



## STAFF REPORT

To: Regional and Corporate Services Committee

Date: 2025-02-13

From: Theresa Alexander, Planner 1

**Subject: Rural Transit Needs Assessment and Action Plan Update**

**Reviewed by:** Alison Stewart, Manager of Strategic Planning  
David Urban, Deputy Director of Regional Services  
Stacey Barker, Director of Regional Services/Deputy CAO  
Kelly Lownsborough, Director of Corporate Services/CFO  
Jennifer Kinneman, Chief Administrative Officer

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### RECOMMENDATION

**THAT** the Fraser Valley Regional District Board direct staff, subject to not receiving confirmation of funding from the Rural Transit Solutions Fund by the end of March 2025, to use Strategic Planning and Initiatives surplus funds to complete the Rural Transit Needs Assessment and Action Plan in lieu of receiving federal funding;

**AND THAT** the scope of the project be adjusted to also assess handyDART connections between the **region's** urban centres.

### BACKGROUND

In September 2023, the Board directed staff to submit an application to **Infrastructure Canada's Rural Transit Solutions Fund (RTSF) Planning Stream** for the funding necessary to complete a regional Rural Transit Needs Assessment and Action Plan.

This work would identify unmet transit and transportation needs and develop strategies to enhance services, improve accessibility, and promote sustainable transportation solutions for rural communities and First Nations within the Fraser Valley Regional District (FVRD).

### DISCUSSION

FVRD residents living in rural communities often have limited or no access to public and private transit services, especially following the loss of Greyhound in 2018, which left non-driving residents, especially those in the Fraser Canyon, with few transportation options.

Residents in rural communities must often travel to urban centers to access employment, health care, attend school, and maintain important social connections. With limited transportation options, it is often more difficult for rural residents to meet their daily needs and access important services. This can be especially challenging for those impacted by poverty or experiencing health challenges.

In June 2023, the FVRD received a request from the District of Kent to assess the feasibility of **integrating BC Transit's** handyDART program within its Agassiz-Harrison (AGH) Transit service. HandyDART is an accessible, door-to-door shared transit service for people with permanent or temporary disabilities that prevent them from using fixed-route transit without assistance from another person.

In response to this request, staff recommended a broader and more inclusive approach by undertaking a regional Rural Transit Needs Assessment and Action Plan, which would include an emphasis on access to local and regional health services. A proposed budget of \$75,000 was determined based on undertakings similar in nature and scope by qualified and experienced consultants.

The Rural Transit Needs Assessment and Action Plan would identify transportation gaps, needs, and potential solutions for rural communities **within the FVRD's electoral areas and the municipalities of Hope, Kent, and Harrison Hot Springs. This work would include the feasibility of BC Transit's** custom or paratransit services, such as handyDART, in communities not currently enrolled in these types of service, as well as innovative rural transit solutions **outside of BC Transit's scope.**

Improving access to local and regional health services is a priority of the Fraser Health Authority and an area of considerable advocacy, especially on behalf of smaller and more remote communities in the region. Prior **to submitting an application for federal funding, staff applied to Fraser Health's** Macro Health Grant. The FVRD was successful in its application and was awarded \$25,000 towards the project, specifically to supplement the project in the Hope and Fraser Canyon area.

On May 21, 2024 staff submitted an application for \$50,000 to Infrastructure **Canada's** Rural Transit Solutions Fund (RTSF ) for the bulk of the funds needed to complete the project. Unfortunately, staff have not received notice of a funding decision, or information as to when a decision is expected. Despite efforts by staff and commitment from Fraser Health, this project has not been able to proceed without a funding decision from Infrastructure Canada. Per the RTSF application guidelines, a project will lose its eligibility if initiated before approval.

**The following timeline reflects the project's origin and efforts by staff to secure required funds:**

- June 22, 2023: Letter to Board from District of Kent staff requesting the FVRD explore the feasibility introducing handyDART to the Agassiz-Harrison Transit service.
- **September 28, 2023: Board directs staff to apply to Infrastructure Canada's** RTSF Planning Stream for the regional Rural Transit Needs Assessment and Action Plan.
- December 5, 2023 RTSF Planning Stream application window re-opens.

- **April 9, 2024: Staff submit application to Fraser Health’s Macro Health Grant for the Hope and the Fraser Canyon for \$25,000.**
- May 2, 2024: Staff received confirmation of \$25,000 grant awarded by Fraser Health.
- May 21, 2024: Staff submitted application to RTSF for \$50,000.
- July 2024 – January 2025: Multiple inquiries by staff to Infrastructure Canada regarding the **FVRD’s RTSF funding application**. The most recent inquiry on January 21, 2025 provided no new information.

Access to transit is a continuing concern for rural communities in the region, whether for day-to-day needs or access to health services. The lack of access to health services is repeatedly expressed in public consultation on transportation and transit-related initiatives. With ongoing uncertainty in **Ottawa in relation to parliament’s prorogued status and the possibility of a federal election** this spring, consideration should be given to find an alternate source of funding for the Rural Transit Needs Assessment and Action Plan.

When first discussed with the Board in 2023, the intent was for all costs to be provided through grant funding. The importance of this initiative has not declined and other gaps have been identified where health-related trips are **a challenge even between the region’s urban centres**. **Currently there are no** handyDART connections between Chilliwack and the Central Fraser Valley (Abbotsford-Mission) transit service areas. For example, residents served by the Chilliwack handyDART service (Chilliwack, Area H and Area E) cannot use handyDART to access services in Abbotsford.

The \$25,000 Fraser Health Macro Health grant has already been received and there is an expectation that the initiative will move forward this year. Staff are proposing that subject to not receiving confirmation of RTSF funding by the end of March 2025, to consider the use of Strategic Planning and Initiatives (601) surplus funds to complete the Rural Transit Needs Assessment and Action Plan in lieu of receiving federal funding. One of the benefits of self-funding is the ability to adjust the scope to include an assessment of handyDART connections between urban centres, not just rural communities, to better serve the region as a whole.

To reflect regional interests, the feasibility of introducing handyDART to areas not currently enrolled in the program, such the AGH Transit service, and a greater emphasis on transportation challenges and opportunities associated with accessing regional health services. This update recognizes that all residents may need to access regional health services at some point or routinely in their lifetimes, and that transportation must not be a barrier to do so.

## **COST**

The original project budget of \$75,000 reflected the costs of similar projects comparable in scope, geographic size, and jurisdictional complexity. If there is a change in scope to address inter-municipal connections there could be a nominal increase to the overall project costs. Staff propose that \$60,000 in departmental funds be used to fund this project in combination with the \$25,000 in grant funding

already received from Fraser Health (Hope and Fraser Canyon). The Regional Strategic Planning and Initiatives (601) appropriated surplus account holds sufficient funds to support this initiative.

If the RTSF funding is not secured, a budget amendment will be brought forward to amend the Regional Strategic Planning and Initiatives (601) budget.

## CONCLUSION

The Rural Transit Needs Assessment and Action Plan is a key action item in the FVRD's **Strategic Plan** for 2023-2026 and supports many Regional Growth Strategy policies related to community well-being, transportation, and climate change. Further, this project is an important step in addressing the transportation concerns and priorities shared by First Nations and the public during engagement for **the FVRD's** Regional Growth Strategy update, the Active Transportation Network Plan and other initiatives.

## COMMENTS BY:

**Kelly Lownsborough, Director of Corporate Services/CFO:** If supported, a formal budget amendment will be brought forward at a later date to formally amend the 2025-2029 Financial Plan.