

Emails dispute Halifax staff claims that buses can't turn on to Macdonald Bridge



By [Alexander Quon](#) Online Producer/Reporter Global News



Halifax Transit has said that the transformation of the Gottingen Street into a dedicated bus corridor is due in because transit vehicles were not able to turn onto the Macdonald bridge. Internal emails and reports indicate that may not be true.

Alexander Quon/Global News

The move to transition Halifax's Gottingen Street into a bus corridor — removing 51 parking and loading zones and creating a dedicated bus lane at peak transit times — is set to be debated at an upcoming meeting of the municipality's transportation committee later this month.

If it passes the committee, the municipality says the changes could likely "be implemented in fall 2018."

But the decision hasn't been greeted with open arms by business owners along the street, who say that the loss of parking will outweigh any benefit that is received by creating the transit corridor.

“They want to add 90 buses during peak hour and we just feel that’s going to overburden the street,” Patricia Cuttell, the executive director for the North End Business Association, told Global News in June.

“It’s too many buses for a 250-year-old narrow, pedestrian-oriented neighbourhood.”

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Ease of traffic congestion

The corridor’s selling point has been the ability to streamline bus traffic at peak hours (7 a.m.-9 a.m. and 3 p.m.-6 p.m., Monday to Friday) at what staff have referred to as a transit choke point.

According to [a report from municipal staff](#), buses that travel northbound along Gottingen Street are delayed an average of five to six minutes during the afternoon peak hour.

Halifax’s [Moving Forward Together Plan](#), which was approved in 2017, recommended the creation of the Gottingen Street Bus corridor.

But the underlying phrase that the city used to justify implementing the scheme — that buses could not turn onto the Macdonald Bridge using the Barrington ramp — may not be as solid as originally described by city staff.

According to internal emails, reports and memos — totaling 426 pages which were released under a freedom of information request — both transit staff and city bus drivers voiced a belief that it would be possible to make the turn.

In response to questions from Global News, the municipality said that they don’t think buses safely completing the turn is possible without “larger changes to the bridge ramp.”

Nick Ritcey, a spokesperson for the HRM, said that it would be “extremely costly” to change the bridge and that risking bus driver’s safety would be irresponsible.

“Safe and consistent operation is a top priority for the municipality, Halifax Transit and Halifax Harbour Bridges,” he said.

“We continue to work with HHB on options which would make this turn safe, to allow transit vehicles to use this access.”

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The Barrington Street ramp

Up until late 2017 it was position of both Halifax Transit and Halifax Harbour Bridges (HHB), who own and operate the Macdonald Bridge, that a bus making a turn on the ramp could not be completed safely.

The Bridge Commission insisted that the geometry for a bus to make such a turn doesn't allow it, saying, “to make a right-hand turn on to the bridge from the Barrington ramp is too tight — particularly if the reversible lane has two lanes to Halifax — there isn't enough room.”

At some point, testing was carried out in the early '90s, but anyone who was involved with the testing no longer works at the municipality — leaving staff to repeat a statement without any data to back it up.

“We've never seriously considered doing a cost/benefit analysis,” Patricia Hughes, manager for planning and scheduling

of Halifax Transit, wrote in an email in June 2017 that was addressed to staff.

Arguments against allowing buses on the ramp boiled down to two points: that buses crossing the centre lane could violate the province's Motor Vehicle Act, and that reducing the bus ramp to buses only — or at the very least, restricting the ramp to one lane — would prompt more congestion in downtown Halifax during peak hours.

But with no data to prove their assumption and reporters asking questions, Halifax Transit decided to conduct its own tests to back up its already publicly stated position that the buses could not make the turn.

Testing

Carried out on October 4, 2017, the trial used staff from HHB and Halifax Transit.

Members were to record the buses from various angles, indicated at A, B and C in the diagram below.



A diagram staff used to depict the test conducted in October 2017

Halifax Transit

Transit bus trainers were used to operate the four buses used in the test: Chris Demedeiro would be tasked with driving bus one, which would approach from the right hand lane; Crystal Rudolph was in bus two and would approach straddling the lanes; Martin Wanless, in bus three, would approach the turn from the left lane; and Kirk Dauphinee in bus four would approach from the right lane, but apply a button-hook turn.

Results were mixed with the drivers of bus two and three voicing concern that they encroached or risked the “appearance of encroachment” into the oncoming lane.

“Any miscalculation by the bus operator or poor lane positioning by a car driver may result in close calls or a frontal collision. In my view, buses should be prohibited from

turning onto the bridge using the ramp from the left lane for this reason,” said Wanless in his notes after the test.

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But three of the four drivers expressed support of using a button-hook turn on the ramp, with one saying that it “would be the safest and most efficient” method of taking the ramp.

“I found the button-hook turn [worked] well,” noted Dauphinee. “I did have plenty of space to the inside and don’t feel as though I infringed on the centre lane any more than other right turns we make in the city.”

Multiple internal memos point to the city’s transit engineers playing with the idea of shifting bus routes onto the Barrington Street ramp — even after the tests were conducted in October 2017.

“I think that buses would be able to use the Barrington ramp with minimal physical changes to the ramp itself,” Harrison McGrath, a strategic transportation planning program engineer, wrote in an email in December.

Halifax responds

But HRM says they came to a different conclusion.

“Halifax Transit, Planning & Development and Halifax Harbour Bridges have said consistently that, at this time, the turn cannot be made safely with the current infrastructure and geometry,” Nick Ritcey, a spokesperson for the municipality, said in an interview.

“This became clear upon the review and analysis of camera footage provided by the Bridge Commission and staff observing the trials that took place in fall 2017.”

READ MORE: [Gottingen street bus corridor coming to Halifax council](#)

Municipal staff say that the transformation of Gottingen Street into a bus corridor is a necessity and would need to take place even if a bus could turn on to the bridge successfully.

“Transit priority is still warranted on Gottingen Street for the buses which would still serve the many residents and businesses on this important corridor,” a staff report said.

“If the Barrington Street ramp were to be accessible to transit vehicles, only routes that do not currently make stops on Gottingen Street would benefit.”

There is, however, some good news. Ritcey says that the municipality will soon be looking find a structural engineer to assess the possibility of modifying the bridge ramp, allowing buses to take the turn.

The assessment will likely appear before regional council this fall.