterly depu-

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and ran the gauntlet of funders’ application processes. One supporter aptly described this work as “doing the \$5 hustle.” This “hustle” required us to continuously try to reinvent the work of Transit Georgina and market it to funders as a new project because foundations and other funders had moved away from core or infrastructure funding for non-profit groups. We resorted to an unhappy reliance on Nevada tickets and lottery funds to sustain a minimum level of transportation service for people travelling to the food bank and to kidney dialysis treatments and other urgent medical appointments—all of whom fell through the huge gaps in existing transportation services. Sometimes we were successful in our bid for funding, but more often we were not.

As 2002 drew to a close, we were becoming increasingly aware of the limitations of our strategy. Our never-ending search for project-based funds was leaving us less and less time for raising awareness about the effects of development in our town. Our local movement for social change had been supplanted by the day-to-day trials of sustaining Transit Georgina. We knew that Transit Georgina was, in one respect, a mere palliative. It had the potential to allow developers and other wealthy corporations, and the institutions that they largely control, to continue advancing a life-impoverishing agenda while we attended to the mounting needs for transportation that this agenda produced. We rededicated our efforts and began pressing government for more public expenditures for transportation in our community. The response from regional officials was that “public transit in Ontario has never had a rural mandate” and that Transit Georgina did not fit easily into the government’s existing silos of funding. Local supporters were advised not to expect much in terms of either expanded funding or policy change (personal communication with Don Gordon, General Manager, York Region

tations to Town Council to keep local politicians abreast of our objectives and our progress, and issued monthly press releases about our activities to the Georgina Advocate. We hosted a community forum on transportation every three to four months which as many as 65 people—riders and drivers, people with special transportation challenges, and other members of the general public—attended to discuss transportation issues and set priorities for action, and we took steps to ensure media coverage of these events. Thankfully, we were not working alone. Like-minded community groups and organizations, and individual riders like Maria and Olga, repeatedly made appeals to elected officials. We worked together to push the need for stable government funding for expanded public transit to the forefront.

In the meantime, the transportation service continued to grow. By December 2004, Transit Georgina had a pool of 48 drivers, and was providing between 700 and 800 rides every month, an increase of 60 per cent over one year. While we held firm to our origins as a grassroots community group and rejected the kind of rider screening process that government agencies urged us to adopt, we put systems in place for driver first-aid training, and ride safety monitoring and evaluation. We also began working with a community group in Midland-Penetanguishene and another in Oshawa-Durham that are attempting to create a similar type of expanded public transit service in their own still mostly-rural Ontario communities.

In March 2005, the local and regional governments agreed to fund Transit Georgina as a pilot project for expanded public transit in a rural community in the amount of \$60,000—\$30,000 each—over ten months. They have made a preliminary promise of annual renewal of funding if the pilot project proves successful. Local supporters are delighted with what appears to be a slight

shift in public policy. We are cautiously optimistic about an upcoming workshop where we will meet with officials to discuss the details of the funding agreement. Yet, we remain mindful that the powerful are often able to exercise power without thinking because "their exercise of power carries few consequences *for them*" (Hawthorne 120). Therefore, once again, we will push the transportation needs of working poor women and their children, especially those living in rural areas, to the forefront in this discussion. Thereafter, we plan to convene another community forum and invite all of our supporters to join us in a celebration.

Local supporters are now more determined than ever to continue taking action to shape official decision-making so that it makes a contribution to a more equitable and fully human community. We believe that Transit Georgina, while far from an ideal solution to the dilemma of transportation in a rapidly developing and still mostly-rural community, is a part of an alternative development paradigm—one based on building relationships and sharing abundance—which operates in the interests of us all (see Vaughan). We also believe that, anchored in our own community and now widely recognized as legitimate champions of those who are most severely marginalized from decisions that affect all of our lives, Transit Georgina and its supporters are well positioned to continue doing this work.

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JEANETTE LYNES

Messages

That fortress called Intensive Care –
my mother's there. To care intensively
is a bastion. No phones allowed. White
sentries barricade even the voice
of faraway daughters.

I'd like to speak of weather in quite
an urgent way, the drag May is, here.
The way a twister in the deep south
sucked pictures right off the walls and
aren't we glad we don't live *there*?

Rules are rules. I beg the nurse to bear
a message, at least. "Ask if she recalls
the time the elm blew down, barely
missing the cat?" The nurse calls this
too complicated. But it was so simple –

merely God being brogue-ish, tossing
trees like cabers – "besides, it's a happy
ending." "I'll tell her you said hello,"
the nurse offers. "Please – more –
I'm sorry for unhooking my phone

all those years, for being an aloof
drizzle in a heartland drought."
(I hear background pages.)
"Why don't I just tell her you send love,
flowers to follow?" the nurse returns.

I'd never have said it like that –
it would worsen a mother's heart, hearing
from a Hallmark daughter she never had.
"You don't comprehend – *these* messages
my mother needs: the girl is sorry, the cat,
lucky."

Jeanette Lynes's poetry appears earlier in this volume.