

**Minutes for BRS-TRANSIT hybrid meeting at Civic Square & online via Zoom
Monday, 15 January 2024 @ 1:30-2:45pm**

ATTENDANCE:

- Saskatoon Transit (Transit):
 - Michael Moellenbeck, Transit Director
 - Braden Cline, Johnson-Shoyama Executive Intern
 - Taha Najam, Transit Planning Engineer (attending by Zoom)
- Engagement:
 - Amanda Lindgren, Engagement Consultant
 - Thomas Kinge, Engagement Consultant
- Bus Riders of Saskatoon (BRS):
 - Robert Clipperton, Spokesperson and Steering Committee Member
 - Peter Gallén, Transit Co-ordinator and Steering Committee Member
 - Lila Wagner, Steering Committee Member
 - James Wood, Steering Committee Member (attending by Zoom)
 - Bob Eaton, Steering Committee Member (attending by Zoom)

ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES

- For this hybrid meeting: Robert led the discussion and Peter prepared the minutes.
- While Amanda goes on leave, Thomas Kinge will take over her function at these monthly meetings. Thomas is a recent arrival to the City and comes to Saskatoon from Edmonton Transit.
- Hybrid vs. in-person meetings: to be determined.
- Amanda/Thomas to book a meeting room downtown for the next meeting.

OLD BUSINESS

- 1) Yet another problem with Transit's Open Data (GTFS) feed to third-party apps:
 - a. Transit confirmed that the General Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) feed for Route #17 was incorrect on January 8 due to a problem with Transit's traffic management software, *Transit Master*.
 - b. When BRS asked if Supervisors check the correctness of the GTFS feed each morning, Transit noted that staff is available for core operational requirements, but not always for a detailed check of the GTFS feed. Currently this task falls to the single Supervisor per shift that is manning the Comm Center, where more pressing issues take precedent.
- 2) Closed Door Policy:
 - a. Bringing up an inquiry on BRS's Facebook-page, BRS wondered what the current policy is on keeping bus doors open or closed when the Operator exits?
 - b. Transit noted that the current policy has been in place for many years, but they are in the process of reviewing the policy internally.
 - c. The current policy states: "*Before you leave your bus unattended, you must follow this procedure. Secure your bus: Neutral, Park Brake, and Air Off of the door. Then close the door behind you.*"

- d. Keeping the doors closed ensures that the bus stays warm in winter and cool in summer for those passengers that are already on the bus.
- e. It should be kept in mind that while passengers may be able to manually open the front door, the policy is “door closed”. In general, passengers are advised to have the Operator of their bus let them aboard, but they may also ask other Operators or Supervisors for help, if needed.

NEW BUSINESS

Recently appointed Transit Manager Michael ‘Mike’ Moellenbeck was featured guest at this meeting to discuss Transit’s current service issues and plans.

3) Budget:

- a. BRS noted that Transit seemed to come away relatively unscathed through an unusually difficult budget process.
- b. Transit lamented that the \$100,000 budget item for snow removal at bus stops was cut.

4) Bus Fleet:

- a. Mike admitted that Transit is very short of buses in working order to provide the required daily service.
- b. However, this shortage is finally being addressed through a Federal funding announcement in December 2023 and Transit’s Updated Fleet Renewal Strategy¹:
 - i. Consequently, the situation is expected to improve somewhat in 2024, when Transit receives two electric 40-foot buses plus five conventional 40-foot diesel buses and three articulated 60-foot diesel buses.
 - ii. A much more substantial fleet improvement is anticipated in 2025, when another 30 buses are expected to be delivered. As an aside, Mike noted that such a large, one-time order will cause difficulties further down the road when all these buses might need to be replaced at the same time.
 - iii. Mike also cautioned that in practise the actual fleet increases in 2024 & 2025 will be much less as several old buses need to be retired by then as well.
- c. Mike also emphasized that while the recently announced Updated Fleet Renewal Strategy addresses the size and condition of the current fleet, this strategy does not yet address the need for additional buses to handle the increasing ridership. Additional revisions to the overall Fleet Strategy are, therefore, to be expected.

5) Overcrowded Buses:

- a. Mike observed that some of the current overcrowding in buses is the result of localized lack of capacity due to increased population; exacerbated by a shortage of buses:
 - i. Transit’s traditional solution to deal with overcrowded buses to high-schools and university is to drive two standard 40-foot buses behind each other in the

¹ See table in the December-minutes: https://busridersofsaskatoon.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/COS-minutes_2023-12-11.pdf

same time slot. This 'long-bus'-approach is not available at the moment due to the current shortage of buses.

- ii. As an immediate remedy Transit has, therefore, had discussions with individual High Schools and with the University to see if these institutions could adjust (stagger) their daily start-and-end times, so that the available buses could accommodate a larger number of students.
 - b. As a reply to BRS's inquiry why Transit didn't simply choose to order more articulating buses in 2024 & 2025 to alleviate the ongoing capacity constraints, Mike noted that:
 - i. Transit acknowledges that a larger number of articulating buses would indeed provide relief to (at least) some of the current overcrowding.
 - ii. In the end, however, Transit decided that it was more important to purchase the largest total number of buses that their current joint federal-municipal financing schemes allowed.
- 6) More on Capacity Issues:
- a. As a more general observation regarding the nature of Transit's capacity issues throughout the transit network and how to deal with particular capacity bottle-necks, Mike noted that they are simply symptoms of broader, more systemic issues:
 - b. Capacity bottle-necks due to ridership spikes:
 - i. There are several types of ridership spikes and different ways of providing transit capacity:
 - 1. Ridership spike to a specific location – such as a high-school – might affect only a single run twice a day:
 - a. In general, such recurring but very narrow spikes in ridership are particularly difficult for Transit to resolve:
 - i. In some cases an articulating bus might provide sufficient capacity.
 - ii. Having to assign an additional bus may be difficult (unless already readily available) and is more costly.
 - b. A much better solution is to be able to provide consistently higher frequency on any regular adjacent transit routes that serve both the school as well as other passengers.
 - 2. Making a sharp, high spike in ridership both smaller and last longer would be particularly beneficial. Thus in the longer term:
 - a. Transit is looking for ways to eliminate some of the steep, narrow spikes in ridership by lengthening these peaks in demand to broader and more uniform capacity plateaus.
 - b. Higher frequency is Transit's preferred method to achieve the required increase in capacity, but the current network layout does not easily facilitate such a solution in a fiscally responsible manner.
 - c. Transit Network:
 - i. Consequently, a fundamental redesign of the current network is in the works:

1. It should be recognized that until fairly recently, the current layout of the transit network actually served the city relatively well, but that is no longer the case today.
 2. Network issues are, therefore, now being addressed through the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system and the supporting New Transit Network, which include both higher frequencies and longer spans.
- 7) More immediate Service improvements:
- a. Mike noted that some service improvements are planned for the next two years:
 - i. On-Demand Transit (ODT) is planned for Aspen Ridge this summer.
 - ii. Fixed-route service is planned for the expanding neighbourhoods of Brighton and Rosewood and will go live in July of 2024.
 - iii. When BRS inquired if later Sunday service could be implemented, Mike noted that the current bus shortage prevents that at the moment:
 1. While evening service in itself does not require a larger bus fleet, because it takes place outside the peaks, the additional mileage would cause premature retirement of a larger portion of the current fleet. This is unacceptable until the fleet is larger and in better shape.
 - iv. As soon as the fleet permits, Transit intends to reinstate 30-minute service on routes that now operate on 40-minute frequency (= improved transfers).
 - b. Mike also noted that especially the ODT-service has provided valuable data that pairs up each departure to its destination; this will help Transit understand actual travel needs.
- 8) Longer-term Transit Plans:
- a. Since time ran out at this meeting, Mike expressed his willingness to discuss Transit's longer-term plans with BRS at another time. The best approach to such discussions will be worked out at the regular meeting in February.
- 9) Upcoming Public Engagements:
- a. The public engagement report on Transit Service Alerts is going to Council's Standing Policy Committee on Transportation (SPCOT) in February.
 - b. Next engagement on BRT Public Art is coming up in February.
 - c. Free Child Fare: engagement starting soon for implementation to take place in September.
 - d. ODT service to Aspen Ridge: engagement starting soon for implementation this summer.
 - e. New Transit Network: engagement will most likely be postponed to after the municipal election.
 - f. Fare Review: engagement start unknown as the Fare Review is now included in the City's Universal Low-Income Subsidy (ULIS) project.

NEXT MEETING: Monday, 12 February 2024 @ 1:30pm, (hybrid meeting at City Hall).