

RIDE TRANSIT AND LEISURE ACCESS PROGRAMS

RECOMMENDATION

That the October 26, 2022, City Operations report CO01192, be received for information.

Requested Council Action	Information only		
ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle	ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals		
CONNECTED This unifies our work to achieve our strategic goals.	Healthy City		
City Plan Values	ACCESS		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	Inclusive and compassionate	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Community safety and well-being
Corporate Business Plan	Serving Edmontonians		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ride Transit Program • Leisure Access Program • Council Policy C624 Fiscal Policy For Revenue Generation • City Policy C451H Edmonton Transit Service Fare Policy 		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CO00576 Transit Fare Fines - Repayment Options, Executive Committee, October 26, 2022 • CR_7420 Leisure Access Pass Eligibility, Executive Committee, October 2, 2019 • CR_5640 Leisure Access Program - Update, Executive Committee, June 6, 2018 • CR_5804 Permanent Ride Transit Program - Transition, Executive Committee, June 6, 2018 • CR_5511 2016-2018 Supplemental Operating Budget Adjustment, City Council, April 10, 2018 • CR_5183 Seniors Recreation Pass, Community and Public Services Committee, January 31, 2018 		

RIDE TRANSIT AND LEISURE ACCESS PROGRAMS

Previous Council/Committee Action

At the March 14/16/22, 2022, City Council meeting, the following motion passed:

That Administration provide a short summary report on the Ride Transit and Leisure Access Programs as well as the current program to allow youth to travel free with a fare-paying customer. This report is to include:

1. The overall usage and cost of these programs.
2. The changes made to eligibility over the past two terms.
3. Any other measures that have been considered in place of low-income cut off (LICO) to determine eligibility for those programs.
4. Opportunities to expand the current scale to include more Edmontonians and an estimate of anticipated costs. This should also include an analysis of expanding these programs to First Nations around the Edmonton Region working in partnership with other orders of government.
5. Opportunities to allow youth 12 and under to travel on ETS for free without a fare-paying customer as well as the opportunity to open that up to those 18 and under.
6. An analysis for individuals with long-term disabilities that prevent the ability to drive (e.g. brain injury).

Executive Summary

- The Ride Transit program launched in 2017 to align with City Policy C451H - Edmonton Transit Service Fare Policy, offering a subsidized monthly transit pass to individuals experiencing low income with the aim of reducing financial barriers to accessing transportation and supporting mobility. Approximately 18,000 Edmontonians purchased Ride Transit passes in July 2022 and usage has been increasing steadily with the recovery of transit ridership.
- The Leisure Access Program (LAP) launched in 1995 with the intent to provide eligible low-income Edmontonians access to participating City of Edmonton recreation facilities and attractions through an annual membership, and, in later years, a subsidized monthly pass. As of September 12, 2022, LAP has 69,857 members.
- Since the launch of Ride Transit and LAP, Administration has further reduced barriers to program participation through a number of changes to program eligibility criteria.
- When exploring options to expand Ride Transit and LAP, Administration consulted Enoch Cree Nation to understand the transit fare and recreation needs of the community. In consultation with Enoch Cree Nation leaders, it was determined an approach similar to Donate A Ride would better suit their transit fare program needs, and participation in the Group LAP and bulk discount programs would best suit their recreation access needs.
- Removing the requirement for youth 12 and under to ride with a fare paying rider would result in transit fare revenue loss, present some operational challenges and may put pressure on passenger loads on some bus routes. Expanding the fare-free age limit to 18 would result in additional fare revenue loss.

RIDE TRANSIT AND LEISURE ACCESS PROGRAMS

- Individuals with long-term disabilities approved for Assured Income for Severely Handicapped (AISH) are able to qualify for the Ride Transit program with their AISH documentation.

REPORT

Edmonton Transit Service (ETS) fare programs have undergone several updates over the past five years, including the introduction of the Ride Transit low income transit pass. Jointly funded by the City of Edmonton and Government of Alberta, the Ride Transit Program launched in September 2017 to provide a subsidized adult or youth monthly transit pass to approved program participants. The program is one of the Game Changer Actions in the EndPoverty Edmonton Roadmap, and ensures greater access to transit service and improved mobility for individuals experiencing low income. Ride Transit began as a pilot and was made permanent in November 2018 after a program evaluation demonstrated the program's outcomes were being achieved, as outlined in CR_5804 Permanent Ride Transit Program - Transition. The funding agreement with the Government of Alberta expires in spring 2023. Administration will work closely with City Council to request ongoing funding to support this program.

The Leisure Access Program (LAP) launched in 1995 with the intent of providing eligible Edmontonians experiencing low income access to City of Edmonton recreation facilities and attractions through an annual membership, and, in later years, a subsidized monthly pass. The LAP program is currently fully funded by the City of Edmonton. However, in the past, the program has received sponsorship support from Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities. As of September 2022, there are approximately 70,000 residents enrolled in the program.

LAP members have access to the following:

- Unlimited, free admission to participating facilities and attractions.
- 75 per cent discount for registered programs (maximum of three per year for adults/seniors and four per year for children).
- Access to drop in child minding service at five recreation facilities across the city.
- Access to one bucket of balls per day at Victoria Driving Range.
- One free Youth in Action course registration per approved youth.
- Access to drop-in shinny and member skate.

In addition to ongoing evaluations and adjustments to the Ride Transit Program and LAP, Council Policy C624 - Fiscal Policy For Revenue Generation, provides guidelines for revenue generation related to municipal services and recommends a user benefit, user pay approach.

In alignment with the Fiscal Policy For Revenue Generation, City Policy C451H - Edmonton Transit Service Fare Policy identifies both a revenue-cost ratio target and includes a principle that the "Transit service will be affordable to the public, regardless of age, financial need or other potential barriers".

The following sections address the six items requested in the motion.

RIDE TRANSIT AND LEISURE ACCESS PROGRAMS

1. Cost and Usage of Ride Transit and Leisure Access Programs

The Ride Transit program currently benefits nearly 14,000 riders per month, compared to 6,800 at its launch in September 2017. While the program reached peak sales in February 2020, with over 20,700 monthly passes sold, pass sales decreased due to the COVID-19 pandemic and have not yet fully recovered.

Approximately 94 per cent of current program participants qualify under the first tier of the program, which offers a 65 per cent discount from the regular adult monthly pass. The remaining six per cent of participants qualify under the second tier of the program, which offers a 50 per cent discount from the regular adult monthly pass.

The annual budget for the Ride Transit program over the 2019-2022 period is outlined below:

(\$000s)	2019	2020	2021	2022
Revenue	14,171	9,575	12,437	13,384
Transit Passes	9,671	4,850	7,712	8,884
Provincial Grant	4,500	4,725	4,725	4,500
Operating Expenses*	28,213	15,130	22,941	26,440
Net Operating Requirement	14,042	5,556	10,729	13,055

*Operating expenses include retail value of passes sold and program expenses (personnel, materials and equipment, external services and other expenses).

As of September 12, 2022, LAP has 69,857 members. The LAP office, consisting of 11.8 FTE positions, administers all LAP and Ride Transit applications through an integrated process. Individuals are automatically considered for both programs when they apply. The annual personnel costs to administer the LAP and Ride Transit program applications is approximately \$819,000. The Ride Transit component of these administrative costs are reflected in the Ride Transit annual budget operating expenses.

2. Changes Made To Ride Transit and LAP Eligibility Requirements

Ride Transit and LAP have undergone several structural changes to eligibility requirements since their initial implementation, all of which either expanded eligibility requirements or increased the length of membership. Changes to eligibility requirements are summarized in Attachment 1.

3. Any other measures that have been considered in place of low-income cut off (LICO) to determine eligibility for those programs

Since the two programs launched, additional qualifying documents were added to the LAP and Ride Transit eligibility criteria to increase access to the programs. The list of qualifying documents which satisfy the application requirements are outlined below:

- Notice of Assessment
- Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH)
- CPP-Disability Benefit (Canada Pension Plan)
- Government of Alberta Income Support
- Learner Income Support

RIDE TRANSIT AND LEISURE ACCESS PROGRAMS

- New Permanent Resident
- Refugee Status (including letter of support from the sponsor agreement holder for privately-sponsored refugees)
- Child Under Government Care
- Government Employment Insurance (Ride Transit only)

In February 2022, due to the influx of new residents from Ukraine to Canada, the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) was added as a new form for proof of eligibility for both the Ride Transit and LAP programs.

4. Opportunities To Expand The Programs

As discussed in relation to the anti-racism review conducted in support of CO00576 Transit Fare Fines - Repayment Options, Administration plans to continually assess the barriers to accessing the Ride Transit program in order to ensure an inclusive program that meets community needs. Several initiatives are planned to increase awareness of the programs and support applicants through the process; for example in 2023, Administration will be assessing the option of providing conditional eligibility Ride Transit passes to support applicants with limited access to documentation who provide agency support letters explaining their circumstances. While there is currently room within the program budget to support increased program subscription, budget availability will also need to be reevaluated periodically.

To explore the opportunity to expand Ride Transit and LAP access to First Nations around the Edmonton region, Administration approached Enoch Cree Nation. This is in recognition of Enoch Cree Nation's geographic proximity to and shared boundary with the city, and the unique relationship shared between the City of Edmonton and Enoch Cree Nation, as defined through the 2017 Memorandum of Understanding. Working with Enoch Cree Nation represents an opportunity to test proposed approaches and learn with an existing partner before considering further expansion to additional First Nations.

Administration met with representatives from Enoch Cree Nation to better understand needs related to accessing recreation and transit. Administration had considered expanding Ride Transit and LAP eligibility to reduce barriers to accessing the programs; however, through engagement with Enoch Cree Nation leaders, different opportunities to better suit the needs of the Enoch community were shared. Enoch leaders shared that people living on reserve are generally not seeking a monthly transit pass as their travel is infrequent and a discounted pass may still be financially inaccessible. A more suitable program would be making free transit tickets available to Enoch Cree Nation to distribute to band members, in a similar fashion as the Donate A Ride program. Enoch leaders also shared that a more suitable recreation option would be to purchase discounted bulk recreation passes and distribute them to their members. In addition, Enoch has expressed interest in the group Leisure Access Program, which would allow access for their youth programs to attend recreation facilities for free up to 12 times per year. Administration is evaluating the outlined transit and recreation options in consultation with Enoch Cree Nation leaders and the Edmonton community.

RIDE TRANSIT AND LEISURE ACCESS PROGRAMS

5. Opportunities to allow youth 12 and under to travel on ETS for free without a fare-paying rider as well as the opportunity to open that up to those 18 and under.

Background

At the April 10, 2018, City Council meeting, Council approved expanding fare-free transit for children up to age 12, expanding it from age five and under, provided they travel with a fare-paying rider. Providing fare-free transit for children 12 and under without accompaniment would likely result in a higher volume of children using transit, and would reduce revenue that would have been collected from the fare-paying rider accompanying these riders. The level of revenue loss is difficult to estimate with existing data and would require additional targeted rider research.

Within the Edmonton Metropolitan Region, the condition for children 12 and under to ride for free with a fare-paying rider is consistent with other regional transit partners participating in the Arc fare payment system. All regional transit partners allow fare-free travel for children 12 and under when accompanied by a fare-paying rider, except for Leduc which limits this to children under five years. Should ETS change this requirement, it may introduce confusion with the regional Arc fare payment system due to inconsistency with other partners and would require further work to resolve regional considerations and ensure clear communications with inter-city riders.

Lastly, school boards provide bus service with a third party contractor for some students; demand for this service would likely shift to ETS buses if children can travel fare-free on ETS without requiring a fare paying rider to accompany them.

Jurisdictional Scan

ETS conducted a jurisdictional scan of transit agency policies regarding children riding fare-free. The scan indicated most agencies, including Calgary Transit, OC Transpo (Ottawa), Winnipeg Transit and Société de Transport de Montréal (STM), continue to require that youth ride with a fare-paying adult or fare-paying rider. Exceptions are:

- The Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) allows children ages 11 and 12 to ride free without a fare-paying adult, but they must show a proof of age card if they are tall for their age.
- Translink (Vancouver) allows youth under 12 to ride for free without a fare-paying rider on buses; however this policy does not apply to the SkyTrain.
- Hamilton has a pilot project until April 2023 that allows children 6-12 to ride for free with a PRESTO card.
- London (Ontario) Transit allows children aged 6-12 to ride for free without a fare-paying rider, provided they have a key FOB to tap on the smart card reader.
- Kingston Transit allows youth aged 14-and-under to ride free without identification or a fare-paying rider.

Increasing Fare-Free Age Limit to 18

RIDE TRANSIT AND LEISURE ACCESS PROGRAMS

When considering changing the fare-free age limit to 18, there are several benefits and challenges that should be assessed. A jurisdictional scan of transit agencies that have recently piloted fare-free transit programs for high school students, such as Kingston Transit and Victoria Transit, demonstrated a significant increase in rides from existing youth ridership. Research indicates these programs tend to be more successful when integrated with broader policies targeted at reducing private vehicle usage. Research also shows a safe, reliable and convenient transit system is key to ensuring the success of these programs.

Increasing the fare-free age limit to 18 would likely increase the affordability and demand for transit, further enabling mobility for this age group and supporting long-term goals associated with mode shift. This change would also significantly increase demand for school service, including the need for school special routes due to overloads on the system if junior and senior high school students could ride fare-free. These service requirements closely align with peak daily service demand hours and would compete with resources to address other service gaps in the transit network. There would be a loss of fare revenues associated with the change, as youth passes and fare tickets sales currently generate \$20 million per year. With the implementation of Arc, the regional fare payment system, changes to eligibility or age criteria will require coordination with transit partners. Similar to when removing the fare-paying rider requirement for children 12 and under, increasing the fare-free age limit to 18 would require further work to resolve regional considerations and ensure clear communications with inter-city riders.

From an operational perspective, expanding to the fare-free age limit to 18 years would be challenging for Operators and Transit Peace Officers to monitor and enforce. It is generally easier to visually identify youth under 13 than it is to differentiate between 18 and 19 year olds. This could lead to fare disputes and disrupt service. From a policy perspective, allowing fare-free transit for riders up to age 18 would not align with City Policy C451H Edmonton Transit Service Fare Policy, which favours needs-based discounts, as opposed to discounts based solely on age.

To encourage youth ridership, ETS currently has several streams of fare support for riders up to the age of 24, including age-based and income-based discounts. As an alternative to expanding the age to 18, ETS recommends increasing support to youth riders, including more work with youth-serving organizations and education programs with the school boards. In addition, ETS is exploring opportunities for additional off-peak service support for youth riders and extracurricular school activities.

Financial implications

If the requirement to travel with a fare-paying rider is removed, there would be a loss in corresponding fare revenue. Estimating this financial impact is not straightforward with current data sources, and would require additional research through interviews and rider surveys.

Increasing the fare-free limit to 18 years would expand the financial impact to approximately \$20 million per year, as ETS would experience a significant decrease in revenue from the loss of youth monthly pass and youth ticket sales, including the loss of youth monthly pass sales to Edmonton school boards. The policy change would be expected to lead to increased service demand, which would also require capital and operating investment to increase service delivery through additional fleet and operations.

RIDE TRANSIT AND LEISURE ACCESS PROGRAMS

If Council directs a policy change to eligibility for fare-free transit for children 12 and under, it will require bringing forward a policy update to City Council for City Policy C451H Transit Fare Service Policy and revising the transit user fee schedule during the 2023-2026 budget process.

6. Analysis For Individuals With Long Term Disabilities

According to Statistics Canada, approximately 23 per cent of Edmontonians identified as having a disability in 2017. The most prevalent disabilities are related to pain, mobility and agility. All of these disability types are considered “invisible” (they may not be readily apparent to others). While many individuals with disabilities are able to operate a vehicle, certain medical conditions may impact the person’s ability to drive safely. In this case, affordable transit service provides a mobility option for people who are unable to operate a vehicle to access education and services, and would enable them to more fully participate in civic life.

ETS has offered a subsidized monthly transit pass for Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) recipients since 2005. The AISH subsidized transit pass was merged with the Ride Transit program in 2017, however program eligibility requirements for AISH recipients remained the same. As of July 2022, there were 7,540 members who were eligible for Ride Transit through AISH, accounting for 14 per cent of all eligible Ride Transit members. Generally speaking, ETS’ equity fare programs are based on ability to pay.

ETS buses are fully accessible and comply with accessibility standards and regulations. For individuals with a mobility challenge, who use a mobility aid or are otherwise new to transit, ETS offers the Mobility Choices Travel Training program - a free, customized travel training program that provides information, orientation and instruction about ETS and an opportunity to practice using the transit system. Riders who are unable to take conventional public transit for all or some trips due to severe physical or cognitive disability may be eligible for Dedicated Accessible Transit Service (DATS) to get door-to-door transportation service.

COMMUNITY INSIGHT

In 2018, Administration conducted a program evaluation of the Ride Transit program led by an external consultant. Program staff, key stakeholders, partners and program participants were engaged to understand the successes and challenges of the program, including how the program benefits its members. An anti-racism review engagement on the Ride Transit program, Donate A Ride, and PATH (Providing Accessible Transit Here) was also conducted in two phases in 2021-2022, which gathered feedback through focus groups from program participants and community agencies who support the low income population.

In addition, an annual survey is conducted with Ride Transit program participants to assess the impact of the program on participants and determine whether the objectives of the program are consistently being met. This year’s survey launched in October 2022.

GBA+

The LAP allows eligible low income Edmontonians to access City recreation facilities by providing an annual pass or subsidized monthly pass. LAP benefits individuals on CPP, income support, AISH, newcomers such as permanent residents and refugees, and children under government

RIDE TRANSIT AND LEISURE ACCESS PROGRAMS

care. The Ride Transit program helps low-income Edmontonians access employment, education, recreation, social services and community support by providing reduced cost public transit. Ride Transit benefits nearly 14,000 riders per month, who are living in low-income households. Ride transit benefits refugees, single parents, people with disabilities, newcomers to Canada who disproportionately live in low-income situations and may be excluded from transit options at the full cost.

The Ride Transit program and LAP are integrated - there is one application form for Ride Transit and LAP and applicants are assessed for both programs at the same time - this model provides easier access to municipal services and increases program participation, particularly for individuals experiencing low income and individuals with mental health conditions. Furthermore, program integration helps reduce program gaps and duplication.

The 2018 Ride Transit Program Evaluation Study engaged over 740 program participants and determined the program was successful in achieving objectives and making access to transit easier for Edmontonians experiencing low income. The survey showed the program has allowed the majority of participants to have greater independence, access to employment, education, healthcare and social activities.

In addition to the 2018 study, ETS conducts an annual Ride Transit survey to gain insights into how different groups are impacted by the program and identify areas for improvement in support of greater equity and inclusion of diverse program participants.

The 2022 survey found the Ride Transit program continues to reduce financial barriers and support social inclusion for the majority of program participants. Some key demographics of Ride Transit survey respondents are outlined below:

- 60 per cent of survey respondents identified as female.
- 30 per cent of survey respondents identified as having a disability.
- Nine per cent of survey respondents identified as Indigenous.
- 17 per cent of survey respondents identified as belonging to a racialized group or visible minority.
- 17 per cent of survey respondents identified as newcomers to Canada.
- 10 per cent of survey respondents identified as LGBTQ2S+.
- 54 per cent of survey respondents were between ages 25 and 44.
- Nine per cent of survey respondents were youth under the age of 25.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Changes To Ride Transit and Leisure Access Pass (LAP) Eligibility Requirements