To Mayor Fred Eisenberger and Members of Council

It is with great concern that we have followed the process that leads to the Committee of the Whole Meeting this week, which appears now to simply have been called to raise transit fares.

While we recognize the difficult financial times, it is not, we think, a situation that should surprised anyone and the fact that so little has been done to find solutions other than an increase that even your managers will tell you is in conflict with your strategic goals for building a transit system.

Our small effort has been to develop a survey independent from the HSR’s work to get some ideas from the public about what to do. The interim results of that unscientific survey will hopefully be brought forward to council later this week. While self-selected it is the views of hundreds of Hamiltonians who care, and represent the views of many more who are worried that our transit system, which is essential for the economic, environmental and social health of this city, is going downhill fast.

I write today to address process. Our group is deeply concerned that yet again fares are going to be considered outside the context of the main budget, I do note that an extra budget meeting to give council context has been set for Tuesday, which we noted only on the calendar this weekend. That was apparently announced after Thursday’s meeting was first advertised., Nevertheless, our group process and one that leads to healthy community participation and support for decisions made

In the absence of any meaningful process of engagement with riders, and other Hamilton residents by the city in the past year and given how information is kept secret until the last minute, we have a sure recipe to breed conflict, confrontation, and poor, not broadly supported decisions. Our group laments that the gas tax committee for example was never allowed the opportunity to morph into an ongoing advisory committee thanks to staff inertia. It could have been a vehicle for mobilizing such public discussions.

It is our understanding that the operational review which has not been released supports our view for the need for investment in transit beyond the status quo. We see no need for delay for a staff report that further excludes the public. While the process of engagement on the review was hopelessly inadequate t two small focus groups) it was a start and we have to make a start in all of this somewhere. The status quo won’t cut it for this or future budgets.
We recognize that a fare increase may be needed but it must be tied to some kind of plan that is realistic to address the needs for service improvement in both quality and quantity.

We seem to be going nowhere fast. We call again on Council to develop some process of broader engagement and discussion to determine options for a consensus to move forward. Fare, taxes, service redeployment, different kinds of services, will all be a part of that community consensus.

Given that transit fares are considered to be a user fee, and given the fact that it seems council has set aside three additional meetings to consider user fees, as a minimum, we call on council to determine that no decision be made this Thursday, and that a final decision be made later in November after we take the month to have an open and honest debate around all transit issues.

Sincerely,

Peter Hutton  
Hamilton Transit Users Group