DATS Program Service Enhancements - Update and Next Steps

Recommendation

That the October 16, 2020, City Operations report CR_7353, be received for information.

Previous Council/Committee Action

At the June 24, 2019, Executive Committee meeting, the following motion was passed:

> That Administration provide an update on the progress and next steps related to the DATS program service enhancements.

Executive Summary

This report provides an update on the three-year action plan to improve the Disabled Adult Transit Service (DATS) user experience, supporting ConnectEdmonton and the City Plan's Healthy City goal. Improving the DATS customer experience is essential to Edmonton's transit network and a key component of a healthy and resilient city. Implementation of the action plan is ahead of schedule and additional enhancements have been added. In 2018-2019, DATS service levels, trip accommodation and on-time performance targets were met.

COVID-19 impacted the delivery of transit service in Edmonton, including paratransit. Enhanced safety measures and operational adjustments were introduced to protect the health and safety of users and staff. However, this did not disrupt progress on the action plan for service improvements and the remaining action items will be completed within the previously communicated timeline.

Report

DATS provides door-to-door shared-ride transportation for residents who are unable to use conventional public transit due to a physical or cognitive disability. Registered DATS users must meet eligibility criteria and book their trips in advance.

In 2019, Administration created a three-year action plan to improve paratransit service. This report provides an update on the status of that plan.

The nine planned actions to improve DATS user experience are:

1. Implement a more flexible and cost-effective service model;
2. Address operator workforce shortages due to excess retirements and unplanned staff absences;
3. Explore partnerships with alternative transportation providers;
4. Pursue technological enhancements in trip scheduling and real-time user information;
5. Leverage the fully accessible conventional transit fleet;
6. Enhance training for contracted operators;
7. Provide clients with an option to book either a pick-up or drop-off window;
8. Provide more flexibility to address individual client needs; and
9. Improve the paratransit trip experience.

Action Plan Progress

The overall action plan is ahead of schedule, with six of the 14 task items completed to date. Being ahead of schedule has allowed Administration to undertake two additional tasks: a review and rebuild of the online booking tool and an overhaul of the trip cancellation policies and enforcement program.

Immediate actions focused on restoring service levels by adding more DATS Operators and improving the contracted service model. These efforts helped improve DATS service standards and meet performance targets of 98 percent trip accommodation and 90 percent on-time performance before trip volume dropped due to COVID-19. The February 2020 trip accommodation rate was 98.5 percent and on-time performance was 95.2 percent.

Action 1: Implement a more flexible and cost-effective service model.

Status update: partially complete; outstanding items on track to be complete by 2021

- In August 2019, DATS entered into new contracts with three taxi companies in addition to the primary dedicated service contractor, achieving $500,000 in estimated cost savings. A pilot was conducted and found that taxi sedans can deliver up to a maximum of 200 trips per day.
- Enhanced contract management, monitoring, training, oversight, and quality control functions for contracted services is in place.

Action 2: Address operator workforce shortages due to excess retirements and unplanned staff absences.

Status update: Complete

1. In 2019, Administration recruited and trained 31 new DATS Operators. This is the most extensive hiring program to date, representing nearly one-quarter of the DATS Operator workforce.

2. Contract service provider pilot was deployed providing 200 trips per day to provide supplemental service while the Operator hiring campaign was underway to allow service levels to return to normal standards in Q2 2019.

Action 4: Pursue technology enhancements in trip scheduling and real-time user information.

Status Update: On track to be completed by 2021

- Several technology improvements have been completed, including changes that reduce customers' time on board vehicles to make trips as efficient as possible and increase trip capacity. An upgrade to the newest version of the paratransit software platform is planned for 2021 which will enable further service improvements, including the online booking tool.

Action 6: Enhance training for contracted operators.

Status Update: Complete

- Contractor training curriculum was redesigned based on industry best practice and engagement with DATS customers focusing on customer service, disability awareness and experiential learning. Administration has developed a consistent train the trainer model, enabling contractors to train and teach other staff, in 2020 that has been implemented with all paratransit contractors and private vehicle-for-hire operators.

Action 7: Provide clients with an option to book either a pick-up or drop-off window.

Status Update: Ontrack to be completed by 2021

- Technical software testing has been completed. Customer engagement is ongoing to establish prioritization principles of appointment times for subscription trips. Phased rollout of appointment times is planned for 2021.

Action 8: Provide more flexibility to address individual client needs.

Status Update: Complete

- Administration has completed customer journey mapping for transit journeys, including the perspective of DATS clients (Attachment 1). Customer journey maps reinforce the action plan. Findings show that many DATS registrants use conventional transit for some trips when possible and show potential opportunities for increased integration between paratransit and conventional transit.

Action 9: Improve the paratransit trip experience.

Status Update: Partially complete and on track to be completed as scheduled with one new action added

- Testing of a distance-based ride time was completed in 2020. Phased pilot rollout is currently underway and will reduce trip duration for users.

- Public engagement on trip cancellation enforcement policies was conducted in 2020, resulting in adding an action item to overhaul the current trip cancellation policy.

COVID-19 Impacts

Demand for DATS service temporarily declined as a result of COVID-19, with trip volume dropping by 90 percent. Demand is slowly increasing and is currently at 30 percent of 2019 levels. During the immediate response to the pandemic, DATS prioritized the health of clients and staff and introduced enhanced safety measures and operational adjustments including:

- Reducing the available seats on vehicles to allow for physical distancing on vehicles;
- Enhanced daily cleaning and disinfecting of vehicles and facilities;
- COVID-19 pre-screening processes for trip booking;
- Enhanced personal protective equipment for Operators and contracted drivers;
- Special precautionary measures such as mandating Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), enhanced cleaning and training a pool of dedicated Operators for trips identified as higher risk;
- Coordination with Alberta Health Services to identify and mitigate risks related to specific location; and
- Communication and monitoring to enforce compliance with the mandatory mask bylaw.

Outstanding Actions and Next Steps

As businesses and activities continue to resume and relaunch after responding to the pandemic, DATS trips are increasing. The rising trip volume confirms that DATS clients rely on DATS trips to connect to our larger community for essential services, education and employment opportunities.

The City Plan aims for a mobility system that moves people and goods in a safe and accessible manner. Providing and improving the DATS service and customer experience facilitates opportunity, connection, equity and health while being safe and inclusive. To achieve a healthy city, Edmonton must have integrated transportation networks that provide residents with convenient options.

The next steps for implementing the DATS action plan include the following activities:

Action 3: Explore partnerships with alternative transportation providers.

Status Update: On track to be finalized by 2022

- Administration is conducting research on technology to allow for a single dispatch and trip booking platform for accessible transportation options, to be finalized by 2022

Action 4: Pursue technology enhancements in trip scheduling and real-time user information.

Status Update: to be complete by 2022

- Automating arrival notifications via text or phone is scheduled for Q1 2021. This will improve the reliability of the manually triggered system and provide consistency across all vehicle types.
- Due to systems upgrade work, Administration added another action to upgrade the online booking platform to be more user-friendly. Rebuilding the online booking tool is targeted for 2022 upon completion of the upgrade to the newest system version.
- Customer engagement is planned for Q1 2021 to identify opportunities to improve user experience of the online booking tool.

Action 5: Leverage the fully accessible conventional transit fleet.

Status Update: On track to be finalized by 2022, one year earlier than anticipated

- Administration will explore options for curb-to-curb service or paratransit service scheduled to and from major transit hubs to support integration with other transportation options by 2023. A review of increased integration with the conventional transit service will be completed by 2022.
- Planning is underway to enhance travel training capabilities for paratransit clients to feel more empowered and comfortable using conventional transit, including the design of physical travel training infrastructure in the next transit garage.

Action 9: Improve the paratransit trip experience.

Status Update: to be complete by 2021

- Automation of the new trip cancellation enforcement program will be completed in 2021 and will reduce late cancellations and no-shows, ultimately improving the reliability of pickup and drop off times for all DATS users.
- A new ETS customer satisfaction survey program is being developed to measure and monitor DATS client satisfaction on a regular basis with a specific survey for DATS customers starting January 2021.

Corporate Outcomes and Performance Management

Corporate Outcome(s): Edmontonians use public transit.			
Outcome(s)	**Measure(s)**	**Result(s)**	**Target(s)**
Reliable paratransit service to connect clients to the community	DATS on-time performance	2019: 92.51%	90% or more of DATS pick-ups are to occur on time (annual target)

Attachments

1. Transit Customer Journey Map

Others Reviewing this Report

- M. Persson, Chief Financial Officer and Deputy City Manager, Financial and Corporate Services
- C. Owen, Deputy City Manager, Communications and Engagement
- R. Smyth, Deputy City Manager, Citizen Services
- S. McCabe, Deputy City Manager, Urban Form and Corporate Strategic Development
- B. Andriachuk, City Solicitor