INFORMATION REPORT

Admin Report - Transit Detour Process.docx

ISSUE
Saskatoon Transit uses a primarily paper-based system for communicating temporary transit stop closures and is anticipating moving to a primarily digital approach by April 1, 2020. This report provides the Standing Policy Committee on Transportation with background, status and process information on this transition.

BACKGROUND
Saskatoon Transit Administration has identified many gaps within the current process of posting paper notices for temporary bus stop closures. The use of paper bus stop closure notifications is susceptible to a number of issues which impacts the timeliness and accuracy of information available. For example, weather, vandalism and theft all impact the reliability of the paper notification. Furthermore, changes to a construction project impacting a bus stop also affects the reliability and timeliness of the information depending on when Transit staff receives the information and can re-visit the location to update the paper notice. Posting, updating and monitoring the status of these paper notices requires time equivalent to approximately 1.5 FTEs, roughly $100,000 annually.

CURRENT STATUS
The vast majority of temporary bus stop closures take place during the City's construction season (April – October).

Saskatoon Transit currently communicates temporary bus stop closures by:
- Posting a paper notice at affected bus stops for planned detours or closures in excess of 24 hours in duration.
- Posting a digital notification, called a Service Alert on the mobile app Transit, Google Transit (available on mobile and desktop), SaskatoonTransit.ca and Saskatoon Transit Twitter.

Over 6,000 Saskatoon Transit riders use the Transit app on a daily basis. This does not include the number of people who use Google maps on their phone or desktop and the approximately 1,000 people who visit Saskatoon Transit's website every day. In addition to receiving Service Alert information, those riders using the Transit app can mark the routes they use on a regular basis as their favourite, within the app, to receive push notifications when there is a service alert on their route.

To post a paper notification, Transit Supervisors drive to the affected bus stop and post a notification. These notices are temporarily affixed to the bus stop pole using zip ties and it is important that they are monitored for vandalism, theft and damage as they are often damaged or displaced by adverse weather. When there is a change to a project/bus stop closure timeline, staff must go back to the affected stop and post new paper notices. This process can result in significant delays for riders to access updated information.

Saskatoon Transit always aims to set up a detour without closing a bus stop, when possible, bus stops are closed only as a last resort. When a closure is necessary, there are typically barricades or pylons blocking the road which offer a visual cue that vehicles, including buses, are not allowed to drive down a street. Posting paper notifications on temporarily closed bus stops could encourage people to walk into construction zones to read them, posing a safety concern for both the individual and workers.

Advances in software and hardware used to monitor and track the GPS locations of buses has allowed Saskatoon Transit to automate service alerts across all digital channels. This automation allows Service Alerts to be pushed to affected routes at the same time as Saskatoon Transit is notified of the service disruption. This provides for immediate alterations to an alert when needed.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

Saskatoon Transit's transition to digital first temporary bus stop closure notifications relies on a method whereby service alerts are pushed to the Transit App, Google Transit, SaskatoonTransit.ca and Saskatoon Transit Twitter. Paper notices outlining all service disruptions for planned detours in excess of 24 hours will be posted at each of the six main Transit Terminals (Downtown, Place Riel, Market Mall, Centre Mall, Confederation Mall and Lawson Mall), catering to those transferring at a terminal who may not be on a digital platform. In all cases, contacting staff at the Saskatoon Transit Customer Service Centre, 975-3100, will result in citizens getting up to date information. This will see paper notifications no longer posted at each affected stop beginning with the 2020 construction season.

The one exception is when a bus stop is closed and routing is changed from one street to another. In this instance, paper notifications will be used to direct riders to temporary bus stops (depicted by A frame signs) in the new locations.

As noted earlier, there are many gaps in the current process of posting paper notifications. Saskatoon Transit's commitment is to provide timely and reliable service to customers yet the reality is that the paper notifications can often lead to unreliable information. The current system requires significant staff hours at a cost of approximately $100,000 per year that could be invested in other areas to enhance customer and employee support.

Furthermore, the current process will not be sustainable as the footprint of the city grows, relying on more staff hours to post, monitor and take care of notices across a larger system. The digital first approach greatly assists Saskatoon Transit in building trust with riders by communicating timelier, more consistent and reliable information on an increasingly convenient platform that up to 96% of the population use. (According to the Pew Research Centre, 96 percent of Americans own a mobile phone with high penetration among all demographic groups.)

By committing to digital service alerts and paper notifications at Transit terminals, Saskatoon Transit can instantly inform the large majority of riders while maintaining a notification system for non-wired users. Moving forward, temporary bus stop closure notifications will be communicated as follows:

Channel	Form
Transit app	Digital (mobile)
Google Transit	Digital (mobile & desktop)
SaskatoonTransit.ca	Digital (mobile & desktop)
Transit Twitter	Digital (mobile & desktop)
Six Transit Terminals	Hard Copy
Calling Transit Customer Service (975-3100)	Other (mobile & landline)

The digital first approach supports the strategic goal of Continuous Improvement by looking at more efficient ways to conduct business and ensure an integrated approach to stakeholder communications. One of the pillars of the Communications and Public Engagement Division is to enhance the digital approach. Exponential growth in technology has brought about increased citizen expectations, with residents wanting access to timely and digitally accessible information they can access on their own time and on their own devices. Moving to a digital approach for advising customers of temporary bus stop closures aligns with the digital approach the City has undertaken for notifying residents of garbage collection schedules, and leisure guide programs and services.

In Canada, the majority of mobile phone users are smartphone users. Further, regardless of assumptions to the contrary, data is not required to access Transit Service Alert information on the Transit app, removing a barrier for many individuals. For clarification, it is by using the "Go" feature in the Transit app that data is required, as well as the function that enables riders to see how far away the bus is in real time.

Transit Agencies from around Canada
Saskatoon Transit enlisted the Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA) to poll Canadian transit agencies on temporary bus stop notification processes. Of the 31 respondents, 24 agencies have some form of digital notification approach, three agencies did not post physical notifications at bus stops and several agencies expressed they would be expanding their digital notifications process. From this quick industry scan, it appears that Saskatoon Transit is at the leading edge of adopting a digital first approach and technology integration.

Digital Approach Services from North American Agencies
Saskatoon Transit also found other examples of government agencies successfully moving to a digital first approach in non-traditional industries. In the United States numerous public service agencies use a digital approach to enroll in a program, set up a free doctor appointment, and communicate with and notify customers of program changes.

Saskatoon Transit is examining the current digital systems available, and is in discussions with existing vendors to see whether there are options to incorporate text messaging, and RSS feeds into the temporary bus stop closure notification process.

IMPLICATIONS
An estimated 1.5 FTEs (equivalent to approximately $100,000) are used to print, physically distribute, update and monitor all the paper notifications. These resources will be used to further enhance the customer experience and provide more day-to-day support to Transit staff including mentoring and coaching of operators as well as timelier customer complaint and issue follow-up.

This change in process will also reduce the amount of paper and single use plastics (zip ties) used by Saskatoon Transit. Completing the adoption of a digital first approach for temporary bus stop closure notifications in the spring of 2020 allows for appropriate time to communicate with residents and seek feedback on the options presented within this report.

Based on a statistical analysis of daily ridership, average number of bus stops closed to construction, total number of bus stops, and percentage of citizens without access to a mobile device, there is a 0.017% to 0.034% probability that an individual citizen may be affected by a bus stop closure during construction season.

NEXT STEPS
Saskatoon Transit anticipates completing the adoption of a digital first approach for bus stop notifications at the start of the 2020 construction season (April 1, 2020). Prior to this, further options for providing notifications will be explored and additional stakeholder discussions will be conducted.

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