

# Reader's Corner

## **James Wilt, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Cars? Public Transit in the Age of Google, Uber, and Elon Musk*, (Toronto: *Between the Lines*, 2020), 293 pp.**

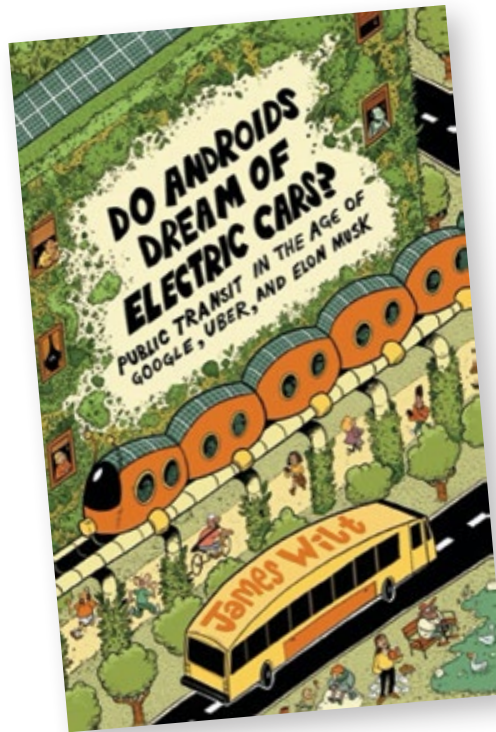
By Joanna Skrajny

James Wilt provides a compelling and well-researched case for phasing out all personal vehicle use and focusing our resources instead on publicly owned transit systems. Even in cities such as Calgary and Edmonton, notorious for their sprawl and love of the automobile, Wilt demonstrates that good public transit is both achievable and desirable.

Public transit has suffered the fate of many of our public services, where transit planners have been dealt with successive cuts to their budgets while being forced to justify the expansion of bus routes or service based on ridership figures. [You can see a similar issue currently plaguing Alberta's parks system, where parks have been removed in the name of "cost savings".] In reality, the addition of one single bus route often isn't enough to convince people to give up their cars. Wilt points to the work of Jarrett Walker, who has identified seven criteria that need to be met before riders will rely on public transportation:

- *It takes me where I want to go.*
- *It takes me when I want to go.*
- *It is a good use of my money.*
- *It respects me in the level of safety, comfort, and amenity it provides,*
- *I can trust it.*
- *It gives me freedom to change my plans.*

My story is one I assume rings true for a number of people. I began to drive out of necessity once I entered university, in order to cut my commute from 90 minutes by public transit to 30 minutes by car. Wilt explains this is often the case for many people, where we essentially have been forced into car ownership (willing or not) based



on a choice that balances convenience with financial and time costs.

Automobile companies, on the other hand, have been working for decades to successfully lobby cities to be car friendly. As a result, our cities have become large, sprawled, and concrete-filled. In turn, we have become increasingly isolated as individual transportation became king.

With the rise of electric vehicles, many of us (including myself) believed they would be a solution to Calgary's sprawl and GHG emissions problems. Wilt explains that this is where the book truly sings, effectively dismantling many of the assumptions made about personal electric vehicles and bringing to light troubling aspects about ride-sharing companies such as Uber.

Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of transportation – including impacts on climate and environment, rural areas, social justice, and safety. Wilt tackles each issue by bringing up the very real problems with the North American transit system as it currently operates and the concerns with relying on ride-sharing companies and a transition to

electric vehicles as a solution to our problems. He then finishes each chapter by suggesting changes to our public transit systems so that they are both good for the environment and our communities.

As the world grapples with a pandemic, there is a legitimate concern that cities will abandon funding public transit as people increasingly travel by vehicle. However, I believe that we should not only retain, but significantly invest in public transit in Alberta.

Such investment would reduce the number of roads required and slow the expansion of our cities into native grasslands and wetlands, environments providing immeasurable ecosystem services and benefits. It would help our cities meet their climate targets by significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution. Denser, transit-friendly cities are also more climate resilient and are also accessible to pedestrians and cyclists. One positive outcome of this crisis is that shelter-in-place orders have helped the general public foster a greater appreciation for walkable and bike-friendly cities with plenty of nature. Transit access into our provincial and national parks would provide more accessibility to wilderness for those without access to a personal vehicle.

Climate change isn't going to go away and, unfortunately, we are likely in an era where overlapping crises are going to become more common. Let's create a future where we are more prepared for what's to come.