

Technologist

In with the new

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BY DENNIS FURLAN

Long-time public transit commuters to Toronto would have become accustomed to a relatively outdated look, feel, and experience at the downtown Union Station a few years ago. Although the main-floor Great Hall itself is grand and historic, it was in need of some repolishing. The downstairs train concourse seemed frozen in 70s beige tile, the bus terminal was primarily outside and exposed, and even the surrounding urban landscape lacked freshness.

However, a few years ago, commuters would have started noticing some changes. The Great Hall was receiving a renovation facelift. The train concourse has been replaced with a sleek, modern look, and development plans are underway for the surrounding area making the corner of Bay and Front look like it's an integral part of a modern cosmopolitan city.

And the latest chapter in all that redevelopment is the recent opening of the spanking brand new Union Station Bus Terminal that sits in a new location and new building on the northeast corner of Bay Street and Lake Shore Boulevard, south of Front Street.

Scott Money is a media relations senior advisor with Metrolinx, the agency responsible for public transit in Ontario and building the terminal in partnership with Ivanhoé Cambridge, a real estate company, and Hines, a real estate investment firm.

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ION STATION BUS TERMINAL



A time for something bigger and better

Money explains the thinking behind the new facility: “The old bus terminal, which opened in 2003, had simply run out of capacity. It was too small to handle the continued growth in Go Transit bus services, and it left commuters exposed to the weather. We needed something bigger and better, and that’s certainly something I think that’s been achieved with this new Union Station Bus Terminal.”

In fact, the new bus station is so much more expansive, and has brought in so many new commuter-friendly features that it’s being compared to airports. Money says, “Tradition-

ally, a bus station is usually a place where a person could go to the washroom, then sit and wait for the bus. But, because Go Transit bus passengers have developed such loyalty to the service, they deserved much better than that.”

As a result, the new terminal contains various features designed to enhance the passenger experience. One of the first things commuters would notice is the terminal’s size - 23,000 square feet occupying two floors. However, it’s not just the size. The entire experience has changed.

Nitish Bissonauth is an issues specialist with Metrolinx, and he explains some of these changes. ➤



Comfort and safety

The new terminal is also much more comfortable than the old one. The entire facility is indoors, including the bus platforms, so passengers don't have to navigate rain or sleet to get on or off. Still, the waiting areas are also fully climate-controlled and include Wi-Fi service. Bissonauth says, "The feedback we've been getting has been very positive. For many, experiencing this new terminal is a bit of a ray of sunshine during a time when the pandemic and lockdowns have been a challenge."

However, Money is quick to point out that, despite all these impressive new features in the terminal, the primary objective has always been about safety first. He explains: "To begin with, it was very important that passengers can board and depart the buses safely. There are glass gate doors that only allow passengers in and out once a bus is ready for deboarding and then boarding."

Furthermore, the new Union Station Bus Terminal is designed for the current realities of pandemic life. Money says, "There's no shortage of safety precautions in this new facility. There are seat dividers on the buses and trains to prevent the spread of germs and shields between drivers and passengers; hand sanitizer on all buses and stations, and the buses and ticket booths are now cashless."

Money continues, "There are also added PPE waste disposal accommodations on the buses, mandatory face coverings for customers and staff on GO and UP Express services, and cleaning has been thoroughly enhanced in all stations, buses and trains. No effort has been spared to protect the safety of our customers during this pandemic."

However, the improvements to Union Station and surrounding areas—a project that involved various government levels and developers—is not only because of the new bus terminal. The result has been the past, current, and ongoing transformation of a historic block in Canada's largest city.

A source of pride

The Great Hall has undergone renovations that have preserved the iconic look of the main ground-floor Union Station structure. The old Bay train concourse is now being replaced and the new York concourse has been built. Its design is in line with the modernized bus terminal, accessible from within and without the various terminals. It is connected to the larger CIBC Square development that includes two office towers on Bay Street.

Money says, "I really think the readers of *The Ontario Technologist* should go down to Union Station just to take a look. It's truly something to behold and represents a significant improvement from what they might have been used to in the past. It looks great. The accommodations for passengers are terrific, and amenities such as restaurants are first-rate. And the upgrades are still ongoing. I think the improved Union Station and surrounding development is something we can all be proud of." ☰

Dennis Furlan is a contributor with The Ontario Technologist.

He says, "There are 69 departure boards across the terminal, and it's important passengers check them because the platform model is different. Previously, the same bus routes always departed from the same platforms. Now, a dynamic system is being used that assigns buses to different platforms to avoid backlogs and delays. So, passengers need to get used to checking those boards."

Yet even the word platform seems a bit dated to describe this new terminal, which is why, just like an airport, the terms zones and gates are now in common use. But it's not the result of a flip use of terminology. These areas represent a fundamental change in the way passengers navigate the bus terminal.

Money says, "The new system incorporates a two-stage departure process. There are zones, and the gates are within those zones. The customers are first directed to a zone, and then the gate information is shown on the boards and announced via the PA system about ten minutes before boarding. It's certainly different from before, but also much more efficient."