

Eliminating key safety position will lead to ‘distracted driving’ in the subway

By Carlos Santos

A crowded subway is not where you want to be when you’re about to give birth.

But when a young woman found herself in this situation at the Bayview station, she was lucky that Connie Shackleton was there on the scene.

In her role as the train’s “subway guard,” Shackleton spotted the pregnant woman bent-over and screaming on the platform. Shackleton immediately called for medical help, rushed to the woman’s side, provided her own coat for warmth and directed curious onlookers to give the expectant mother some privacy.

It was an effective intervention before the ambulance arrived, and it contributed to the birth of a healthy baby.

But if TTC management gets its way, the subway guard will be eliminated, leaving passengers to fend for themselves in difficult and sometimes dangerous situations.

For more than sixty years, our subways have been equipped with two crew members – a Driver who drives the train, and a Guard who watches out for passenger safety. This 2-person team is part of the reason Toronto’s subway system has been one of the safest in the world.

While the TTC admits it’s planning to soon remove Guards on the Yonge-University-Spadina line (and later on the Bloor-Danforth line), it has downplayed the threat to public safety.

TTC management seems to be hoping that the public isn’t paying attention. It has no plans to hold public hearings or invite passenger feedback before implementing this significant change.

It’s not surprising the TTC wants to keep this off the public’s radar – a poll conducted last month by Corbett Communications for the Amalgamated Transit Union found that 71 % of respondents disapprove of the removal of the Guard, and 84% say it’s important to have public hearings before any such plan is implemented.

The Guard’s role is extensive. In addition to ensuring passengers enter and exit the train safely, the Guard provides a crucial set of eyes scanning the platform, watching for passengers being harassed, for lost children, for people with mobility issues or for distressed individuals who appear suicidal and are edging close to the edge of the platform.

Guards are first responders when passengers suffer medical emergencies or become victims of assault, on the platform or inside the train. Most importantly, Guards are trained to lead an

emergency evacuation of passengers through a darkened tunnel – where there’s a live wire that needs to be shut off – in cases where a train is stranded due to fire, the incapacitation of the Driver or unexpected dangers on the track.

Some passengers choose to ride in a car near the back of the train, where the Guard is located, since the Guard’s presence alone helps deter aggressive and disorderly behaviour.

Rather than eliminating the Guards, the TTC should be making the public more aware of them and their role in assuring passenger safety and comfort.

On the less-travelled Sheppard line, the TTC has operated trains without Guards since 2016, and the results are worrying. With Drivers required to perform the tasks of Guards as well, they can’t devote their full attention to driving. The result has been a 50% increase in potentially dangerous “red light violations.”

These days, although police are cracking down on “distracted driving” on our roads, the TTC is almost guaranteeing there will be “distracted driving” on our subway tracks.

How can the Driver, located at the front of the train, possibly pay full attention to the track ahead and to what’s happening on the platform and inside the subway cars?

The TTC’s motivation appears to be cost-cutting. Yet this is surely false economy, especially since the TTC plans to compensate for the missing Guards by hiring extra, higher-paid Station Managers.

But Station Managers won’t be right there on the scene in an emergency. They may not even be nearby. They may well have to come by car from another station. How can they possibly respond in the split-second time sometimes needed to avert a tragedy?

At a time when public safety concerns are higher than ever due to the pandemic, the TTC should not be playing fast and loose with a safety system that’s been crucial to our comfort and trust in riding the red rocket.

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