



Erinn Pinkerton

ROAD to Success

THE FUTURE OF
PUBLIC TRANSIT IN BC



Steve Vanagas

by Natalie Bruckner

“WELELCOME ONBOARD your personalized drone carrier. Please be sure you are safely buckled up before take off. We will be arriving at your destination in less than three minutes. Sit back and enjoy the ride and don’t forget to provide us with feedback via our online virtual assistant.”

While this may read like something out of a sci-fi book, the idea of passenger-carrying drones as a mode of public transit isn’t so far-fetched when you consider the advancements that the sector has recently made here in British Columbia.

“We often have discussions about transportation going into ‘the vertical,’ as we call it, especially with companies like Amazon now moving into that realm with deliveries

by drone...anything is possible,” says Erinn Pinkerton, BCom ’01. Pinkerton is president and CEO of BC Transit, the provincial Crown corporation responsible for delivering public transportation across the province, with the exception of those areas serviced by TransLink (Metro Vancouver).

Over the past five years, public transportation in BC has undergone a massive change, but this is just the beginning.

Increasingly stringent emission regulations, advancements in technologies, market disrupters like ride-sharing as well as customer expectations are just some of the reasons BC Transit and TransLink are exploring ideas that may have been laughed out of the boardroom just a few years ago.

“The industry is changing as customer expectations are changing. On a macro level, we have to make sure we stay abreast of technology, and at the micro level that means we are considering what we can do to mirror

some of the benefits that technology brings by offering more dynamic transit,” says Pinkerton.

Increasing passenger numbers is helping drive this innovative mindset as more people leave their cars at home and rely on public transportation as their main means of getting around.

“Over the past three years, ridership on TransLink’s system has grown by 18 per cent—the largest increase in all of North America and far outpacing the growth in local population and employment,” explains Steve Vanagas, MBA ’01 and vice president, communications, marketing and public affairs at TransLink. “We are in the midst of a \$9-billion plan to improve transit and transportation in the Metro Vancouver region.”

BC Transit has also seen an increase in ridership, growing by six per cent in 2018-2019 to just over 57 million passenger trips annually. The trend is expected to continue in both regions.

“There is a new appreciation for the vital role that public transportation plays in the economic and social success of our communities,” says Vanagas.

You can’t talk about social and economic success without looking at what public transportation is doing when it comes to reducing its carbon footprint. Currently transportation is said to produce 24 per cent of Canada’s total emissions. And while public transportation produces significantly less greenhouse gas emissions per passenger kilometer than private vehicles, the sector is looking to further reduce its impact.

“The industry is changing since we know we can’t build ourselves out of congestion anymore and there needs to be an alternative solution. Customers today are not choosing transit solely based on finances, but because they see it as a green solution. It takes people off the roads, and that’s why we are moving to a zero-emission fleet,” says Pinkerton.

In July, BC Transit announced the launch of the low carbon fleet program that aligns with the Province of BC’s CleanBC plan, aids provincial targets for greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and supports local government climate action goals. Its target is to create a fully

electric provincial fleet in all vehicle classifications by 2040.

“The exciting part about a public agency, given our size and our ability to work with others like BC Hydro and the provincial and federal governments, is that we can accelerate a program more quickly than an individual car owner deciding to go electric,” says Pinkerton.

This summer TransLink introduced

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its battery-electric bus pilot—a \$10-million project that will test how well buses powered by fast-charging batteries work. TransLink started rolling out the electric buses for a two-and-a-half year trial on Route 100, travelling along Marine Drive through Vancouver, Burnaby and New Westminster. High-powered charging stations, capable of recharging the bus batteries within four to seven minutes, are being installed at each end of the route.

“The big picture for us at BC Transit is that electric buses will not only be reducing emissions out of the tailpipe, but they will be quieter, which is essential for community roads and on-demand services,” says Pinkerton.

On-demand services, you say? Yes, don’t be surprised if in the next few years you can book a door-to-door public transportation service on your phone...from anywhere. Rather than being concerned about the increasing popularity of ride shares, public transportation is embracing it and the opportunities it presents.

“It’s exciting to see the choices that people are going to have. Fast, frequent bus and rapid transit, ride sharing and car-sharing, e-bikes and e-scooters—there will be more choices than ever before. We see TransLink as being central to ensuring that those choices help reduce congestion, create more opportunity and make our communities more sustainable,” says Vanagas.

However, as Pinkerton says, it’s not just about reducing emissions and creating more efficient service, but about the emotional connection.

Photos: (left) Uvic Photo Services; (right) courtesy of Steve Vanagas

Q&A

with Erinn Pinkerton



We understand you are BC born and raised?

I was born and raised right here in Victoria.

Can you sum up what BC Transit does?

From small towns to large urban centres, BC Transit transports more than 57 million customers in communities across the province every year.

How did you enter into the transportation sector?

Like most young people who are going into commerce, I thought I would be making millions on a stock market or a private company. Then, when I got my first job at BC Ferries in 2001, I quickly realized that finding a job where you have a purpose and a passion is where I wanted to be for the rest of my career. I joined BC Transit in 2008 as the director, corporate & strategic planning, was promoted in 2014 to vice president, business development & chief transformation officer (CTO) and became president and CEO in 2018.

Can you tell us why you chose BCom and MBA degrees and how they have helped in your career?

I got my BCom at Gustavson and later continued with an MBA from Lansbridge University. You can take all the courses and learn A, B, C, D and E, but when you roll them all together, it doesn't matter if you are working in a public, private or not-for-profit, it all comes back to who is

your customer. All the courses you take at Gustavson—accounting, finance, et cetera—are focused on the customer, which is essential in business.

What would your advice be to grads wanting to enter the transportation sector?

In the transportation industry you are part of so much. At the core, we are running a business. But you're also focused on customers and at the same time involved in municipal, provincial and federal funding and advocacy. You get to be part of a big solution and big picture that covers a wide range of experiences.

What are the unique challenges transportation faces in BC?

Our clock resets every night. Every day is a new opportunity.

What are you excited about moving ahead?

To continue to provide a public service that is relied on to improve people's lives, whether that's ferry, rail or bus.

What's your favourite route?

Route 6 that goes along Quadra Street. It goes through so many different villages and neighbourhoods. There are tons of stops, it has a high ridership, and you get to see the residential growth of the area.

And finally, where can we find you in your spare time?

Trail running or hiking, or puzzling. I puzzle every day! I got into it a couple of years ago as I was looking for a way to de-stress. Now, every morning before work, I puzzle. I did a 10,000 piece once, but you need the physical space to do it, and I have been told I can't do that again as I took up the entire dining table! ■

“When you look at Uber and Lyft coming into the province, anyone who has taken one is not excited because it's an Uber or Lyft, but because it's interactive: you get to book your trip, know where your driver is and his or her name. You know where they are taking you, you have the convenience of paying for it on your phone, and you can rate your driver,” says Pinkerton.

Local transit has already started making headway in this realm. Since 2018, BC Transit real-time bus location technology (NextRide) has rolled out in seven transit systems, including Victoria, Nanaimo, Comox Valley, Squamish, Whistler, Kamloops and Kelowna. It allows customers to use BC Transit's website or their mobile devices to track the location of their bus. It also helps remove barriers for the visually impaired by enabling automatic next stop announcement, and provides passenger information displays on board buses and at selected bus stops to assist those with hearing impairments.

Vanagas says it's all about getting customers more personalized information, faster.

Ride-on-demand services will also benefit those in rural communities as the sector explores how to better serve those routes. In the past, it has been difficult to provide public transit in a reasonably efficient way to some low-density, rural areas. However, as Pinkerton explains, this is about to change.

“I am 100 per cent confident that fixed route, high-capacity transit will always have its place, but we are entering into more unique services. Take UVic as an example. Currently we drop everyone off at the Exchange, but how do you get to your home at the end of the day? This is where we start to look at on-demand bus scheduling—moving away from a fixed route to a pick-up/drop-off—as we can use technology to facilitate that,” says Pinkerton.

Before we transition to that point, the next stop is riders using current

technology to pay for fares on their phones. “The traditional approach with the fare card means the backend system has to be up-to-date; you have to administer the cards, and if they get lost, it is a bureaucratic and administrative challenge. When customers bring their phones on the bus, they bring their own tickets and remove everything we have to do on the back end. We are actively pursuing the product right now with the goal that within the year we have something started,” says Pinkerton.

Pinkerton and Vanagas understand that by working in transportation, well, no two days are ever the same. “Technology is changing, so we need to be sure we are nimble enough and choose our products wisely, and we are not stuck on legacy systems. It's a hard thing to get to. If we wait until it's perfect, we won't ever get anywhere,” says Pinkerton.

So what's the most challenging element moving forward? They both agree that it's about constantly meeting customer expectations, 24/7.

“We are very real and very relevant to the lives of a half-million people who use our system every day to get around. It's a big responsibility. We have a huge impact on virtually everyone in this city and that's why we have to listen to people. We have to work hard every day to provide a safe and reliable service, and we have to think and plan for the future,” says Vanagas.

They also both agree that when you choose to work in transit, you're only as good as the last trip you provided for that customer. That's a big responsibility to carry.

“It's not like flying, where you may take a trip once a year. In some cases it's three or four times a day. You can have five good days and then one bad day on the system and it impacts you,” says Pinkerton. “I have become almost obsessed with how a massive agency works and how it breaks down into the minute-by-minute experience of our customers.” ■

Q&A

with Steve Vanagas



We understand you are BC born and raised?

I was born and raised in North Vancouver. I'm married with three boys—the oldest has just finished the BCom program at UVic.

Can you sum up what TransLink does?

We finance, build, manage and operate an integrated regional transportation system that moves up to 500,000 people every single day, and connects 23 communities by bus, SkyTrain rapid transit, commuter rail (West Coast Express), passenger ferry (SeaBus), on-demand service for people with disabilities, as well as pedestrian and cycling paths, major roads and five bridges.

How did you enter into the transportation sector?

I joined TransLink in 2017 after 10 years as Chief Communications Officer for BC Hydro. TransLink was coming off the most painful period in its history. It had a new CEO, a passionate board that was dedicated to reviving the organization, and a renewed commitment from all levels of government to improve transportation in Metro Vancouver. I was offered an opportunity to create a new strategy, rebuild the team, and renew the brand—I couldn't turn it down.

Can you tell us why you chose an MBA and how it has helped in your career?

I saw an MBA as something I needed to do to take the next step in my career. Up to that point I had worked in journalism and politics, and I had taken on leadership and management roles, but without any formal training. If I

wanted to take on larger roles, I had to dedicate myself to deliberately learning the art and science of leadership and management.

What would your advice be to grads wanting to enter the transportation sector?

There is a big focus on planning and operations in the transportation sector. So if those are fields that interest you as a graduate, transportation offers some great opportunities to develop a career. I would add another piece of advice: learn strong communication skills. If you want to progress in any career, it's essential to learn how to communicate and work with your colleagues, your teams and your customers.

What are the unique challenges transportation faces here in BC?

Like most other sectors, we are facing the challenge of new technology, new entrants in the market and the need to be more sustainable in everything we do. Making transit fast and frequent and convenient makes people more likely to choose transit. But how do you pay for it all? Transportation infrastructure has a big price tag and paying for it is one of the toughest challenges facing public policymakers today.

What are you excited about moving ahead?

We are in the midst of a massive public engagement effort called Transport 2050, which is seeking public input on what the next 30 years of transportation should look like in Metro Vancouver. So we're focusing right now on what the public wants and what they want the future to look like.

What's your favourite route?

I'm a frequent SeaBus rider. It's an incredibly convenient way to get between the North Shore and downtown Vancouver. And it's a beautiful ride.

And finally, where can we find you in your spare time?

I spent the last decade coaching soccer so I still enjoy watching my sons playing for the North Vancouver Football Club. Otherwise, you will find me at a gym or obsessively trying to complete *New York Times'* crosswords. ■

Photos: (left) UVic Photo Services; (right) courtesy of Steve Vanagas