

## Meeting minutes for the March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2025 BRS-Transit Meeting at 1:30 pm

### Attendance:

- BRS
  - Odin Swidzinski, BRS-Transit Coordinator
  - Muhammad Abdullah, Member
  - Robert Clipperton, Member
  - Peter Gallen, Member
  - Curt McCoshen, Member
  - Sydney Risler, Member
  - Lila Wagner, Member
  - James Wood, Member
  - Brittany Z, Member
- Transit
  - Cory Shrigley, Customer Service and Engagement Manager
  - Seth Akande, Johnson-Shoyama Executive Intern
- Access Transit
  - Brittany Hadley, Access Transit Manager

### Administrative issues:

For this meeting, Curt chaired the meeting and Odin prepared the minutes.

### Old business:

- Meeting with Filip
  - The Customer Service and Engagement Manager suggested that the meeting with Filip take place in the next couple of weeks
    - BRS suggested either March 24<sup>th</sup> or March 31<sup>st</sup> at 1:30 pm
    - The meeting date will be decided by Filip
  - A BRS member asked if the meeting would be an extra meeting on top of the regular meetings would be that BRS has with Transit
    - Transit said that it would be an extra meeting, and they need an extra meeting to discuss the preliminary design before the report goes out to council
    - Filip would like to have the meeting occur within the next couple of weeks
  - Another BRS member asked if they would be discussing the report or if they would be discussing the route network at the meeting
    - Transit said that the meeting would discuss the report, the principles around the network redesign, what questions should be asked to the public, and how to engage with the general public in the design process, rather than deciding on the exact routes

## **New business:**

- Introductions
  - Introductions were provided by all participants
- Access Transit fleet renewal
  - Impact of tariffs
    - Access Transit reported that the five new buses were ordered before the tariffs went into effect, and said that the buses will arrive in late August/early September
    - Access Transit reported that the rest of their fleet strategy will be affected by tariffs as Crestline that produces the buses relies on American parts, so they are in discussions with Crestline and other vendors about how they will affect Access Transit's fleet renewal strategy
    - A BRS member asked about the order for next year
      - Access Transit said that they have a plan to order another five buses a year to account for both population growth and replace existing buses
      - Access Transit said that if demand keeps rising, they may increase the order to ten buses per year if necessary
  - Layout changes
    - Access Transit said that they would like the buses to be as consistent as possible, and that when they make changes to bus layouts, it becomes difficult for maintenance and bus drivers to maintain and operate the buses, which is why they try to be careful in making changes
      - There were only some minor tweaks in the layout of the five new buses to address concerns that were raised by customers
    - Access Transit said they have found that the lift system is a better option than the ramps as not every sidewalk is flat enough for ramps to be effective
    - A BRS member asked if they had a layout that did not meet the needs of its users
      - In the late 2010s, Access Transit had more R-back buses (where the ramp folded down) in their fleet, but they reported difficulties in larger mobility devices making sharp turns on the ramp, and those who used walkers found it more difficult to get on the buses with R-back ramps rather than stepping on a lift
    - Another BRS member asked the users of Access Transit if they prefer the lift system over the ramp

- An Access Transit user said that the lift system worked well for them
  - The Access Transit manager said that they take customer feedback into account when considering design changes, but said that they could only make so many changes, and they may not be able to accommodate their requests
- Weekend schedules
  - Access Transit said that the problem with weekend schedules is that they would need more buses in order to provide more service, which was why they implemented a fleet renewal strategy
  - A BRS member asked if demand for the service is lower on weekends
    - The Access Transit Manager said that demand has generally been lower on weekends, which means that they have allocated fewer buses on weekends to accommodate the lower demand, which has led to lower service levels during the weekends
    - When Access Transit plans out their schedule, they put service where and when people need it the most, and they can only allocate so many buses
  - Another BRS member reported that an Access Transit user they knew had to wait 45 minutes on Monday mornings before getting any kind of answer, and asked Access Transit why they had to wait for that long
    - Access Transit said that they open the booking line at 9:00 am, there are only so many clerks who could take people's calls, and noted that until recently, people were unable to connect to the system when it was filled up, but now they have enough phone lines to accommodate demand
    - Access Transit said that part of their plans to improve the booking system is to look at allowing people to book trips online
    - The same BRS member expressed concerns that Access Transit may switch from using phones to using online booking, as many seniors do not use the internet
      - Access Transit said that they would allow people to continue using their phone lines for booking, but they would like to provide different options to clients so that Access Transit could reduce call volumes to make it easier for those who use phones to actually reach a clerk
  - A BRS member asked Access Transit if they could use callbacks for people who do not want to sit around waiting for the next available clerk
    - Access Transit said that they use callbacks for people who request it.
- Accessible taxis
  - Access Transit reported that they use accessible taxis to supplement their bus fleet, and typically see twenty trips by taxi on a weekday and eight

trips on a weekend, but they noted that the number could vary depending on the ability of buses

- Access Transit said that most paratransit systems across Canada have some form of contracts with taxis
- Do accessible taxi drivers have the obligation to assist clients when picking them up or dropping them off?
  - Access Transit reported that accessible taxi drivers are obligated to assist passengers, but noted that they rely on customer complaints as it would be difficult to directly manage their third-party contractors
  - Access Transit reported that two years ago, the City of Saskatoon instituted a policy where they would train the accessible taxi drivers to the same standards as Access Transit drivers, and said that the training is provided for free over two days in June
  - Access Transit stated that Riide was the successful contractor to operate wheelchair-accessible taxis on behalf of Access Transit
    - Access Transit reported that the contract will expire in fall, so they will be putting out a tender in late summer for taxi companies to bid on operating it
  - A BRS member asked about how often they replace contractors who operate wheelchair-accessible taxis
    - The Access Transit Manager reported that they did not know how often they replace contractors, as they have not looked at the data frequently enough to give an accurate answer
  - Another BRS member asked if they changed companies lately or if they have a longer-term contract
    - Access Transit reported that it was typically a longer-term contract, and they want to have a three-year contract
  - A BRS member asked Access Transit users how useful accessible taxis are in carrying passengers, and asked Access Transit how many passengers could accessible taxis carry
    - No response was provided by the Access Transit users at the meeting
    - Access Transit reported that accessible taxis could only carry one wheelchair and a companion
  - The same BRS member reported that accessible taxis may have been stretched to the limit
- Booking system
  - Access Transit said that they are currently working with their vendor to correctly utilize their system and take advantage of all the features that the software has to offer
  - Access Transit reported that they are halfway through with the project, and have said that the new options are better able to schedule buses and get

a better idea in how long it would take for a bus to travel to a specific destination by using historical data to determine how long it took for buses to travel

- Access Transit reported that the project is going well, and that it is supposed to wrap up the software upgrades by the beginning of May
- A BRS member mentioned the shortage of telephone lines from the previous meeting and asked if it is still a problem
  - Access Transit reported that it has been addressed, so while you would still have to wait on hold, you can actually connect without encountering a busy signal
- The same BRS member asked what the capacity of the Access Transit phone lines is now
  - Access Transit reported that their phone lines now have double the capacity (20 to 40)
- The same BRS member mentioned that the only problem now is to hire more staff
  - Access Transit said that when the upgrades are completed, more time would be freed up for staff to answer phone calls rather than dealing with behind-the-scenes stuff that they had to deal with
- A BRS member asked if there are any additions to the queue to inform people that “you are the fifth person in line”
  - Access Transit said that the phone lines are used for various city departments, and asked Transit if they could provide more information
  - Transit said that the Revenue department has reported that they are on hold for a lot longer, and they have said that Transit does not have a limit on wait time
  - The Customer Service Manager said that they would look into having such a system set up, as it would also affect Transit
- Callbacks
  - Access Transit said that if someone requesting a callback fails to input their phone number when they are supposed to, it would revert to the city’s phone number, and unfortunately it was how the system was designed
  - A BRS member asked when they have to input a phone number
    - Access Transit said that users are asked to input their phone number when they request a callback
  - The same BRS member asked if the information about inputting your own phone number when requesting a callback should be on the website

- Access Transit said the information is currently on the website, but they added that they need to upgrade the site to make it more user-friendly, so that the information would be more obvious
- Denial rates
  - Access Transit reported that denial rates rise every October because they receive an influx of winter customers
    - Since October, Access Transit stated that denial rates have slightly went up and remained stagnant, but as of February, they are starting to come down
    - The denial rates are not where Access Transit would like them to be, but they are still working on reducing denial rates
  - A BRS member observed that the spike and fall in demand may be weather-related
    - Access Transit said that it is weather-related, as they have many clients who only use Access Transit during the winter months
  - The same BRS member asked if winter users use regular Transit in the summer
    - Access Transit reported that many Access Transit clients use the regular Transit system in the summer months
  - Another BRS member asked what things trigger a denial
    - Access Transit reported that if no buses are available for a passenger wishing to use Access Transit to get from point A to point B, it would be marked as denied
    - Access reports that if an applicant fails to meet a set of eligibility criteria set out by City Council, they are denied for service as the cost for people to travel on Access Transit is much more costly than regular Transit, and they would like to ensure that those who need it could use it
      - These refusals are not counted in the denial rate
  - A BRS member asked about why they reduced the time needed to book a trip from seven days prior to the COVID pandemic to three days after the COVID pandemic
    - Access Transit explained they reduced the time from seven days to three days because they have struggled with no-shows and trip cancellations, so if they reduced the minimum time to book from seven days to three days, then they could reduce the number of no-shows and trip cancellations as people would be more likely to remember their trips
    - Access Transit reported that the number of no-shows and cancellations has remained high since they have reduced the wait time

- Another BRS member asked why do people no-show and asked what could be done to combat no-shows
  - Access Transit explained that users sometimes ‘double or even triple-book’ a trip to ensure that they would get a ride to their appointment, and when their ride has been confirmed they may then forget to cancel the extra bookings.
  - Access Transit stated that clients must cancel by no later than a couple hours before their scheduled trip
  - Access Transit reported that it is difficult to pinpoint the answer, especially no-shows at the door as people may be sick and unable to go on their trip, although the Access Transit Manager pointed out that they could do a same-day cancellation
- A BRS member asked Access Transit if there are any punitive measures for making too many no-shows
  - Access Transit said that once a person has hit a certain threshold of “points,” they would be removed from Access Transit for a couple days at the beginning of the month
  - Access Transit reported that it has usually been the same people who have made no-shows or cancelled their trips on very short notice
  - Access Transit acknowledged that the current policy has not done much to solve the issues, and that it is difficult to deal with these issues when service is at a premium
- Another BRS member asked about the minimum time for cancellations
  - Access Transit recommended that they cancel at minimum, two hours before the trip so that Access Transit could reallocate buses to serve other journeys
- The same BRS member expressed concerns that people trying to cancel trips may encounter busy phone lines
  - Access Transit has a dedicated cancellation line so that they would not be in the same queue as people booking their trips
- Another BRS member asked about apps
  - Access Transit reported that as part of the scheduling work, they are looking at having an app which would allow for people to book or cancel journeys, and for caregivers to monitor trips so that they could remind their clients of when they need to be ready by the scheduled time so that they would not miss the bus
  - Access Transit’s main priority at this time is on their fleet renewal before they could focus on other issues

- A member asked that if clients using Access Transit cancel three hours ahead, they could get more people on the service
  - Access Transit said that it would be beneficial for people to cancel as soon as possible rather than cancelling very last-minute or not showing up at all
- Transit reported that their On-Demand service witnessed similar issues of no-shows as they also lack punitive measures to penalise people with no-shows
  - The Customer Service and Engagement Manager reported Transit has sent emails and sent trip reminders, which increased cancellation rates and affected on-time performance as it affects customer experiences
  - Transit said that without punitive measures, “people can and will get away with” making no-shows or cancelling trips on extremely short notice
  - Transit reports that it is a lot easier to cancel an on-demand trip as it is app-based, rather than cancelling an Access Transit trip as you would have to make a phone call to cancel the trip
- Lift procedures
  - Access Transit reported that they are supposed to talk through lift service with new clients, but they only give instructions for more established clients
  - Access Transit said that if customers have questions about lift procedures, they could ask the supervisors
- Additional questions
  - In their phone booking system, does Access Transit have plans to replace the hold music?
    - The City of Saskatoon’s IVR system uses the same hold music, regardless of which office (e.g. Revenue, Saskatoon Transit, Access Transit) that one calls in to
      - At one time, Transit explored having separate hold music, but they did not consider separate hold music to be a need
    - A BRS member asked if the hold music was expensive because of price-gouging
      - Access Transit reported that having more options for hold music would come at a cost
    - Transit said that they have been submitting customer care requests to the vendor, and said that they would explore changing the hold music, but if changing the hold music comes at a cost, Transit will not change it
  - A BRS member reported that many years ago, the City Council agreed to purchase an additional bus for Access Transit, but a councillor noticed that

it did not increase the staffing component so they can staff the bus and asked for it to be increased, and said that if Access Transit need something, BRS will look at Access plans and ensure that someone gets it

- Access Transit explained that they have a growth factor in budget to allow for additional operational staffing
- Access Transit said that they need to address the fleet size and have the plan be reviewed and approved: once they know the fleet size, then they could look at staff because they cannot have more operators than buses
- Another BRS member asked what Access Transit's next project after the booking system would be, and asked if they had any requests that they can share for the next budget cycle
  - Access Transit reported that they are still in discussions about the budget, so they have not made any requests yet
  - After Access Transit has finished with the fleet renewal, they will be working on the booking and scheduling systems so they could use the technology to the best of their ability
    - The software component of their updates does not address some of the accessibility issues that have been observed by users, so Access Transit would like to review the options on the website to make it more user-friendly
  - Once Access Transit has completed both the fleet renewal and the software, they would like to reexamine the eligibility criteria, as the criteria was set up when Access Transit was first established
    - Access Transit would like to see if the eligibility criteria would still be up to industry standards and to see what improvements could be made to the eligibility criteria
- Customer service feedback
  - Transit announced that they would start directing customer complaints and feedback from Access Transit towards the Transit Customer Service Centre phone line
    - Transit said that they are working with a vendor to modify their IVR system so that they could add options relating to Access Transit so that that Transit may receive feedback, complaints, and commendations of Access Transit staff
  - Transit said that they would like to be more proactive in examining the data and in providing feedback to customers who make commendations, suggestions, or complaints
  - A BRS member asked if the calls about Access Transit would be separated from regular Transit calls when the call systems are integrated

- The Customer Service and Engagement Manager said that Access Transit would be treated as a separate department and the data will be filtered out of Transit's dataset
- Another BRS member asked how information gets in the system if the information is provided verbally, and asked Transit if the data is typed manually
  - Transit said that if they have received enough data from the person providing feedback, they could create a CCR (a five-digit number) for their information, and they would keep the data permanently
- The member asked if an oral complaint works or if written is better
  - Transit said that it is better for them to receive written complaints as the person writing the complaint themselves must provide more detail compared to someone who transcribes an oral complaint that they overheard into the system, as Transit could miss the necessary details
- The Customer Service and Engagement Manager observed that there was a need for a stakeholder group to represent the interests of Access Transit users
  - Transit would like to see a BRS-style stakeholder group for Access Transit, and the Customer Service and Engagement Manager asked that the topic be revisited at a later date
  - A BRS member said that they had difficulty capturing complaints on Access Transit as Access Transit users tended to be more hesitant to provide feedback to BRS, and asked Access Transit users present at the meeting if they would be interested in such a group
    - An Access Transit user said they would be interested in having such a group
  - Another BRS member asked if Access Transit has had a difficult time receiving customer feedback from Access Transit users
    - The Access Transit manager reported that it has been difficult for them to receive feedback from customers, especially as Access Transit has sought to improve their service
  - The same member asked the Access Transit manager if they would like to recruit people to serve on such a committee
    - The Access Transit manager reported that they have a newsletter published twice a year to communicate information with Access Transit users
    - As of the meeting, Access Transit has had a conversation with the Customer Service and Engagement Manager to discuss establishing a stakeholder group for Access Transit

- Access Transit reported that there was no action on their end taken towards establishing an Access Transit stakeholder group, but they would like to discuss more as they would like to see it happen
- A BRS member suggested that the topic for the next meeting should be best practices for the budget, and service improvements and service changes
  - The Customer and Service Manager said that the meeting may take place after the budget discussion, so they may provide more information to the BRS Steering Committee

Next meeting on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025 at 1:30 pm on Zoom