

This following article is also featured on VO1SS SFU - during my first year of university, I was fortunate enough to interview the co-founder of *Build the SFU Gondola* which has mobilized the mission to enhance public transportation for SFU's students. Here, I ask him questions about his project, why it is meaningful to him and to others, and as a SFU prospective graduate at the time, his future plans once he graduates from SFU in Spring 2020.

COLIN FOWLER: THE GONDOLA GUY SFU'S ONE AND ONLY

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Bio: Who is Colin Fowler?

"I really enjoy the experience of delving deep into SFU policies and administrative work."

A fifth year Economics major at Simon Fraser University, Colin Fowler is the co-founder of *Build The SFU Gondola*, along with Daryl De La Cruz. Aside from his most popular identity as the 'Gondola Guy', Colin also loves the challenging role of being a dedicated member of the student Senate.

What is “build the SFU gondola”? When did it start?

“We are a student run, non-profit advocacy group,” described Colin.

This group is not run by other honorary students, but is promoted by other students on campus. Colin discussed how they are hoping to get the gondola built between Production-Way University station and the SFU Burnaby Campus.

Colin explained how currently, this project is nearly 12 years in the making! He mentioned:

“A research intern for the University/SFU community trust established a business case for the gondola back in 2008. The university themselves studied it in 2009, and then Translink put out their first business case in 2011, and then they finally did a feasibility study in 2018.”

The viability of the project was actually assessed in 2011, but it was reconfirmed in 2018.

Fun Fact:

One day, Colin felt so passionate about the gondola that he wanted to make a ‘Gondola Group’ on Facebook after encouragement from his co-ed fraternity, Alpha Kappa Psi. He said the bulk of the group’s success was simply aggregated through sharing and spreading the word across the internet and the SFU community.

“Last February, it took off again with more inclement weather and snow cancellations which is quite frankly, incredibly vital for the public.”

The idea began when Colin was unfortunately stuck in a snowstorm that took him three hours to get home. It is safe to say that many SFU students, especially those on the Burnaby campus, can relate to this ongoing issue. Colin, along with many other individuals, knew about the proposal to build the gondola before the Facebook group even began, but he was upset that there was no one who had done anything to initiate the project or even had the resource to get it developed. Nevertheless, this was the moment that he knew the gondola needed to be built.

What are the key features of this Gondola? What about the system do you want students to know?

“It is a 35-person capacity cabin that comes every 34 seconds. Essentially what you get is a system that is able to transport roughly double the number of students that we can carry on the 145 right now within a given hour. In addition, travel time is reduced to six minutes”

Colin believes it is a major improvement to transit and expressed that running any more busses would be impractical. Moreover, he stated that it will not require large hikes in the U-Pass fees; it is solely a transit project with the help of government funding. He wants everyone to know that everybody is welcome to use this gondola!

“The transLink already planned for an 18-month construction period, so I’m hoping 2024 for an official opening date”

Furthermore, Colin answered the frequently asked question: When will the Gondola be built?

So yes, most students currently attending SFU will have graduated by then. However, luckily for the majority, that is one less noisy construction to avoid! Although, to reiterate, the positive side of the project is that it is both revolutionary for commuters, but also a service that will be available to the public. This is an incentive for current and future alumni to revisit the campus once it’s been built.

By now we’ve talked about all the advantages of the SFU gondola, but what are the disadvantages? I.e., how can it potentially have a negative impact on public transit?

“Some people have expressed that their exams will no longer be cancelled last minute because of snow days”

As any student would understand, a perk relying on public transit as a method of transportation is that it can save them having to take an exam they have been dreading! For some students, school cancellations can be a bonus that will allow an extra day of study or some time to relax.

“Another disadvantage of the gondola would have to be the issue of gathering federal and provincial funding together.”

Unfortunately, students still have to wait a little longer to see the final outcome, but the important thing is that we are very close to having the gondola built! Even though it will still take some time, Colin emphasizes that, *“We are already over capacity for the busses, and with time, it’s only going to get worse”*. At this point in time, building the gondola is the most viable option the University can provide for its many commuters. Essentially, this is a project that is integral for the school and our community.

After successfully completing this project, what do you hope to do in the future? Will we see more upcoming projects created by you?

“So, this is my last semester ... I’m not sure how much time i’ll have left to spend [on this project] moving forward, but I’m sure there’s still lots of student support that can drive this over the finish line and get it built – I’m not necessarily the person to have a massive game plan for the next transit project but I’m the type of person to look at things and say: Is there a way that I can help out? And if the answer I believe is yes, then I will do it. I am, however, very excited to see more expansions like the Port Coquitlam SkyTrain expansion and the North Shore expansion.”

Colin's graduation is nearing the end of this semester. Thus, this may be the last time we see the face of Colin in our community. However, he will continue to remain involved in the project. As aforementioned, he is quite the problem solver. He will always finish what he starts, which means that he will complete his mission of getting the gondola built. This also alludes to his interest in transit affairs and is looking forward to other British Columbia transit expansions in different regions as an embodiment of innovation in the area.



What are your plans after graduating?

"I'm an undergraduate student, and I actually haven't done any co-op since I didn't want to study for any longer. My plan is to go straight into the workforce after I complete my undergrad which is fairly soon. I am actually looking into real estate development and I'm hoping to acquire one of those positions."

To keep it simple, Colin's plan is to purely work after graduation. He is hoping to contribute to more volunteer work for the community and does not plan on leaving the gondola project either once he's done at Simon Fraser University! Also as previously indicated, he aims to continue assisting with anything that can be done to help with the gondola.

Do you think this gondola will make a big difference not only in your life, but in others as well? How?

"I already get recognized about once a week as the Gondola Guy. So, it has been interesting and it's a good way to get face time with the students – to really talk to them about it and understand how they feel towards the gondola. In terms of changing my life, I mean, I live a pretty low-key life and I never expected to become some 'figurehead'. This too, is definitely a big improvement in service. People would be less afraid of waiting at the bus stop alone, especially during the evening. Even for the region, having a successful gondola system would make a huge difference"

He feels as if he dedicated an insane amount of time into the Gondola project, and at the end of the day, the recognition isn't as rewarding as witnessing others adopt his initiative to get the Gondola started. Someday, Colin hopes to notice the visible difference and the great impact within the community that the gondola will bring about.