

HALIFAX

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Item No. 9.1.1
Halifax Regional Council
June 23, 2020

TO: Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY: Original Signed by 
Jacques Dubé, Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: March 11, 2020

SUBJECT: **Free Transit on Election Days**

ORIGIN

On October 22, 2019, Regional Council approved a motion requesting the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to prepare a staff report on the possibility of providing free public transit on Municipal, Provincial, and Federal election days. Starting from the time polling stations open, ending at the scheduled time polling stations close. The staff report should consider:

- The financial and service impacts on Halifax Transit
- Potential partnerships with the Provincial and Federal government or other stakeholders; including non-profits, community groups, etc.
- Jurisdictional scan of other municipalities that have offered free public transit on election days
- The potential of HRM creating a “how to get to your polling station” campaign for Halifax Transit

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipality Charter, 2008, c. 39, section 102 allows Council, by by-law, to prescribe charges for the provision of services for persons who use or benefit from the service, on a basis to be set out in the by-law.

Halifax Regional Municipality Charter, 2008, c. 39, subsection 69(1) enables the Municipality to provide a public transportation service, and clause 79A(1)(a) the Municipality may only spend money for municipal purposes if the expenditure is included in the Municipality's operating budget or capital budget or is otherwise authorized by the Municipality.

By-law U-100, the *User Charges By-law*, Schedule 1, clause 4(1)(b) Council, by resolution, or the CAO, may waive any user charge under this schedule where, in the opinion of Council or the CAO, such a waiver would be beneficial to the Municipality.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Halifax Regional Council continue with the current practice of not offering free transit on election days.

BACKGROUND

On June 21, 2016 Halifax Regional Council received an information report on the impact of providing free transit for the October 2016 municipal election. Council did not move to implement free transit for the 2016 election.

The following provides background on the methods of voting within HRM and recent turnout in Municipal, Provincial, and Federal elections to contextualize the options and inform the relative costs and benefits of providing free transit on election days.

Municipal Elections – Voting Methods and Turnout

Since 2008, residents have been able to vote in municipal elections by way of telephone, internet, and in-person. As well, in the most recent municipal election, voters were able to cast their vote on two days of advanced polling. Overall voter turnout in the 2012 municipal election was 37%. Of the roughly 110,000 votes cast, the majority (59%) were cast through alternative methods or advanced polling, with approximately 41% or 45,000 residents voting in-person on election day. Turnout in the 2016 municipal election was approximately 32%. Approximately 65% of those who voted in the election did so using alternative methods or advanced polling, with the remaining 35% or roughly 32,000 residents voting in-person on the day of the election. Despite efforts to increase voter turnout, the last municipal election saw a decline in participation, but an increase in the use of alternative methods or advanced polling. Although there is a shift to alternative methods and advanced polling, voting in-person on election day is still an option chosen by many and reflected in the recent direction provided by Regional Council¹ for the upcoming 2020 municipal election.

Provincial and Federal Elections – Voting Methods and Turnout

Eligible voters in both Provincial and Federal elections can cast their vote at advanced polls, at returning offices, by mail, and in-person at polling stations. Overall voter turnout for the past few Provincial elections has been higher than Municipal elections, with participation rates between 54% and 60%, but the rate has been declining since 2003. Conversely, turnout for Federal elections in Nova Scotia have been on the rise since 2008 with rates between 62% and 70%. The breakdown of in-person votes on election day for recent Provincial and Federal elections was not available for HRM. However, there is a general trend of more voters shifting towards advanced polling in both Provincial² and Federal³ elections.

DISCUSSION

The provision of free transit service on election days is often positioned as a tactic to increase voter turnout. This approach is predicated on the notion that improving access to polling stations will increase turnout, but it must also be recognized that polling stations are typically placed in high traffic areas and often strategically located to be accessible to the greatest number of residents.

Within HRM, not all polling stations are able to be served by transit. Of the 69 total polling stations in the 2016 municipal election, 49 were considered to be served by transit (Attachment A)⁴. Data on the location of polling stations within HRM from the past Provincial and Federal elections were not available. However, polling divisions for these elections are typically smaller than those of Municipal elections, which suggests these polling stations are likely more accessible by walking or rolling and thus less dependent on vehicle travel (e.g. car or bus).

¹ Halifax Regional Council Special Meeting April 14, 2020. Available at <https://www.halifax.ca/sites/default/files/documents/city-hall/regional-council/200414rc-DraftMins.pdf>

² Elections Nova Scotia (2017) "The Report of the Chief Electoral Officer on the Proceedings of the 40th Provincial General Election Volume I, Statement of Votes & Statistics." Available at https://electionsnovascotia.ca/sites/default/files/2017_SOVvolume1.pdf (Accessed: April 2, 2020)

³ Retrospective Report on the 42nd General Election of October 19, 2015. Available at <https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=rec/eval/pes2015/ege&document=p1&lang=e#a3> (Accessed: April 2, 2020)

⁴ Where a polling station is within 500m of a transit stop

Methods

There are a variety of methods to provide transit free service on election days. The options vary in complexity and financial impact. Common methods of free service provision include:

- Free service all day;
- Free service while polls are open;
- Voter identification card in lieu of fare⁵; and
- Free one-day pass obtained by download or pickup at municipal facility.

Jurisdictional Scan

A jurisdictional scan was completed amongst comparable municipalities and transit agencies. The results of this scan are provided in Table 1. Based on this scan, the majority of comparable municipalities and transit agencies have not provided free transit on election days. Of those that did provide free transit, they were not able to determine if the free service had a positive impact on voter turnout.

Table 1: Jurisdictional Scan of Comparable Municipalities / Transit Agencies

Municipality / Agency	Method	Impact on Voter Turnout
Regina & Saskatoon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free one-day pass obtained by download or pickup at municipal facility for Municipal, Provincial and Federal elections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No noticeable impact on voter turnout
Windsor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voter information card required for free travel via transit for Municipal, Provincial and Federal elections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unknown
BC Transit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13 systems offered free all-day service for the 2019 Federal election⁶ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unknown
Other (Brampton, Hamilton, Niagara, London, and the Region of Waterloo)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not provide free service on election days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A

Financial Impact and Service Implications

The following table compares the options for providing free transit service on election days, the potential revenue impact, and the relative advantages and disadvantages of each option. Note the financial impact for options 3 and 4 are based on votes cast on election day from the past two Municipal elections. Data on Provincial and Federal election turnout on election day with the municipality were not available. Given that Provincial and Federal election voter turnout is higher than Municipal elections, the revenue impact would likely be higher than what is estimated in Table 2.

Table 2: Comparison of Options

⁵ Voter identification cards are mailed to registered voters. This method would enable voters to present their card on election and receive a transfer to complete their return trip free of charge.

⁶ Some municipalities / agencies only provided free transit on specific routes. Victoria did not provide free service.

Option	Potential Revenue Impact (per election) ⁷	Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Free service all day	\$9,000 to \$42,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple to message and communicate to users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Largest potential revenue impact
2. Free service while polling stations are open	\$7,000 to \$33,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More cost-effective than option 1, but still represents a much higher revenue impact than other options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time restrictions may be more difficult to communicate and manage Moderate revenue impact
3. Voter information card in lieu of fare	\$5,000 to \$7,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduces a financial and transportation barrier to voting for all residents Simple to message and communicate to users Limited staff resources required Does not promote free trips for non-election related purposes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some potential voters who recently moved or those who were not previously on the voter registration list may not receive a voter information card, thus precluding them from accessing free transit service Some eligible voters who do not have a permanent address do not receive voter information cards and thus not be able to take advantage of the free service
4. Free one-day pass	\$10,000 to \$14,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduces a financial and transportation barrier to voting for all residents Available to all eligible voters, including those that may not receive a voter information card Modest revenue impact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Residents without internet access, a mobile device and/or access to a printer would have to visit an election day pass pickup location Staff resources would be required to develop and promote the program Non-voters could exploit the intent of the one-day pass program

As noted above, since not all polling stations are served by transit, most polling stations are accessible within a short distance from most residents, and the fact that there is a declining trend of voters casting their vote on election day, it is unlikely that free transit would increase voter turnout in HRM. Thus, staff do not recommend providing free transit on election days. Additionally, to address equity concerns, the Municipality continues to deliver programs to provide transit access through the Low Income Transit Pass Program and a partnership with the Department of Community Services to provide passes to vulnerable residents for whom the cost of transportation may serve a barrier to voting.

Potential Partnerships

The jurisdictional scan determined that those comparable municipalities and transit agencies which did provide free transit service on election days did not receive any financial support from the Provincial or Federal governments to subsidize the cost of providing the service. Thus, it is likely that the cost of providing free transit service would have to be absorbed by the Municipality.

⁷ The ranges for the potential revenue impact reflect the difference between a weekday and weekend election as weekday and weekend ticket and cash fare revenue vary substantially.

Transit Polling Station Campaign

Halifax Transit could develop a “how to get to your polling station” campaign, however staff recommend integrating a campaign with ongoing efforts to increase voter turnout would be more effective. Halifax Transit can collaborate with the Election Team and the Office of Diversity & Inclusion on how best to support efforts focused on increasing voter turnout.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The are no financial implications associated with the recommendation.

RISK CONSIDERATION

There are no risks associated with the recommendation.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

There was no community engagement associated with this report.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no environmental implications associated with this report.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative A (Option 4):

Regional Council could choose to proceed with Option 4, to allowing all eligible voters that could access their polling station using transit to do so, regardless of whether they receive a voter information card. This option would reduce a financial and transportation barrier to voting for all residents and limit the impact to revenues, but, like the other options, is unlikely to increase voter turnout.

Alternative B (Option 3):

Regional Council could alternatively choose to adopt the use of voter information cards as fare on election days for Municipal, Provincial, and Federal elections. As described in the discussion section above, this alternative would not provide the same level of access as Option 4 and is also unlikely to increase voter turnout.

Alternative C (Option 1 or 2):

Regional Council could choose to waive all fares for transit on election days or alternatively only while polling stations are open (generally 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM). As described in the discussion section above, this alternative is not recommended as waiving all fares is unlikely to have a significant impact on voter turnout and would represent a large revenue impact.

The alternatives listed above would require resources to develop and promote a free transit program. However, the resource requirement would be minimal and could be absorbed by the annual operating budget.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A - 2016 Municipal Election Polling Stations Serviced by 2020 Transit Routes

A copy of this report can be obtained online at halifax.ca or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210.

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2016 Polling Stations Serviced by 2020 Routes

