

TO: Chair and Members of Transportation Standing Committee

SUBMITTED BY: Original Signed

Dave Reage, Director, Halifax Transit

DATE: April 13, 2017

SUBJECT: Halifax Transit Access-A-Bus Strategic Review

ORIGIN

This report originates from the:

- 1) December 9, 2015 meeting of the Committee of the Whole, when it was moved by Councillor Craig “that the Committee of the Whole direct staff to include in the proposed HRM 2016-17 budget and business plan documents, options for expansion and increased flexibility of door-to-door paratransit service for persons who are unable to use the conventional transit system. Consideration is to be given to not tying service to conventional routes and their timetables, and expanding capacity and service through partnerships”;
- 2) March 24, 2016 meeting of the Transportation Standing Committee, when Halifax Transit presented intentions to conduct a strategic review of the Access-A-Bus paratransit service; and
- 3) April 1, 2016 meeting of Halifax Regional Council, when Council directed staff to develop an Expression of Interest (EOI) to explore the viability of partnerships to support the Halifax Transit Access-A-Bus service.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Section 69(1) of the *Halifax Regional Municipality Charter* provides that “the Municipality may provide a public transportation service ...”

Section 79(1)(o) of the *Halifax Regional Municipality Charter* provides that “The Council may expend money required by the Municipality for ... public transportation services”.

Section 6 of the Terms of Reference for the Transportation Standing Committee provides that “The Transportation Standing Committee shall ... (a) review and oversee policy direction and long term funding approach to promote and encourage Transit alternatives as outlined in the Regional Plan”.

Recommendation on page 2.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Transportation Standing Committee recommend that Halifax Regional Council:

- 1) Reconfirm the temporal and geographic restrictions on the delivery of paratransit service approved by Council in 2010 as a baseline for future planning;
- 2) Direct Halifax Transit to propose revisions to the current set of Eligibility Criteria for use of the Access-A-Bus service with the aim of restricting eligibility to those who cannot use the conventional transit service; and
- 3) Direct Halifax Transit to continue charging registered Access-A-Bus users standard rates to ride the conventional transit system.

BACKGROUND

The Halifax Transit Access-A-Bus service is a shared ride, door-to-door, paratransit service for persons who are unable to use the conventional transit system due to physical or cognitive disabilities and are declared eligible through a registration process. In recent years, increased demand for the service has pressured the traditional model for supply, and suggestions to address demand pressures have been discussed by both the Transportation Standing Committee and Halifax Regional Council.

In response to questions and proposals on discrete initiatives intended to make incremental improvements to the service, Halifax Transit initiated a strategic review of the Access-A-Bus service that will include an innovative, multi-faceted and synergistic approach. While the review is not yet complete and the resultant tasks will require time and effort to implement, this report is intended to seek decisions on some recommendations and update the Committee on overall progress.

DISCUSSION

The Halifax Transit Access-A-Bus Strategic Review was established with the following objectives:

1. Research and consider service model options for the delivery of paratransit service;
2. Review and update service standards to support a more predictable model for service supply;
3. Review and update supporting technologies and technology options to improve customer interfaces and the scheduling/dispatching of paratransit work; and
4. Review and update service related registration rules and administrative procedures to ensure that reliable paratransit service is available to those who are most in need, with the shortest possible reservation window for advanced booking of travel support.

Work on the strategic review of the Access-A-Bus service has been in progress since the summer of 2016. The following paragraphs summarize the major issues and progress to date.

Use of Accessible Modes of Transportation to Support Access-A-Bus

Halifax Regional Council directed staff to develop an Expression of Interest (EOI) to explore the viability of partnerships with accessible transportation providers to support the Halifax Transit Access-A-Bus service.

Staff met with accessible transportation providers to gather feedback on approach, and issued EOI E16-069 in May 2016 to determine:

1. Existing and planned accessible resources (staff and vehicles);
2. Service coverage, hours of availability and schedules;
3. Industry perspectives on potential models for support for the Halifax Transit operation and pricing;
4. Challenges experienced with operating accessible units to date;
5. Challenges experienced with the training and conduct of accessible vehicle drivers; and
6. A detailed assessment of known risks and associated strategies for mitigation.

The responses received related industry conditions including concerns around the relatively high cost of procuring and operating accessible taxis, and challenges related to training/skills maintenance with a transient workforce. Of note, the number of accessible taxis serving HRM continues to decline and those in service are owned and operated by individual drivers; this situation would require Halifax Transit to contract for accessible taxi services with numerous individual service operators instead of single corporate entities, and it reduces the potential for efficient, effective and sustainable partnerships. Further, Halifax Transit would be required train and monitor customer service standards across a workforce that is not directly employed by the Municipality.

At the time of writing, a discreet initiative to augment the Access-A-Bus service would not be beneficial relative to the challenges. That stated, as a healthy accessible taxi industry would have great utility in either a dedicated or non-dedicated partnership with our operation, there is scope for Halifax Transit to collaborate in any effort to create a sustainable foundation for this service.

Service “Grandfathering”

In 2010, the IBI Group conducted a review of the Access-A-Bus service and created a Strategic Plan which was documented and ultimately approved by Halifax Regional Council. One of the many recommendations placed temporal and geographic boundaries on the delivery of paratransit service to the citizens of HRM as follows:

“It is recommended that Access-A-Bus shall operate the same hours of service by day of week as that of adjacent conventional transit services. Access-A-Bus service boundaries shall be within 1000m of a bus stop (consistent with the buffer for local transit taxation)”.

These approved service boundaries have since been utilized to guide the service supply model for Access-a-Bus and have been helpful in establishing appropriate controls on service delivery.

Challenges arise with any changes to the delivery of conventional transit service; in some cases, registered Access-A-Bus clients have found themselves either no longer eligible for service or restricted to the modified temporal limitations of the adjacent conventional transit service as staff adjusts service parameters in accordance with approved guidelines. Difficulties arise when staff receive requests to continue to deliver service outside of the approved guidelines (service “grandfathering”) creating disparities between grandfathered service users and new users in the same geographical area.

Service “grandfathering” strains the limited resources that were planned and procured to deliver paratransit service under the approved delivery model. Any requirement to travel outside of the approved service boundaries results in increased trip times, additional service dead-heading, and increased costs. Additional pressure on system resources can lead to decreased customer satisfaction as service availability and reliability decline.

Recommendation: It is recommended that the temporal and geographic restrictions approved by Council in 2010 be reconfirmed as a baseline for future planning.

Mindful of the impact that approval of this recommendation may have on individual clients, if the recommendation is approved Halifax Transit staff will explore alternatives and partnerships that can reliably support clients impacted by service changes. Options to that end, and a recommended timeframe for the cessation of service grandfathering, will be included in the next update for the strategic review. For further clarity, existing Access-a-Bus clients living in an area that see a reduction or elimination of fixed route transit service under the Moving Forward Together Plan will continue to receive Access-a-Bus service while staff explore alternatives as per above. Prospective new clients would not be grandfathered.

If the recommendation is rejected, staff will seek guidance from Council on revised boundaries for the delivery of paratransit service and determine the additional resourcing that will be required in support.

Upgrades to Scheduling Software

The Halifax Transit Access-A-Bus operation is supported by a scheduling solution known as Trapeze PASS. The baseline version of the software is dated; it was initially set to work with our paratransit operation in 2008. In preparation for an upgrade, the vendor has conducted a comprehensive assessment of the solution and related processes.

In order to ensure the best possible foundation and operating environment for an upgraded scheduling solution, staff recently completed a Value Stream Mapping exercise with the following aims:

- Review industry best practices;
- Redefine and optimize business processes;
- Review staff roles;
- Develop user training; and
- Document all improvements and processes.

A general implementation approach with related tasks has been created. The effort has been granted project status for execution during FY 2017/18; the upgrade to Trapeze PASS is expected to be completed by autumn 2017, with related tasks scheduled for completion before and after set-to-work of the updated version of software.

Revised Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility for paratransit service in HRM is currently guided by a set of published criteria; individuals are eligible to become registered users of the service if they:

- Require use of wheelchair or scooter;
- Are unable to step up or down a 35 centimeter step unassisted;
- Are unable to walk 175 meters outside unassisted;
- Have 20/200 vision or less (legally blind); or
- Are unable to utilize conventional transit due to cognitive or physical disabilities.

Recent improvements to the accessibility of the conventional transit fleet and the shared experiences of other paratransit services suggest that a review of the eligibility criteria for the Access-A-Bus service is in order. Staff have liaised with the Chair of the Canadian Urban Transit Association accessibility committee to gather information on trends and develop eligibility criteria that are less prescriptive and more focused on an individual's ability to use the conventional transit system. A framework designed to restrict access to paratransit service to those who cannot use the conventional transit service will support the broader goal of reducing demand pressures on limited resources.

Recommendation: It is recommended that Council directs Halifax Transit to revise the current set of Eligibility Criteria for use of the Access-A-Bus service with the aim of restricting access to those who

cannot use the conventional transit service. A proposal for revised Eligibility Criteria will be included in the next update for the strategic review.

A related challenge is associated with the controlled and fair assessment of eligibility. Under the current registration process, applicants are assessed by independent medical practitioners who interpret standards without guidance or any stake in the objective of ensuring that the Access-A-Bus service is delivered only to clients who have a genuine and undisputable need. Halifax Transit utilizes the services of a contracted medical practitioner for the conduct of Bus and Ferry Operator work related medical assessments; a similar model to support the assessment of potential registrants could assist the controlled application of criteria related standards and reduce demand pressures.

A proposed structure and related processes will be included in the next update for the strategic review.

Options to Shift Paratransit Users to Conventional Transit

Council has directed staff to report on the possibility of allowing registered Access-A-Bus users to utilize the conventional transit system free of charge. In discussions with other transit properties in Canada, staff have discovered the following issues:

- Programs of this nature can create a corresponding surge in applications for paratransit service; increased pressure on paratransit administration and declining revenues result in no clear benefit to the program. Very stringent and well controlled eligibility criteria would be required to minimize the risk of abuse; and
- Equality in human rights mandate equal treatment, including fare parity, for all groups across all components of a transit system.

There are other initiatives that could fulfil the objective of the motion, which is to shift demand to the conventional transit system where there is spare capacity. As some individuals lack confidence in their ability to use the conventional transit system, many transit properties in Canada have adopted a concept known as “Travel Training” to educate and develop individual confidence via a program that includes both formal classroom instruction and practical application in the environment that is assisted by a personal mentor for guidance.

Halifax Transit has an established Travel Training program but it is limited to classroom instruction offered once per month only and staffing levels are insufficient to provide the personal mentorship that is considered necessary to significantly improve the success of the program. In an attempt to address this shortfall and engage the community, the concept has been discussed with staff at Independent Living Nova Scotia (ILNS) to determine their capacity to provide peer mentors. ILNS is extremely receptive to the idea, and they have provided information that will be useful in the development of a procurement strategy for this service. Halifax Transit intends to pursue the initiatives required to expand the Travel Training program using resources provided by the Operating Budget.

Mindful of the results of this investigation, it is recommended that Council not direct Halifax Transit to allow registered Access-A-Bus users to ride the conventional transit system free of charge.

Integrated Trip Delivery

Related to the Integrated Mobility Plan, the Integrated Trip Delivery concept will permit transit users to plan and make trips between urban destinations using a sophisticated application that will best leverage the availability and capacity of a variety of travel modes. While investigation and plans for adoption of this concept are in very early stages, it is included for mention in this update as it holds long term potential to achieve efficiencies in the use of paratransit vehicles.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

At this time, none of the recommendations or initiatives outlined in this report require approval from Halifax Regional Council for the expenditure of funds.

RISK CONSIDERATION

There is a short term risk of negative public opinion associated with the initiatives and recommendations outlined in this report. This risk can be mitigated with a robust communications plan and consistent application of the rules that govern the operation of the paratransit system.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

On April 24th, 2017, staff provided an update on progress and solicited feedback from members of the Halifax Regional Municipality Accessibility Advisory Committee.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

Staff have not identified any environmental implications associated with the initiatives or recommendations outlined in this report.

ALTERNATIVES

The Transportation Standing Committee could choose to not support the recommendation to reconfirm the temporal and geographic restrictions on the delivery of paratransit service approved by Council in 2010 as a baseline for future planning, and instead recommend that, with the implementation of the Moving Forward Together Plan and any service changes beyond, Halifax Transit continues to provide paratransit service to those residential areas currently in receipt and at any time during the service day, However, this would hamper Halifax Transit's ability to forecast demand pressures and operate an efficient and reliable service unless additional resources are funded in response.

The Transportation Standing Committee could choose not to support the recommendation to revise the Eligibility Criteria for registration with the Access-A-Bus service. However, this would hamper Halifax Transit's efforts to reduce demand pressures by restricting the service to those who cannot utilize conventional transit and better utilize the spare capacity that exists in the fully accessible conventional transit system.

The Transportation Standing Committee could choose to recommend that Regional Council direct staff to allow registered Access-A-Bus users to ride the conventional transit system free of charge as a pilot initiative once the revised eligibility criteria are in place. In view of the experience of other Transit agencies and as there may be human rights implications, this option is not recommended as it may be difficult to retract this benefit or manage expectations should there be a need to cease the initiative.

ATTACHMENTS

No attachments.

A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/commcoun/index.php> then choose the appropriate Community Council and meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210, or Fax 902.490.4208.

Report Prepared by: Glen Bannon, Manager, Transit Operations, 902.490.1505