

Victoria International Airport: The shameful secret of its First and Final Mile

By Jonathan Lee

Here’s a little fact that Victoria International Airport’s (YYJ) Board Chairman James P. Crowley and President and CEO Geoff Dickson might imagine is unremarkable – they both drive cars to and from work – or are personally driven.

So do most, or all, of the YYJ Board members and management personnel at YYJ.

Victoria is proud of the development of its airport. In 2016 more than 1.8 million passengers passed through the facility. It’s now the 10th busiest airport in Canada.

President and CEO Geoff Dickson speaks on the YYJ website of how “a vibrant and growing airport is a sign of a vibrant and growing economy”. He pledges to “help airlines keep their fares down and to help attract new air services”.

Dickson ends his message of continued optimism with a promise to “...continue to improve the airport experience for our **valued customers**”.

All good news – except that Dickson’s YYJ website message makes not a single mention of the staff that actually operate this growing, international airport. Nor is there much evidence that his board or management team value staff work experiences in the same way that they value customer experiences.

What do Dickson’s and Crowley’s choices of transport – private cars – to and from their workplaces have to do with the growth and economic contribution that YYJ can make to Victoria’s future? We all have to make our way to the workplace as reliably as possible, so what’s the problem, you might ask.

While Geoff Dickson is bending over backwards to “improve the airport experience for our **valued customers**”, who comfortably fly in and out from locations often thousands of miles away from Vancouver Island, many of the unmentioned airport service staff can’t even make a reliable and comfortable connection with a public bus service one mile distant from the airport.

The problem that YYJ’s leaders are ignoring is about fundamental, local, convenient and cost effective “connections” – and, ironically, that is the entire raison d’être of the transportation industry. Moving and connecting people and goods safely and efficiently.

International airports operate 24/7. Staff shifts are employed throughout all operational hours. Granted, at YYJ they



YYJ’s lonely, dark walk to and from the nearest bus stop one mile away

do not all work for Dickson, but without such staff and workers Dickson wouldn’t have an airport to “manage”.

He needs the cleaners, the commissionaires, the security personnel, the food/service staff – you get the idea.

These are not high wage jobs. Often these are barely minimum wage positions requiring anti-social working hours – shifts beginning and ending at times when Mr. Dickson and co. are safely tucked up in bed.

These are not positions that enable affording the luxury of a private car with its costs of gas, maintenance, insurance, expensive airport parking charges etc. – we’re not talking limos. These jobs can’t even pay to maintain and park a broken beater.

So the valued workers that Mr. Dickson fails to mention in his customer friendly, business message, must look to public transport. At YYJ this must be the bus.

One mile away from the shiny, developing YYJ airport terminal is a relatively new bus terminal set to the side of the Pat Bay highway – McTavish. It’s a state of the art complex, which includes an array of roundabouts, bus shelters and turn-arounds for various bus routes to and from the ferry terminal, connecting Sidney and Victoria downtown and points along the way.

Here’s where Geoff Dickson’s negotiation, planning and management skills seem to have failed even his “valued cus-

tomers”, not to mention his unmentioned YYJ workers.

Passengers emerging from the arrivals lounge at the curbside at YYJ find there’s often not a public transit bus available.

Airport workers know the wait will be long, at best, and futile after 8.40 pm.

Now the passenger or the worker, without a private or rental car to drive, must deal with the Final Mile -- at YYJ a lonely, dangerous, potholed country road.

YYJ is not unique in needing to solve the Final Mile or First Mile puzzle. It’s a problem that relates to connecting goods and people from mass transit systems to local destinations – homes, workplaces etc. Viable solutions vary depending on local characteristics, but the problems are solvable, usually.

Airports – and ferry terminals -- particularly face transit connection challenges because the nature of their locations tends to be outlying.

Usually, effective, regular and convenient transit is available. Either rail and bus systems terminating within the airport or shuttle services carrying passengers and staff to remote parking lots.

None of this is reliably and conveniently available at YYJ. It could and should be. Rail systems are not an option, of course, but regular and frequent buses and shuttles can easily be scheduled to carry people the first and final YYJ Mile, to and from the lavish McTavish bus terminal.

Instead, an often rainy and cold 30 minute walk in the dark, on the rough, partly

unlit, partly unpaved, potholed, one mile, mostly un-shouldered road, is the best that Victoria and YYJ can offer its minimum wage airport workers and its “valued” international visitors.

Now, there are others, like Crowley and Dickson, who can use their private transport to drive the final mile to the highway and head home. There are also dozens of taxi cabs ready to shuttle arriving passengers to downtown Victoria for \$60 and more and airport rental car services. These options are affordable for those with corporate expense accounts and fat travel budgets. For the airport worker and the budget traveler the choices that Dickson and his colleagues enjoy,

don’t exist.

The taxis aren’t waiting at the airport for a \$10 fare that only requires a ride to the McTavish terminal, one mile away. For the airport worker, anyway, that short ride and \$10 fare represents close to one hour’s wages. Think about that, Mr. Dickson. So taxis aren’t an option for the YYJ worker. Just a long walk in the dark.

But there is a public bus that services YYJ and McTavish, Dickson might say – route 88.

But route 88 only services, at best, YYJ every 40 - 120 minutes. It also ceases to service the Final Mile at 8.40 p.m. on weekdays and 7.55 p.m. on Sundays.

For our unmentioned, low paid airport workers, their shifts often don’t finish until much later than 8.40 p.m.

And then they’re on their own to face

the final mile.

It’s a dark and dangerous road. Every day and every evening it’s possible to see travelers struggling along, towing luggage, on their way to the buses at McTavish, or workers, finishing their shifts, also heading for the public transit, for the ride home. It’s not much fun to walk this mile after a 10 hour work shift or a long haul flight. And then in the opposite direction, the next day, for a new shift.

Along the way cars and cabs will pass by, often splashing rain water from the potholes onto Geoff Dickson’s “valued customers” and unmentioned workers. Maybe Messrs. Dickson, Crowley & co. have looked out of the window and noticed. Maybe not.

The minimum wage workers at YYJ cannot possibly afford cab rides. They must rely on buses and public transit.

Victoria International Airport – the workplace of so many – seems to willfully make accessibility difficult for its workers, and even for its customers.

First and Final Mile problems are often very expensive and difficult to solve.

In the case of YYJ the problem solving could not be easier. For the 4 minute ride from the airport to McTavish, YYJ must have a dedicated, affordable, shuttle on hand at all times for the use of shift staff and passengers who don’t or can’t choose a cab.

Such a shuttle is no more than most airports provide to take passengers to parking lots. The shuttles are funded by the parking charges. YYJ can do the same.

Taxi cabs seek passengers who want a journey further than the one mile McTavish connection, so it is difficult to imagine why taxis would not welcome the dedicated YYJ/McTavish shuttle – no more four-minute fares.

The Final Mile connection between YYJ and McTavish is not only an inconvenience. It’s an accident or assault waiting to happen. An accident or assault that could so easily be avoided.

It’s time for YYJ and its board and management team to look beyond their shiny development plans for a moment and prioritize the human requirements of the workers who don’t seem to figure too prominently in Geoff Dickson’s world view.

Building and developing an international airport, Mr. Crowley and Mr. Dickson, means including plans that enable easy, affordable, and safe, worker and passenger access for the first or final mile of their journeys.

Greater Victoria public transit is a vital issue in the upcoming BC election. Votes for candidates who support the effective development and improvement of Victoria’s transit systems are votes for individuals who truly understand the requirements of humane and cost effective economies.

Victoria International Airport can easily and quickly make its own contribution to Victoria’s public transit requirements at YYJ, and at the same time honour the airport workers, the needs of whom it seems to continue to shamefully ignore.

“That poverty of principle is never more plain than in his (Trudeau’s) approach to the Indigenous peoples of Canada and the fossil fuel industry. When Trudeau’s road runs over the rights of our First Nations, he keeps his foot on the gas.”

- Sid Ryan,
Canadian union leader

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