

To: Regional and Corporate Services Committee
From: Alison Stewart, Manager of Strategic Planning

Date: 2020-05-12
File No: 8330-02-19744

Subject: FVRD Transit Services COVID-19 Response

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the Fraser Valley Regional District Board support BC Transit's efforts to actively work with the Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA) to lobby for federal and provincial support to recoup lost revenues already incurred due to COVID-19.

STRATEGIC AREA(S) OF FOCUS

Support Environmental Stewardship
Foster a Strong & Diverse Economy
Support Healthy & Sustainable Community
Provide Responsive & Effective Public Services

BACKGROUND

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that the spread and severity of COVID-19 had led it to declare the outbreak a pandemic. While the first COVID-19 cases in BC appeared in late January, the first significant outbreaks began in earnest in the first two weeks of March and progressed from there. The Province declared a Provincial State of Emergency on March 18, 2020, which gave the Province the power to take any action necessary to protect people and communities.

BC Transit had been monitoring the situation, and after discussion with local governments announced on March 20, 2020, that all transit services within the FVRD (FVRD, Chilliwack and Central Fraser Valley) would be implementing rear door boarding to enhance social distancing for drivers and passengers. Rear door entry also meant that fare collection would not be possible, so as a result, through this pandemic period, transit has been free. These were the first of a number of operational changes introduced over the following weeks.

DISCUSSION

Staff are monitoring the status of the FVRD transit services. Route 66, route 22, and route 11 continue to operate as per scheduled; however, there have been impacts to the services which experienced occasional delays or temporary removal of runs due to operational issues. BC Transit and the transit operating company is working hard to minimize such issues, but the nature of this emergency remains fluid. The FVRD greatly appreciates the work BC Transit and transit operators are doing to maintain this essential service in such a difficult time.

Health Canada and the Province of BC are taking the lead on the response to COVID-19, and BC Transit is following their lead. BC Transit has several actions to improve passenger and transit operator safety:

- Enhanced cleaning on buses and at BC Transit facilities.
- Communication to staff and customers about physical distancing procedures.
- Rear door loading to reduce operator-public interactions – extended to May 30, 2020
- Not collecting fares to reduce operator-public interactions – extended to May 30, 2020
- Limiting passenger capacity to support physical distancing.
- Enhancing the red line for passengers to stand behind.
- Vinyl panels installed on light duty buses.

Transit has been designated an essential service by the Province of BC and is still providing service for those who need transit, including essential service workers and the general public who have no other transportation options but transit. Ridership around the province is down 75 to 80%, although in the Fraser Valley, the drop in comparison to the same period last year is a little over 60%, although it varies between services. At this time, BC Transit has not been notified of any confirmed COVID-19 cases involving BC Transit services in the province.

Provincially, BC Transit has been considering service reductions where requested in systems seeing operational challenges. The FVRD is not considering service reductions at this time but have requested more detailed ridership information to determine that should service reductions be required, that any reductions be made to runs that will least impact customers. Any changes will be discussed with FVRD's partners before being implemented.

FVX Expansion

As a result of the COVID-19 emergency, the BC Transit Board of Directors announced on April 21, 2020, that all transit expansions slated for the 2020-21 fiscal year will be delayed until 2021-22. This means that the FVX expansion to Lougheed Town Centre in Burnaby will not take place in January 2021. An updated time frame for implementation has not yet been determined and shall be discussed with partners as more information becomes available.

TransLink

Externalities may also impact FVX service levels. TransLink is under a significant amount of financial pressure due to a reliance on fares, fuel taxes and parking taxes. TransLink does not receive provincial funding to cover the cost of operations. These pressures have resulted in service cuts with additional cuts announced for mid-May. At this point, TransLink connection issues to the FVX have been limited to longer wait times at off-peak times in the evenings due to low ridership, but connections still exist for passengers. FVRD staff will continue to monitor.

COST

Rear door loading and fare collection implications

A key element of COVID-19 response was the introduction of BC Transit's rear door loading policy to reduce operator-public interactions. In order for this to be implemented, fare collection was cancelled at the same time. Even had fare collection continued, revenues would have been impacted by significant reductions in ridership. As it stands, based on 2019 average monthly revenues, the potential fare box revenue losses from the no revenue collection policy could be approximately:

FVX: \$80,000 per month (total 2019 annual revenues \$965,700)

AGH: \$9,000 per month (total 2019 annual revenues \$108,500)

Hope: \$1,400 per month (total 2019 annual revenues \$16,800)

Staff have received notice from BC Transit that the rear door loading and no fare collection measures will end on June 1, 2020. This will reduce some of the financial pressures affecting BC Transit services across the province. It is likely that ridership levels may take some time to recover as the economy slowly reopens, and public confidence in transit services rebuilds. All other safety measures that have already been implemented will remain in effect. TransLink has also announced that rear door loading and no fare collection measures will end on June 1, 2020.

BC Transit is actively working with the Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA) to lobby for federal and provincial support to recoup lost revenues already incurred. It is important to note that under BC Transit's funding formula, the province funds 46.69% of conventional transit systems and local governments 53.31%. Revenues collected from the transit systems are used to reduce the local property tax share of the costs.

CONCLUSION

Transit has been designated an essential service by the Province of BC and is still providing service for those that need transit, including essential service workers and the general public that have no other transportation options but transit. The FVRD's service hours have not been reduced, but public safety measures have significantly reduced ridership, and the temporary elimination of fares have reduced revenues. As the province begins to reduce restrictions and as fare collection is reinstated, it may take some time before ridership and revenues recover to pre-COVID levels.

The FVRD greatly appreciates the work BC Transit and transit operators are doing to maintain this essential service in such a difficult time.

COMMENTS BY:

Stacey Barker, Director of Regional Services: Reviewed and supported.

Kristy Hodson, Acting Director of Financial Services: Reviewed and supported.

Jennifer Kinneman, Chief Administrative Officer: Reviewed and supported.