

Let us begin our discussion of the recent and ongoing changes related to the introduction of the Ion service by noting our firm hope that the Ion and greater Grand River Transit system will prove beneficial to all who call Waterloo Region home. However, change, regardless how positive the anticipated outcome may be, is always challenging. This challenge is also greater for some people than others.

The theme of our photo voice submission is ‘the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.’ Waterloo region residents, whether Ion and GRT users, motorists, cyclists, or pedestrians, must navigate both the transit system as a whole, and its several parts, Ion and bus stops, crosswalks, etc. Ideally, one would be able to navigate the transit system seamlessly, comfortably, and confidently. We project, though, that adapting to the introduction of the Ion service will have a steep learning curve, and unanticipated challenges as residents learn new routes through the twin cities. Sadly, photos can only illustrate isolated parts of the transit system, however, we are mindful that individual negative, or problematic, experiences, even very minor ones, can mount up to create frustration possibly resulting in individuals reducing their use of the transit system or avoiding certain parts of the city altogether.

The Victoria Park Ion stop (Figure 1) illustrates several of our observations, both positive and problematic. We are more than pleased with the inclusion of the yellow pavement marking along the edge of the sidewalk. We would like to see this marking extended along the entire length of sidewalk wherever it abuts Ion rail tracks. This is important even where the sidewalk is level, or nearly level, with the tracks. We cannot underscore enough the importance of such features, or the potential dire consequences should a person not be aware of precisely where the sidewalk ends. Although these features were designed to benefit blind and visually impaired individuals, experience has

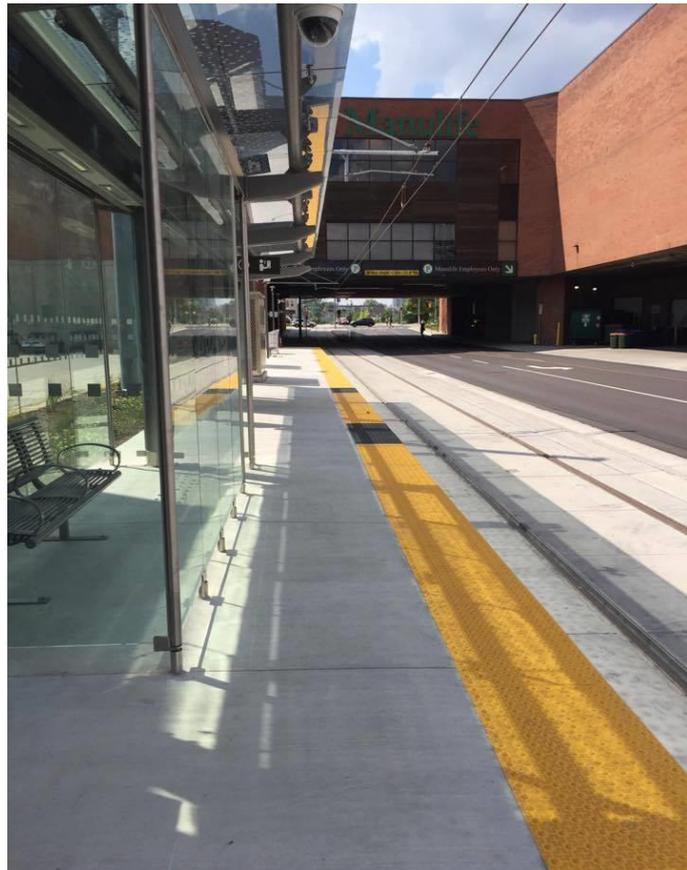


Figure 1

shown that such features also benefit many others, such as caregivers minding young children.

This view of the Ion stop (see Figure 2) also demonstrates how narrow the usable portion of the sidewalk has become due to the addition utility boxes and/or shelters. We acknowledge that in certain locations, such as this one, there was little to no choice as to locating the box, however, where options are available, we recommend obstacles be positioned further from the curb. The narrow sidewalk will likely create difficulties for pedestrians to negotiate this portion of sidewalk. We question whether enough space has been left for users of wheelchairs and other mobility devices to traverse this section.

Additionally, this narrowness could create ‘bottleneck’ conditions for pedestrians. We anticipate a significant number of people will be entering and



Figure 2

exiting the train, especially during peak hours. Some of our members with mobility challenges have expressed that they would need to stop and wait for the crowd to clear before proceeding through such sections, or avoid the intersection entirely. Because the Ion trains are expected to run frequently and be well utilized, such bottleneck conditions could recur several times per day. Such conditions would only be worsened should there be additional obstacles present.

The sloped curbs we have noticed at formal crossings are greatly appreciated. These curbs should make it easier for wheelchair users to cross the tracks. Hopefully, such sloped curbs will be included at all formal and informal crossings where the track is not perfectly level with the roadway. Please bear in mind the degree of slope on these curbs matters a great deal to mobility device users.

Walking further along Charles Street toward Benton Street, we note several obstacles to easy pedestrian traffic. The repositioning of formal crossings has made the position of certain posts, already problematic for some, more concerning. We realize posts are needed in certain places, but are they necessarily needed where they currently are? A 'barrier



Figure 4

free' downtown is also obstacle free. Navigating around such obstacles might already be difficult for some during the summer. But what will happen in the Winter? Otherwise well-intentioned, even attractive, objects can become obstacles. The positioning of such movable obstacles, as public art, should be done with pedestrian and mobility device traffic at top of mind. We ask how these obstacles will impact snow removal during the Winter. Persons with conditions which impact their mobility are even more reliant on timely snow removal than other residents. The downtown core should be barrier free year-round.



Figure 3

The gaps on either side of the actual tracks could be a hazard for people using canes or wheelchairs. Granted, these gaps were unavoidable, but we are mindful of the potential for harm. What is the precise width of these gaps? When walking with a support cane, it is very important that the cane land on stable ground. Should a person's cane inadvertently land in one of these gaps, or not land on level ground, say sliding off the edge of a rail, the individual will fall. Falling in front of a moving train is bad for one's health. Even if no train is imminent, the situation would be very scary for the individual.



*Figure 5*

The inevitability of winter weather raises unanswered questions and concerns. How, and how quickly, will snow be removed from the tracks? Will the tracks be safe to cross when it is snowing or icy? Will the tracks become slippery? This is a serious worry for senior citizens and persons with mobility challenges. How will periods of low visibility, (e.g. fog, blowing snow) impact crossing the tracks? Will there be auditory and visual warnings that a train is approaching? We also ask what the experience will be when a rapidly moving light rail train is passing while we are using the sidewalk less than a meter away. How fast can a rapid transit train stop in case of emergencies?

The Disabilities and Human Rights Group values its relationship with Social Development Centre Waterloo Region (SDCWR) and the role SDCWR plays in amplifying the voices of those which have been silenced or under-represented. As downtown Kitchener remains the largest public space in the city where most social, cultural, and economic services can be found, members of our group wish to see a transit system which provides inclusive and meaningful access to all citizens.



Figure 6

Submission by Charles Nichols and Sydney Atwood on behalf of the Disabilities and Human Rights Group