

ADMINISTRATION RESPONSE: ETSAB RIDERSHIP IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

Recommendation			
That the December 5, 2023, City Operations report CO02060, be received for information.			
Requested Action		Information only	
ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle		ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals	
CONNECTED This unifies our work to achieve our strategic goals.		Urban Places	
City Plan Values	ACCESS.		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	A community of communities	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Mobility Network
Corporate Business Plan	Serving Edmontonians		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C539A - Transit Service Policy and Transit Service Standards Procedures • Enhanced Transit Safety Plan 		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • November 18, 2019, City Operations report CR_7128 Ridership Recovery and Growth • March 21, 2023, City Operations report CO01725 Administration Response - ETSAB Report: Youth and Their Perception of Safety on ETS • June 13, 2023, City Operations report CO01907, Monthly Update on the Transit Safety Plan and the Downtown Core - Verbal report • July 4, 2023, City Operations report CO01908, Monthly Update on the Transit Safety Plan and the Downtown Core - Verbal report • July 4, 2023, City Operations report CO01834, Implementation of the Edmonton Transit System Safety Plan • August 22, 2023, City Operations report CO01922, Monthly Update on the Transit Safety Plan and the Downtown Core - Verbal report • August 29, 2023, City Operations report CO01337, Edmonton Transit Services in Newer Developing/Developed Communities • October 11, 2023, City Operations report CO02028, Administration Response - ETSAB: A Review of Winter Mobility and Accessibility of Pathways to Transit Stops • October 11, 2023, City Operations report CO02029, Administration 		

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Response Youth Perspectives on Transit in Edmonton - An Analytical Report of Ongoing Transit Issues from the Youth Lens

- October 24, 2023, City Operations report CO01974, Opportunities to Enhance Transit Safety and Security - Further Information and Plan
- October 24, 2023, City Operations report CO01944, Bi-monthly Update on the Transit Safety Plan and the Downtown Core - Verbal report
- December 5, 2023, City Operations report CO01552, Commingle Paratransit and On Demand Services

Executive Summary

- The Edmonton Transit Service Advisory Board (ETSAB) has prepared a report “ETSAB: Ridership Improvement Strategies” which provides recommendations to increase Edmonton Transit Service (ETS) ridership.
- Investment in transit service has been shown to be the most critical driver of ridership growth.
- Administration is committed to continuing to implement safety and security measures, cleaning initiatives, improving service reliability and frequency, and implementing paratransit service enhancements.
- ETS’ comprehensive rider research program uses a variety of research tools and methodologies designed to gain meaningful insights from transit riders, paratransit riders, and non-riders.
- Strategies and initiatives, such as marketing campaigns, transit space activations and partnerships, are being pursued to further attract and retain riders and improve the overall transit rider experience.

REPORT

Public transit is a critical part of building a great city and integral to achieving Council’s strategic goals, as outlined in The City Plan and ConnectEdmonton. Growing transit ridership advances the goals of building a healthy, climate resilient city with vibrant urban places and regional prosperity. ETSAB has prepared a report, EXT02023 ETSAB: Ridership Improvement Strategies, which includes research, analysis and recommendations for ETS regarding safety and security, cleaning, service reliability, as well as other strategies and incentives to increase transit ridership.

Transit ridership is driven by many factors that determine how residents and visitors use transit in Edmonton as well as their trip frequency. A 2016 City of Edmonton report¹ on factors affecting transit ridership showed that service delivery and design aspects such as service hours and frequency have high elasticities associated with ridership. Similar findings have been reported in external research, including the Victoria Transport Policy Institute². Elasticity indicates the percentage change in demand is equal to the percentage change in frequency. For example, transit demand elasticities for frequency increases are 0.5, meaning that increasing frequency from two buses per hour to four buses per hour would increase passenger demand from 100 to 150 passengers per hour. In Edmonton, the recent service increase of 500 weekly off-peak service

¹ City of Edmonton. [Factors Affecting Transit Ridership](#), 2016

² Victoria Transport Policy Institute. [Transit Price Elasticities and Cross-Elasticities](#), April 2023

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hours (26,000 hours per year) and 25 per cent increase in On Demand Transit service, implemented as part of service adjustments in September 2023, provide an opportunity to further increase ridership through improved frequency levels and extended bus routes. Administration continues to prioritize growing service to further support increased ridership and equitable access to transit.

Administration remains committed to listening, learning and adapting to the needs of transit riders. Opportunities to improve the rider experience are continually being explored, including smaller-scale initiatives that make an impact on the rider journey and can be implemented within existing budgets. Examples of ongoing and new initiatives regarding safety and security, cleaning, reliability, DATS and other ridership strategies are outlined below.

1. Safety and Security

A safe, reliable and equitable transit service builds trust in the community. Furthermore, transit riders who feel safe and supported within their transit network are more inclined to become lifelong, regular riders.

Administration is committed to the safety and security of everyone within the transit system, with extensive work being conducted in collaboration with tripartite partners Edmonton Police Service and Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society and in coordination with the Government of Alberta, Government of Canada, and other community partners. Since June 2023, Administration has presented six reports to Council detailing initiatives and progress updates on safety and security work. This work is aligned with the Canadian Urban Transit Association's (CUTA) Transit Safety Task Force recommendations released in April 2023, focusing on rider safety, staff safety, housing and supports, substance use and mental health (see Attachment 1 of July 4, 2023, City Operations report CO01834, Implementation of the Edmonton Transit System Safety Plan).

Enhancing safety and security on transit is ongoing work. Administration will continue to provide regular updates to Council to monitor and report on progress. The next update to Council is scheduled to take place at the December 12, 2023, City Council meeting through City Operations report CO01954, Bi-monthly Verbal Update on the Transit Safety Plan and the Downtown Core.

2. Cleaning

Clean transit spaces create a welcoming environment with fewer safety hazards and signals to riders that spaces are well cared for, positively influencing rider decisions to take transit. Cleaning of transit spaces includes vehicles, LRT stations, transit centres and bus stops. Administration ensures cleaning standards and protocols are followed for all custodial and cleaning services. These standards follow industry best practices. Starting in 2020, enhanced cleaning of transit vehicles and stations includes surface cleaning for high-touch points, as well as general maintenance to remove waste and debris. This has improved rider perceptions of safety and the overall rider experience.

The October 24, 2023, City Operations report CO01974, Opportunities to Enhance Transit Safety and Security - Further Information and Plan, outlines an opportunity to permanently maintain enhanced cleaning levels. As a result, Council directed Administration to bring forward an

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unfunded service package for permanent enhanced cleaning for consideration as part of the fall 2023 Supplemental Operating Budget Adjustment.

3. On-Time Reliability: Connections, Transfer Time and Bus Frequency

Administration agrees with the importance of continually striving for timeliness and adherence to posted schedules to maximize connections. Reliability of service is one of the guiding principles for City Policy C539A - Transit Service Policy and a critical component of the rider journey. Changes to routes and schedules are made five times per year to account for changes in travel patterns, such as increased ridership, construction and road traffic.

Administration has recently responded and highlighted improvements on this topic through two October 11, 2023, City Operations reports: CO02028, Administration Response ETSAB Report: A Review of Winter Mobility and Accessibility of Pathways to Transit Stops; and CO02029, Administration Response Youth Perspectives on Transit in Edmonton.

4. Ridership and DATS

Dedicated Accessible Transit Service (DATS), Edmonton's paratransit service, provides a vital transportation service for thousands of Edmontonians who are unable to use conventional transit due to a physical or cognitive disability. The service plays a pivotal role in enabling access to travel to work, education, healthcare, housing and community life. In September 2023, DATS delivered an average of 17,600 trips per week, representing a 16 per cent increase from approximately 15,200 trips per week in September 2022.

In 2019, the multi-year DATS Program Enhancements Plan launched to improve paratransit service by enhancing trip planning, rider information, ride times, on-time performance, service delivery and other key aspects. Since then, Administration implemented 25 actions that have significantly improved access to transportation service for DATS riders, with an additional five actions rolling out in 2024. DATS accommodation rates, the proportion of trip requests that are accommodated within one hour of the initial requested pick-up time, have consistently met or exceeded 98 per cent since the plan was launched. The action plan has also contributed to improved DATS overall satisfaction, from 90 per cent in 2020 to 92 per cent in 2022. A progress update on the DATS Program Enhancements Plan will be provided on December 5, 2023, as a component of the City Operations report CO01552 Commingle Paratransit and On Demand Services.

5. Other Strategies to Improve Ridership

Engaging with transit riders and non-riders through rider research tools, outreach, marketing campaigns and community activations provides a significant opportunity to increase loyalty among existing transit riders and attract new riders. Over the years, ETS has deployed various strategies aimed at supporting rider experiences to achieve greater ridership attraction and retention. Some examples of past, ongoing and future initiatives are outlined below.

Transit Rider Research Program

ETS has established an industry leading rider-centric research program, focused on building upon rider experiences that prioritize service enhancements and transit initiatives that have the most

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meaningful impact on Edmontonians. Since its implementation, the rider research program has adapted to the changes in the public transit industry, ridership patterns and the transit journey experience in Edmonton. The program employs a variety of research tools to provide a holistic view of ridership, including frequent transit riders, occasional riders, paratransit riders and non-riders. Attachment 1 details the program's research streams as part of a comprehensive effort to understand the attitudes, perceptions and experiences of transit riders.

Additionally, as discussed in the October 11, 2023, City Operations report CO02029, Administration Response Youth Perspectives on Transit in Edmonton, Administration will be exploring options to expand youth research in 2024, in collaboration with the City of Edmonton Youth Council and other Council advisory boards and committees.

Strategies and Incentives

Over the past several years, outreach and engagement initiatives were implemented to attract ridership. Examples include the Rediscover ETS marketing campaign, launched in summer 2022, which encouraged the public to use transit to explore the city and connect with their communities. The campaign included on-site activations through ETS ambassadors at local attractions and transit spaces, partnerships to reach wider audiences, and social media contests to engage with riders.

The Rediscover ETS campaign laid a foundation for continued partnerships and evolution. In 2023, ETS partnered with several community events and organizations to position ETS as a primary transportation provider to local attractions. This introduced non-riders to transit and provided an opportunity for ETS to tap into new advertising channels, and position ETS positively in the community. Additional transit space activation initiatives, such as experiential initiatives, art activations and partnerships are outlined in the October 24, 2023, City Operations report CO01974, Opportunities to Enhance Transit Safety and Security - Further Information and Plan.

Moving forward, ETS will continue to explore other innovative opportunities to provide incentives to attract ridership. This includes exploring mutually beneficial opportunities with external festivals and event organizers or gamification strategies to offer rewards to riders.

Community Insight

Administration regularly collects feedback from transit riders through 311, community engagement and customer service interactions. As discussed in Attachment 1, research tools include monthly transit rider satisfaction surveys, non-rider surveys, Edmonton Insight Community surveys and other qualitative studies. These research streams provide valuable insights on trip characteristics and travel patterns, perceptions of transit, reasons for transit use and satisfaction along the transit journey. In 2022, ETS collected over 2,450 responses from conventional transit riders, 240 DATS riders and 400 non-riders through core research streams. Key insights from rider surveys are outlined below:

- Overall satisfaction for conventional transit riders was 82 per cent in 2022, and 81 per cent in 2021. Areas of improvement for conventional transit riders included safety and security, cleanliness, service frequency and transfer waiting times.

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- Overall satisfaction for DATS riders was 92 per cent in 2022, and 90 per cent in 2021. Areas of improvement for DATS riders included the 30-minute pick-up window, call centre wait times and total ride times.
- When non-riders were asked about their past overall satisfaction with ETS, 74 per cent of respondents in 2022 indicated they were satisfied. Top areas for increasing likelihood of using ETS included better safety/security measures, more direct connections, reduced faring options and convenient bus stops/LRT stations.

GBA+

Ensuring riders have equitable and inclusive access to a safe, reliable and affordable transit service is a key driver for attracting and retaining transit ridership. Studies³ show that people who live in communities with lower access to reliable transit service and connections are more likely to resort to alternative transportation means such as cars, taxi and rideshare services to travel to daily needs. This disproportionately affects those from marginalized communities such as youth, seniors, newcomers and lower income households who have limited affordable transportation options to meet their daily needs.

To reduce these barriers, recently ETS has placed greater focus on increasing access to transit through service planning and increasing service levels, safety and security, outreach and reducing barriers to low income fare programs. In addition, the November 22, 2022 City Operations report CO01450 Transit Network Equity Analysis demonstrated findings from an equity analysis which identified transit service improvements in areas throughout Edmonton with higher proportions of lower income households, seniors (ages 65 and over) and Indigenous populations. Administration is committed to further integrating an equity lens in service planning. For example, in 2023 through a partnership with the University of Alberta School of Urban and Regional Planning, a review of bus stop design and stop amenities that influence the transit rider experience will be conducted to inform future bus stop amenity investments and planning.

Ridership growth and retention measures also take into consideration the existing ridership demographics to meet the needs of all Edmontonians. Transit ridership is represented by a diverse range of demographic identities and lived experiences, including youth, women, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, persons with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+ and those with lower household incomes. Measures to improve transit safety, reliability and convenience of transit ultimately increase the well-being of all Edmontonians and support decisions to use transit.

Attachment

1. Transit Rider Research Program Tools and Methodology

³ Wang, K. Woo, M. [*The relationship between transit rich neighborhoods and transit ridership: Evidence from the decentralization of poverty*](#), 2017