

# COMMENT

## On the buses: It's about frequency, not speed

Fare box systems are slow. A proof-of-payment system would shorten trip times

BENJAMIN GILLIES

When it comes to implementing new public transit initiatives, it is often assumed speed is the critical factor in creating the most user-friendly transit experience possible. Yet, studies actually show frequency is more important in determining how quickly commuters will get where they are going.

This may be somewhat counterintuitive, but it is the difference between catching "the" bus and catching "a" bus: the former means a long wait time between buses, so you must ensure you get on the one that meets your needs; in the latter scenario, there are plenty to choose from, and if you miss one you can be assured another will arrive shortly.

If the idea that frequency trumps speed is difficult to grasp, imagine a gate at the end of your driveway that only opens every half-hour. If you miss the opening, your entire schedule is thrown off and you are guaranteed to be late.

According to transit experts, catching "a" bus means ideally having to wait no more than eight minutes for the next one to come along.

Of course, frequency and speed do go hand in hand, and with most cities dealing with tight budgets — and therefore unable to increase frequency by buying more buses and hiring more drivers — they are instead turning to alternative technologies and policies to improve the efficiency of existing service.

One approach is to do away with on-board fare boxes in favour of proof-of-payment systems along key lines. Passengers purchase tickets in advance, and validate their ticket with a time stamp while waiting at their stop. When the vehicle arrives, they simply step on. Once in a while, an inspector will board and ask to see people's tickets, and anyone who fails to produce a stub will be fined.

The virtue of this system is that people can board quickly. The transactional hassles of payment and validation are handled during otherwise wasted waiting time. A few years ago, New York's Metropolitan Transit Authority discovered nearly 30 per cent of the time it took for a bus to complete its route was spent idling as passengers boarded and paid fares. Since the study was done, the MTA has moved to a proof-of-payment system on several lines, and buses are now able to complete approximately four runs in the time it used to take them to do three, which increases frequency without having to operate more vehicles.

To save even more time, transit systems across North America are installing signal pre-emption systems — wireless technology that switches a red light to green whenever a bus is approaching. Using Global Positioning Systems, a computer can calculate the expected arrival time of a bus at an intersection and either extend a green light or shorten a red one. The pre-empted traffic light returns to normal operation within a cycle or two. (The computer also knows the schedule of the bus, so empty vehicles and those running ahead wait at the light like everyone else.)

Not only does signal pre-emption increase the speed of the bus, it also improves the reliability of service, as vehicles are no longer as susceptible to being held up in traffic. This means more predictable wait times and fewer missed connections for passengers. Additionally, the system saves money and reduces idling. In Calgary, for example, transmitter-equipped buses save 8,000 litres of fuel and therefore nearly 23,000 kilograms of carbon emissions per year compared to buses on regular routes.

Moreover, cities can employ signal pre-emption technology on emergency vehicles to similarly improve their efficiency. Houston, for instance, has reduced travel time for ambulances over 20 per cent by using the transmitter system — a huge difference for a patient being rushed to hospital. Meanwhile, Plano, Texas, discovered its fire stations can each serve a wider area thanks to signal pre-emption. This saved the city having to build three additional stations, to the tune of \$9 million in construction costs and \$7.5 million in annual operating expenses.

Equipping an existing bus fleet with technologies such as signal pre-emption and proof-of-payment could be an effective and affordable way to provide cities with the reliable and efficient public transportation networks they need.

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## It's no boast, I'm a dreadful host

Avoid the spousal lecture by learning the Five Cottage Rules



PAUL BENEDETTI

Most summers, this one included, we're lucky enough to be invited to our friends' cottages.

Sometimes we're invited for a few days — or even a week! — but only if the people in question have never had me up before.

I've written in the past about the Top Ten Signs You are an Unwanted Guest, most of which I have learned from personal experience. I've been at many cottages and been confronted with tiny indications that I had overstayed my welcome. These "social hints" have included waking up to find: a) a bus ticket on my pillow, b) my bags packed and on the dock and c) my car fully loaded with the engine running. Believe me, it takes a brave man to open a "breakfast beer" and laugh these off, but I've done it. Many times.

I may be a lazy, ungrateful and annoying guest, but I'm also persistent. I was once escorted from a friend's cottage after playing Rick Astley's Never Gonna Give You Up 67 times in a row. Hey, what's not to like? It's got a good beat and it's fun to dance to.

But last week, I realized that along with being a pretty bad summer cottage guest,

I am also a significantly bad host.

We were on vacation and spending a few days at our cottage at Lake Erie. Actually, we've started to call it the "lake house" to cover the fact that it lacks pretty much everything people expect in a "cottage," like a homey, pine-filled interior, a working fireplace, a dock from which to dive into the water, water you actually want to dive into, and evenings filled with the haunting call of the loon.

We've got a "beach" of jagged stones which is now covered with about 10,000 pounds of dried, reeking seaweed, water that is often pleasantly scented with the occasional floating dead carp, and at night you are serenaded by the combination of the sound of roaring Harleys and some idiot playing Rick Astley tunes at full blast. (OK, that last guy might be me.)

Anyway, the point is we invited our old friends Kevin and Susan to join us for a couple of days of their vacation. Crazily, they said yes. We found out later that their acceptance of our offer was influenced by the sudden cancellation of another invitation to a "real" cottage and the fact that their house was on fire.

Apparently, my first "host mistake" was my response to Susan's email question: "Can we bring anything?" Naively perhaps, I emailed back a short note that read: "Just yourselves really. But if you feel like it, we could use: one breakfast, one lunch, one dinner, a couple cases of beer, wine (as many bottles as you think you'll drink) and could you please pick up

my dry cleaning? It's right near the liquor store anyway. Love, Paul."

This was, according to my wife, just the first of my series of "faux pas" (That's French for "dead squirrels.") To save you time, I have boiled these down to a few tips that will help you avoid the hour-long lecture I received — and be a better host!

1. Don't open with: "Great to see you guys. Your timing is perfect. We just had the place fumigated for bed bugs."

2. The correct answer to, "Do you have a dishwasher?" is not, "Yeah, YOU! Ha ha!"

3. It's not good manners to say, "We've got the master bedroom, but there are two nice air mattresses on the porch. And here's a can of Off! You'll need it."

4. Avoid the greeting: "Glad you came up, pal. I could really use a hand emptying the septic tank. Did you bring hip waders by any chance?"

5. Apparently, most people do not consider wieners on a stick and roasted marshmallows a "meal." Especially, not breakfast.

Despite my deficient hosting capabilities, I think Kevin and Susan had fun. We went walking, played tennis in Port Dover, made some terrific meals together and generally had a good time with old friends.

My wife says if I behave myself, we can have more friends out to the cottage. I'm looking forward to it.

Now, I just have to download some more Rick Astley tunes.

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## Prayer's necessity in navigating our lives

Exploding trains or shoe-bomber's plot, we must go out into 'the thick of it' each day

THOMAS FROESE

It's a strange world, especially here on what is, for all I know, my deathbed. It's malaria and I'm dreaming. Or maybe in the fight of it I'm actually hallucinating.

I see a friend, a writing mentor, a bear of a man, the sort you can disappear into when he hugs you. He's an American who's never been to Africa, no not once. But he's somehow made it over the ocean and through the walls to kneel at my Ugandan bedside.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.  
"I'm praying for you."

"Why?" I ask.

"I'm a Christian."

"Yeah? So?"

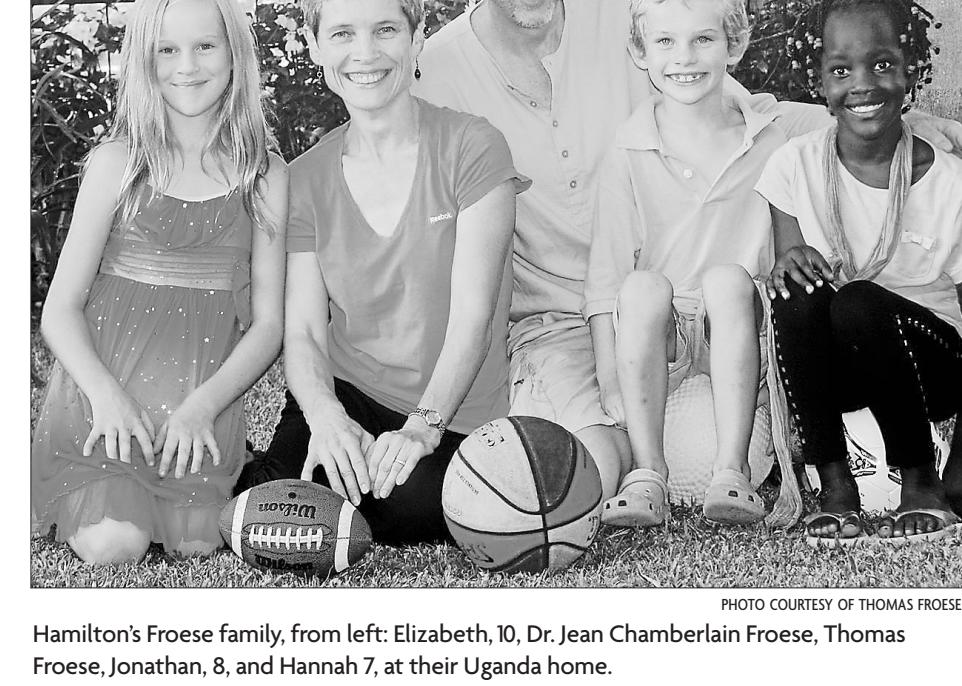
"I'm a Christian," he says. "And, well, this is just what we do for each other."

This friend, I discovered later, had prayed for me. But maybe, for the religious and irreligious alike, our real prayers are somehow spoken between our prayers. This is how my father once put it.

Whatever the case, I share this story — I've had malaria three times — with a longtime friend and his wife visiting our Hamilton home. They're in Canada for a respite from their 20-year work in Pakistan.

"But I doubt my life was in danger. Not really. Not like yours," I tell my friend's wife, who once had malaria spread to her brain. She doesn't say much. Nobody does. Nobody has to. We know the risks. We get the same questions. "You live where? Really? Is it safe?"

Shortly after, my wife Skypes from Hamilton to Yemen. In broken Arabic she wishes other friends, our former Yemeni landlord, a Happy Eid. "When will you visit?" Dr. Ali asks. I chime in, "We want to come today!" Mrs. Ali joins the joy of the moment. Then Tazbeer, their daughter. She's now engaged. Where have the



Hamilton's Froese family, from left: Elizabeth, 10, Dr. Jean Chamberlain Froese, Thomas, Jonathan, 8, and Hannah, 7, at their Uganda home.

years gone?

That time in Yemen comes back: the warm Arab hospitality, the waves and yells of "Welcome!" on the streets of Sana'a from strangers who barely know an English word. Then the day an Islamic extremist murdered our three American friends, a bloody day that spilled ink into the papers, especially this paper since my wife skirted death only after her last-minute change of plans.

Is it safe, then? No. It can be any summer day and an exploding train will destroy your town, or a snake will strangle your sleeping boys, or your husband will drive off in his truck for just a minute and be murdered by sunrise. No, the terrible truth of it is that life itself is not safe.

This is why we pray, any of us, in one way or another like my father said, with or without words, whether we're pious or whether we think it's all mumbo jumbo. We murmur our quiet desperation because any of us need to leave bed and eat breakfast and walk into the thick of it, a world that's not safe because somehow it's not meant to be.

This is also why our response to global terror chatter, which recently cranked up public fears, can do as much harm as good. The news can have very little to do with daily life in so-called terror states where diseases and driving, in fact, will get you more than anything.

Meanwhile, here you're more likely to die from falling off a ladder than from any shoe-bomber's plot. Still, we sheepishly remove our footwear at airports. Just like we fearfully drive our kids two blocks to school when they're more likely to win millions than get abducted. This is our strange world, where it's harder than ever to know what's real and what's not.

Now my family, including the kids, are about to return to Uganda, a back-and-forth life my wife and I started in those Yemen years just after 9/11. Some people will pray for us. This will maybe even save our lives. For this we're profoundly grateful.

And we're also thankful to fly to a place where the curtain is pulled back a bit, where it's more plain to see that life is a gift and death is imminent and the days between are meant for a joy that would otherwise be harder to find.

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