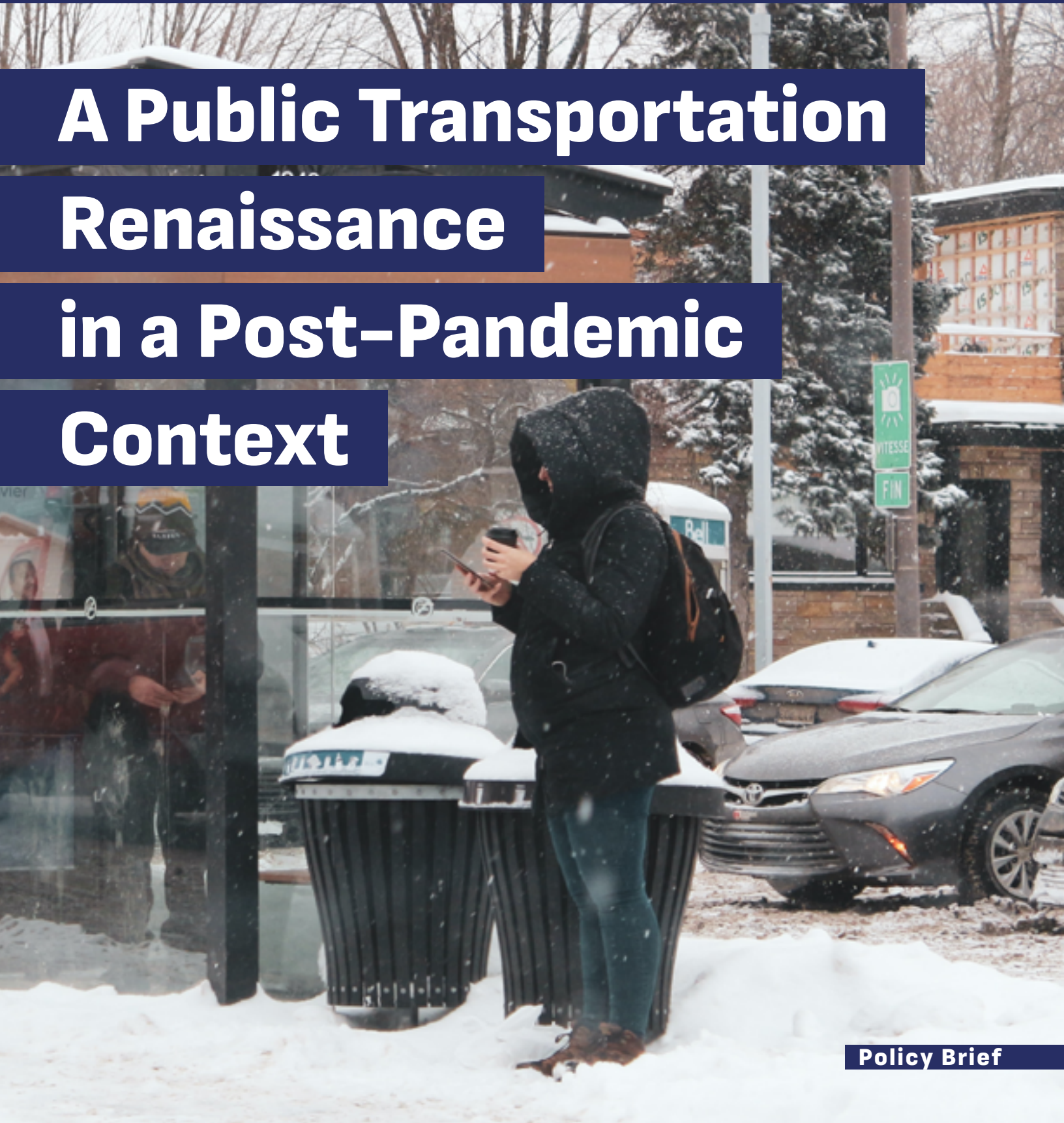


A Public Transportation Renaissance in a Post-Pandemic Context





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CONTEXT

A recent study published in 2021 by the David Suzuki Foundation focused on the perceptions of young adults, in this case CÉGEP students aged from 18 to 25, on public transportation. 95% of respondents believe that public transportation “allows [them] to be more eco-friendly, more space-efficient and [contributes] to reducing road traffic” (Lavolette, 2021, 41). However, 81% of respondents also believe that it is “unreliable, which is preventing [them] from planning [their] trip duration and getting to [their] destination on time” (Lavolette, 2021, 41).

In 2014, another study revealed that only 26% of UQAM students owned a car, as most students rely on public transportation (Lachapelle, 2015, 2). Unfortunately, in Montréal, the *Société de transport de Montréal* (STM) recently announced budget cuts to the tune of 18 million (Magder, 2023; Schué, 2022). In Québec City, 4.3 million bus trips to and from Université Laval were recorded in 2019, demonstrating that public transportation is not only popular in Montréal (Porter, 2020). However, the *Réseau de transport de la capitale* (RTC) is becoming less reliable as buses are more packed and struggle to arrive on time (Gagné, 2020).

CLIMATE CHANGE AND GHG EMISSIONS

Public transportation, of course, is also about combating climate change. In Québec, since 1990, GHG emissions have increased in the transportation sector, despite the fact that their total amount decreased by 17% for regular automobiles. This is partly explained by the massive increase in sales of larger, more polluting cars, such as sport utility vehicles (Bendali, 2022). Nevertheless, a good public transportation system in cities across Québec could, if properly implemented, deter private automobile use and help reduce GHG emissions.

EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic plunged public transportation into chaos, as it drastically reduced the number of users, and therefore revenue, for extended periods of time. Furthermore, as the job market was forced to adapt to a massive uptick in employees working from home, a tendency which persisted even after the pandemic, the STM and RTC, for example, are struggling to regain their pre-pandemic traffic (Ouellette-Vézina, 2022). As of December 2022, the *Association du transport urbain du Québec* estimated that pandemic-related financial losses could total 900 million by 2027 (Ouellette-Vézina, 2022).

A WORK IN PROGRESS

Policies aiming to increase the efficiency of public transportation are underway, while some have recently been implemented. As of June 2020, Québec City made it possible to buy bus tickets through an app called *RTC Nomade* (Lavallée, 2020). By 2024, the *Autorité régionale de transport*

métropolitain is planning to have such a service available in cities like Montréal, Laval, and Joliette (ARTM, 2023). As of February 2023, it is possible to pay for a metro ticket in Montréal via credit or debit card directly through the new turnstile models, while the same concept for buses has been implemented in Laval since 2021 (Pelletier, 2020; Radio-Canada, 2022).

As public transportation modernises in Québec, there certainly are more ways to disincentivise the use of cars in cities. Here are some of them.

U-PASS FOR ALL STUDENTS

A U-Pass, or in French, the *Laissez-Passer Universitaire*, is a popular measure for incentivising students to commute via public transportation. Existing at Québec's Université Laval since 2019, it blew up in popularity with 80% of admissible students getting their hands on one before their fall semester had even started (Radio-Canada, 2019). A U-Pass integrates an additional cost within the mandatory student fees for a given semester. This allows for students to have access to public transportation across relevant areas for one payment per semester, the total sum being cheaper than regular monthly payments. At l'Université Laval, for example, the cost for a U-Pass giving users access to buses from the cities of Québec and Lévis is 147,60\$ per semester while the price for the same access without the U-Pass is 108,25\$ per month (RTC, 2023; ULaval, 2023).

LOW-COST TRANSIT SUBSCRIPTIONS

While the Québec Liberal Party (PLQ) proposed free public transportation for students and seniors during the 2022 provincial elections, the Parti Québécois (PQ) proposed what they called a Passeclimat, which was a 365\$ yearly subscription giving access to all public transportation across Québec (Chouinard, 2022). With the cost of 150\$ set for a current monthly pass in both Montréal and Longueuil, a commuter would save 1435\$ yearly under this policy (La Presse Canadienne, 2022).

Let us now look at a similar policy that was implemented in Germany in the summer of 2022. In the face of high inflation, "[the] German government created the 9-Euro-Ticket as one component of a relief package" (Kirby, 2022). While this measure was only meant as temporary, it turned out to be very popular (Kirby, 2022). Although the success of the 9-Euro ticket has been limited due to its short timeframe, traffic has shown to have decreased in most German cities, more people used public transportation, and car usage has dropped by 3% (Kirby, 2022).

HOW DO WE PAY FOR IT?

We now examine one way to finance these proposals. The Generations Fund was created in 2006 by the Québec government to finance the reduction of Québec's debt. Funds are collected each year from various sources, such as water-power royalties from Hydro-Québec (Ministère des Finances, 2022). As of March 2023, the fund is worth 19.3 billion dollars and is estimated to be worth 37.7

billion in 2027 (La Presse, 2022). In the 2022 provincial election campaign, Québec Solidaire suggested freezing the Generations Fund payments and redirecting them towards fighting climate change and investing in senior care (Lecavalier, 2022).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Making public transportation more affordable and efficient is an excellent way to increase its popularity. Not only would it disincentivise the use of cars, thereby reducing pollution, it would also reduce traffic. As a crucial component of our fight against climate change, reinvigorating our public transportation system can be done through various approaches, including:

- The provincial government collaborates with CÉGEPs and universities across the province to ensure they all offer their students the option of a U-Pass.
- Provide the option of affordable yearly transit subscriptions for all citizens.
- Take inspiration from the 9-Euro German Ticket to conduct a similar experiment in Québec.
- Use the Generations Fund to finance the expansion of Québec's public transportation system.

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