

Metro Transit Strategic Operations Plan

February 2010

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: If the plan is adopted in principle, does that mean the routes changes it contains are set in stone?

A: The Plan should be considered a roadmap rather than a blueprint for what the future transit network will look like in HRM. The route changes suggested in the Plan are simply recommendations from the consultant. It is standard practice that not all changes in a Plan such as this will ever be implemented. It is the responsibility of staff to bring forward the changes that provide the greatest benefit to HRM residents for consideration by Council through the annual budget process. By adopting the Plan in principle, Council is not giving approval to individual route changes. Route changes will be brought forward to Council every year during the budget process in the form of an Annual Service Plan.

Q: What are the financial details/financial plan?

A: A financial plan for the items proposed in the Plan is included in Chapter 7. However, the financial details for any items with budgetary implications will be brought forward each year through the budget process. Approval of the Plan in principle does not mean that any funding/financial commitments are being made.

Q: Are all financial options being considered?

A: The financial options presented in the Plan are simply that, options. They were included to provide Regional Council with information on potential funding mechanisms outside those typically used: fares, advertising revenue, and property tax. Most of these potential funding mechanisms are outside the control of Regional Council and would therefore require cooperation on the part of the Province. In the end, it is a decision for Council how to fund Metro Transit and whether to pursue alternative funding arrangements or maintain the status quo.

Q: Why is our cost recovery so much lower than it used to be?

A: Metro Transit's current cost recovery is within industry averages. A high cost recovery is an indicator that a system does not provide a high enough level of service, particularly off-peak service. The cost recovery has been reduced in recent years due to aggressive service increases that have resulted in significant ridership gains.

Q: Why do we have to raise fares on a regular basis?

Currently, Metro Transit revenue comes from fares, advertising revenue, and property taxes. In order to implement the service increases requested by Regional Council, revenue must also be increased. Also, like any good or service, the cost to provide transit service increases every year with inflation, requiring increased revenue to provide the same service.

Advertising revenue is a relatively static funding source, so the remainder of funding must come from either an increase in fares, or an increase in property tax, unless Regional Council were to pursue alternative funding options with the Province.

Q: How many routes enter the Peninsula from other areas of HRM, could some of these incoming routes serve as a shuttle?

A: There are currently 36 routes that serve the Peninsula from areas outside the Peninsula. Many of these routes already serve a circulation/shuttle function within Downtown and the Peninsula, as they provide service to areas other than Scotia Square. For example, many routes from outside the Peninsula serve Scotia Square, then proceed to Spring Garden Road and either the Hospitals/Universities. As a result, frequent service is already provided between major destinations on the Peninsula.

Q: Why doesn't the plan recommend implementing the Downtown Shuttle?

A: With the service improvements recommended for the Peninsula and Downtown, implementing the Downtown Shuttle would provide an unnecessary additional layer of service to an area that is already the most heavily served in HRM. Most communities that implement a Downtown Shuttle do so to meet a specific capacity demand that is not being serviced by the rest of the transit system. No such capacity deficiency exists in Downtown Halifax; the current high level of service and proposed increases supply sufficient service to meet the demand. Also, service changes are proposed to serve some of the connections (i.e. Ferry Terminal to Hospitals) that are currently not served without a walking connection. The goals of the Downtown Shuttle can be met more effectively and efficiently at this time with changes to the existing service.

Q: Does the plan propose that Barrington and Spring Garden Road be closed to all traffic except buses?

No. The plan does suggest these as concepts, but are included mainly as an example of the type of tough decisions that will have to be made in the future if HRM is to meet the modal split targets laid out in the Regional Plan and to spark discussion. They are also listed as potential transit priority measures in a chart on pages 121-122, but the chart simply lists items that are recommended for further consideration/study for feasibility prior to implementation.

Q: Why are levels of service in urban areas different than in rural areas?

A: The level of transit service any given area receives is primarily a factor of demand. The biggest factors that create demand are population and employment density. Those areas with high demand warrant, and typically receive, a higher level of service. Those areas with a low demand for service receive a lower level of service or if the demand is too low, no service at all. This is why urban areas generally have more service than rural areas (which typically feature very low population densities), the same way Downtown has more service than suburban areas.

While it is understandable that most areas of HRM desire the highest levels of transit service, there are finite resources available to deliver such service. Therefore, service levels are adjusted based on demand so that the greatest number of residents benefit from targeted service improvements.

Q: Where are the rural components of the plan?

A: Detailed planning for MetroX and local rural transit were not part of the scope for this Plan. MetroX implementation details will be brought forward as part of future capital budgets. Staff will be preparing a report to Council on options for local rural service

Q: What are the plans for the ferry service?

A: Future capital budget plans will bring forward information on funding for a fourth conventional ferry, which would be assigned to the Woodside route. "Fast Ferry" plans will be brought forward through a business case for the HarbourLink project as well as through a comparative analysis of MetroLink and Ferry options for Bedford.

Q: What about light rail?

A: It is important to differentiate between Light Rail and Commuter Rail. Light rail is typically a rail system that operates wholly or partially within a public roadway and uses rail cars with a "light" capacity relative to commuter rail or subway systems. Streetcars in Toronto or the C-Train in Calgary are examples of Light Rail. Commuter Rail is a heavy rail system operating on fully segregated tracks such as the GO Train operation in Toronto.

Previous studies in HRM have examined options for Commuter Rail on the existing CN tracks through Bedford and beyond. Light rail has not been examined in this regard and cannot legally be operated on active freight tracks such as the CN tracks through Bedford.

Light Rail is proposed in the Strategic Operations Plan as a long term initiative, not to be considered within the five-year scope of this plan, but potentially feasible in the 10-15 range, subject to extensive study and analysis.

Staff are currently investigating Commuter Rail transit options and will be bringing a report forward to Council in the future.

Q: What sustainable, "greener" initiatives is Metro Transit undertaking?

A: Transit is one of the most sustainable, "green" transportation alternatives available. Metro Transit is further enhancing our sustainable nature by continuing to purchase fuel efficient, clean diesel buses. New buses are required to meet 2010 emissions standards. These buses emit approximately 1/60th the emissions of an older bus manufactured in 1988.

All new buses purchased by Metro Transit are equipped with onboard bicycle racks. Work is currently underway to retrofit the entire Metro Transit fleet with onboard bicycle racks.

Also, a continued focus on high ridership services designed to increase transit's overall modal split in HRM will help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in HRM.

The new Ragged Lake Transit Centre is being built to a LEED Silver standard, demonstrating Metro Transit's commitment to green solutions. Future transit terminal buildings will also be built to a LEED Silver Standard at minimum.

Q: Why does Metro Transit use a timed transfer system? Is Metro Transit losing a lot of revenue because of this?

A: It is standard industry practice to offer time-based transfers to passengers. This has been shown to actually increase ridership since people who are only making a short trip can do so on a single fare rather than two fares. Many of these people would have previously not made the trip by transit as the cost was not competitive with other modes of transportation. Use of a transfer in this manner does not constitute fare evasion. Most transit providers have found that moving to a time-based transfer system is actually revenue-neutral since the increase in new trips balances the fact that some people are paying one fare instead of two.

Further, the introduction of a time based transfer has been a significant improvement for the safety of our Operators. A simpler transfer system results in far fewer disputes over transfers, which is often a key contributing factor in Operator assault incidents.

Q: How does the Plan deal with Accessibility? What else is Metro Transit doing to improve Accessibility?

A: The Plan speaks to improving accessibility through increasing accessible infrastructure at bus stops and terminals, purchasing additional accessible low floor buses, and increasing the number of routes providing accessible service.

Metro Transit is currently undertaking an overall review of the Access-a-Bus system. Further, staff is putting forward a capital budget request for the 2010-11 fiscal year to conduct a study of overall accessibility in the Metro Transit system, which will guide future decisions surrounding accessibility, including items such as stop annunciation.

Q: What options are there for providing increased amenities at transit terminals?

A: Metro Transit's newest terminal facilities (Portland Hills and Sackville Terminals) feature improved security, enclosed waiting areas, bicycle amenities etc in order to provide a more attractive place for passengers to wait for their buses. Pending budget availability, Metro Transit plans to continue in this theme when building new facilities, while at the same time matching passenger amenities (and costs for those amenities) to the requirements of the terminal and volume of passengers using the terminal.

Q: Is there a transit service expansion planned in Burnside?

A: Yes, the plan recommends an overall reorganization of service in the Burnside/Dartmouth Crossing area. This reorganization will improve overall service while balancing the service supply with the potential demand in these areas.

Q: Why do I see empty buses driving around?

A: There are many reasons why an empty bus may be seen during peak hours. A bus could be "deadheading" out of service to begin its next in-service trip. Also, routes typically have sections that are busier than others, so while a bus may be empty at a given time, it may be full 10 minutes later. Due to the settlement/employment pattern in HRM, some buses operate full in the peak direction and virtually empty in the opposite direction, such as the recently introduced MetroX service to Tantallon. Without more employment at the typically residential ends of the routes, this is unavoidable.

Q: Can we use smaller buses?

A: The Plan does recommend the use of a limited number of smaller buses on some routes. This recommendation requires further analysis by staff to determine if it is feasible. In order to be able to use a smaller bus, all trips that bus is assigned to in a given day must be low ridership trips. Most Metro Transit routes carry too many people at peak hours for this to be feasible.