



P.O. Box 1749
Halifax, Nova Scotia
B3J 3A5 Canada

Item 3
Transportation Standing Committee
July 27, 2017

TO: Chair and Members of Transportation Standing Committee

SUBMITTED BY: ORIGINAL SIGNED

Dave Reage, MCIP, LPP, Director, Halifax Transit

DATE: June 23, 2017

SUBJECT: Facilitating Access to the Low Income Transit Pass Program

INFORMATION REPORT

ORIGIN

At the February 7, 2017 meeting of Regional Council, the following motion was put and passed:

That Halifax Regional Council request a staff report regarding the possible inclusion of the following in relation to the Low Income Transit Pass Pilot Program Extension and Expansion:

- Solicit the United Way to become one of the “community partners” referenced that helps citizen’s complete application;
- Consider a “Fair Entry Halifax” program, modeled on similar program in Calgary, so that applicants do not have to repeatedly demonstrate low income in order to qualify for municipally subsidized programs; and
- Consider including the Mobile Food Market as a drop location for Low Income Bus Pass applicants.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipality Charter, R.S.N.S. 2008, subsection 59(3) states, “Council may adopt policies on any matter that the Council considers conducive to the effective management of the Municipality.”

BACKGROUND

In April 2014, Halifax Regional Council directed staff to develop a by-law for transit fares and implement the Low Income Transit Pass Pilot Program. On June 21, 2016 Halifax Regional Council adopted Schedule 1 of By-law U-100, enabling staff to initiate the Low Income Transit Pass Pilot Program. Through this program, qualified applicants could purchase monthly transit passes for 50% of the regular price for each month during the pilot. There was no obligation to purchase a pass for each month of the pilot.

The six-month pilot took place between September 2016 and February 2017. At the February 7, 2017

meeting of Regional Council, the Low Income Transit Pass Program was approved as a permanent program, with the new annual program to begin in July 2017. To ensure an uninterrupted transition between the pilot and permanent programs, the pilot program was extended until June 2017. Intake for the annual Low Income Transit Pass Program began on May 8, 2017 and will continue until all 1,000 spaces are filled.

The Low Income Transit Pass Program was amended at that time to reflect lessons from the pilot stage. This report includes information regarding additional proposed modifications that were brought forward through a motion of Council.

DISCUSSION

Solicit the United Way to become one of the “community partners”.

United Way Halifax funds nearly 80 community programs and partnerships local to Halifax. United Way works with local partners to “create vibrant and safe places to live and solving issues of homelessness, social isolation and food insecurity.”¹

Halifax Transit has approached United Way Halifax about becoming a community partner to help support the Low Income Pilot Pass Program. Their role would involve raising awareness about the program and assisting applicants to the program with completing the application form. United Way has indicated that they would be very interested in pursuing this partnership, and that they would work with Halifax Transit and other local agencies that they support to promote the program and offer support to applicants through the application process.

Halifax Transit has met with United Way Halifax and their partner organizations to promote the program and discuss the program application form. Contact information has been provided and groups have been instructed to contact the appropriate staff if any additional information is required when assisting community members with applications.

A “Fair Entry Halifax” program

The City of Calgary began offering a Fair Entry application process in May of 2015. The Calgary Fair Entry application provides low income applicants with one application form for a number of municipal services. These include: Calgary Transit Low Income monthly passes, recreation fee assistance², no cost spay & neuter program³, Seniors Home Maintenance⁴, and Property Tax Assistance Program⁵

Those applying to programs via the Fair Entry application are required to demonstrate their income once annually. The proof of income required may vary depending on the programs to which the applicant is applying. This approach has several benefits: firstly, applicants may discover program subsidies that they may not be aware of, and secondly, applicants are only required to disclose their financial situation once a year. Further, the streamlined process makes it more convenient to access more than one program.

It has been determined that the following programs may be candidates to become part of a consolidated “Fair Entry Halifax” application:

¹ Source – United Way Halifax: <https://www.unitedwayhalifax.ca/community/community-goals.html>

² Source – Calgary Recreation: <http://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/Recreation/Pages/Fee-assistance/Home.aspx>

³ Source – Calgary Animal Services: <http://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/ABS/Pages/Animal-Services/No-cost-spay-neuter-program.aspx>

⁴ Source – Calgary Senior Programs: <http://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/CNS/Pages/Seniors/City-Links/Home-Maintenance-Services.aspx>

⁵ Source – Calgary Property Tax Assistance Program: <http://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/CNS/Pages/Seniors/City-Links/Home-Maintenance-Services.aspx>

- Low Income Transit Pass Program: This is an annual program, with applicants applying in May or June for a July 1-June 30 year. Candidates must prove that their household income is at or below the low-income threshold, that they are Halifax residents, and that they are not receiving a transportation subsidy from another government program. To date, the first annual Low Income Transit Pass Program has accepted over 800 applicants into the program year starting July 1, 2017.
- Subsidized Recreation Programming: HRM Recreation offers numerous free and subsidized programs through a variety of registration approaches in order to promote active lifestyles for Halifax residents. One example is subsidies for summer camp registration. For the 2017 summer camp season, summer camp fees have been subsidized for 336 campers from low income households (to date). In order to qualify for a subsidy, applicants must provide a Notice of Assessment, or alternately they may provide a letter from the Department of Community Services or from Immigration Services Association of Nova Scotia for newcomers, to demonstrate need.
- Partial Tax Exemption for Residential Taxation Program and the Tax Deferral Program: The Municipality currently assists low income residents with paying their property tax through a payment plan, a partial tax exemption, or deferral of property taxes (payment is put off to a later date). These programs are available to all homeowners with a combined annual household income of \$33,000 or less. Applications to this program are collected between June and December of the year for which the taxes will be levied. In 2016, there were approximately 2,150 annual applications to the program of which 2,090 were approved.

The other two programs offered provided by Fair Entry Calgary (No Cost Spay/Neuter, Seniors Home Maintenance) are not offered by HRM at the present time. Although HRM provides funding to community organizations which offer low cost/no cost spay and neuter and snow clearance for seniors, these services are not administered by HRM but through community organizations.

There are some challenges with creating a consolidated "Fair Entry Halifax" application process. The intake periods for the three existing candidate programs are different, the information required to apply for the programs varies, the eligibility requirements vary, and acceptance into one program does not ensure acceptance into all three of the candidate programs. Although there is some ability to streamline the requirements, variations will remain due to the nature of the programs. For example, the Residential Taxation Program requires information regarding the applicants dwelling, and signatures from all property owners, whereas the other programs do not. As a result, a consolidated application form will be longer and more complex, and will be available during multiple intake periods, which may lead to confusion for applicants.

However, because a consolidated application process has the benefit of potentially reducing the number of applications submitted by residents, and may create more awareness of the other programs that are available, work will be undertaken to consolidate application forms for the candidate programs, beginning with the 2018 intake periods. A key objective of this consolidation will be maintaining simplified and easily understood application forms/processes, and as a result, this consolidation will be phased and consider ongoing feedback from residents, and may not include all candidate programs at this time.

Consider including the Mobile Food Market as a drop location for Low Income Pass Program applications

Since the pilot began in 2016, the Mobile Food Market has provided improved access to high quality, affordable food to neighbourhoods with food access issues. Travelling to communities such as East Preston, North Preston, North End Halifax, and Fairview, the Mobile Food Market has acted as a temporary community gathering place for the duration of the market.

The Mobile Food Market is largely staffed by volunteers with oversight from HRM staff and employees of the Nova Scotia Health Authority. The municipality further provides the in-kind donation of a Halifax Transit bus or a fleet vehicle.

In discussion with the Mobile Food Market team, staff have determined that the Mobile Food Market is not a suitable location for allowing an onboard drop off location for Low Income Transit Pass Program applications. Applications contain significant personal information including financial information contained in a Notice of Assessment. Further, market days are extremely busy, and it is possible that completed applications may be misplaced.

In order to improve access to the program, Halifax Transit staff will provide Mobile Food Market staff with application forms to the Low Income Transit Pass Program to make available to patrons. Halifax Transit staff will also make themselves available to train Mobile Food Market staff to assist applicants in filling out the form.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

No financial implications were identified as part of this report.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

No community engagement was undertaken in preparation of this report.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A - Calgary Fair Entry - Fee Reduction Application Form

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.

Report Prepared by: Erin Blay, MCIP, LPP, Supervisor, Service Design & Projects, Halifax Transit (902.490.4942)
