

Saskatoon Transit Operations Update – Re-Open Saskatchewan

ISSUE

Saskatoon Transit intends to support the Re-Open Saskatchewan plan by getting riders to their destinations on-time with an emphasis on keeping staff and riders safe. The current physical distancing requirements and operating procedures drastically reduce the capacity of Transit vehicles. As more phases of the Re-Open Saskatchewan plan are enabled, Saskatoon Transit will not be able to meet the anticipated capacity needs for riders wanting to take the bus without adjusting some of the current operating procedures through a phased approach. Should Saskatoon Transit start returning to pre-COVID-19 operating procedures and capacity levels through a phased approach in conjunction with the Re-Open Saskatchewan plan?

BACKGROUND

History

At the April 27, 2020 Regular Business Meeting of City Council, Saskatoon Transit provided an information report regarding service levels being provided during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the steps taken, as part of the Exposure Control Plan, to protect employees and the public. This information can be found in the report “Transit LOS During COVID - 19”. One key change effective March 20, taken for staff and rider protection, was to move to rear door entry and suspend fare collection.

Re-Open Saskatchewan consists of five phases. The timing and order of the businesses/workplaces included in each phase is subject to change based on a continuous assessment of transmission patterns and other factors:

- Phase 1 - May 4. Re-opening previously restricted medical services, golf courses, parks, and campgrounds.
- Phase 2 - May 19. Re-opening retail and select personal care services.
- Phase 3 – June 8. Re-opening restaurants and food services, gyms and fitness centres, licensed establishments and child care facilities; re-opening remaining personal care services; re-opening places of worship; increasing indoor public and private gatherings to 15 people and outdoor gatherings to 30 people.
- Phase 4 – TBD. Re-opening indoor and outdoor recreation facilities; increasing the size of indoor public and private gatherings to 30 people.
- Phase 5 – TBD. Consider lifting long-term restrictions.

Phase 1 has been in effect for almost three weeks and has had limited effect on transit ridership. Phase 2 is still in the early stages of implementation and has resulted in increased ridership. Phase 3 is anticipated to see further ridership increases that are difficult to predict at this stage as Saskatoon Transit has never experienced the re-opening of an economy after a pandemic lockdown.

Current Status

Saskatoon Transit is currently realizing 10% to 20% of the typical ridership at this time of year. Most riders are using transit for essential trip purposes with a defined destination and purpose, however, there are riders using the service without a defined destination or purpose.

Saskatoon Transit is currently meeting the demand on the system while schools, post-secondary institutions and businesses are closed; however, the introduction of Phase 2 saw an increase in transit demand. Under Phase 3 it is expected that Saskatoon Transit will see a further increase in demand. Providing service for the expected increased demand will be problematic with the current reduced capacity on buses, and could result in ridership exceeding capacity along some portions of the service, or the service as a whole. An average 40 foot bus is limited to approximately 10 passengers with the current COVID-19 physical distancing limitations and operating procedures. Under non-pandemic conditions, this type of bus carries approximately 40 people seated and can carry an additional 20 standing.

Stakeholder Engagement

There have been conversations with the Vulnerable Sector EOC on implications of returning to pre-COVID-19 operating procedures through a phased approach. For this sector, continued discussions and sufficient notice on any changes to the transit system is critical and will be ongoing.

Saskatoon Transit's Current Approach

Saskatoon Transit has been monitoring the ridership on all services daily. Through this monitoring, and flexible operator schedules, Fixed Route Transit has been able to react to buses with full loads on most routes. The intent is to continue to monitor and react to full loads, but as Phase 3 and subsequent phases of the Re-Open Saskatchewan plan are implemented, there will not be enough resources to completely solve the issue. There will be a requirement to make changes to current operating procedures to realize more capacity on buses while physical distancing requirements are in place.

To limit exposure risks for Operators, the front portion of buses was sectioned off after the wheelchair positions to provide physical distancing from riders. Removal of these barriers will accommodate an additional 3 to 5 passengers. The installation of a clear vinyl panel at the Operator driving station will remove the necessity for the current separation barrier after the wheelchair positions; allow front door boarding, facilitate re-introduction of fare collection, and access to the seats near the front of the bus.

Saskatchewan Government Insurance (SGI), Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) have been consulted on the addition of the clear vinyl panels. Once the panels are installed on the buses, Transit's Exposure Control Plan will be updated.

Unless provincial requirements are relaxed, typical peak loads on buses would only be possible if face protective masks were mandatory for all passengers. Transit properties across Canada will be grappling with this issue in the coming months. The

Administration will continue to monitor ridership and Transit's ability to maintain service as well as national trends in the transit industry. A future report on mask use or other solutions will be brought to City Council as the situation evolves and more is known.

Approaches in Other Jurisdictions

Most transit agencies in Canada are following the advice of Public Health Authorities and have suspended fare collection, introduced modified Saturday service, have been loading passengers through the rear doors and have reduced seating capacity to half or less than half of the available seats.

Translink (Vancouver), BC Transit, Grand River Transit in Kitchener ON, and Kodiak Transit in Moncton, NB will be re-introducing fares starting June 1, 2020. Brampton, ON will be re-introducing fares on June 15, 2020. All these systems have provided permanent or temporary barriers at the operator station and have already moved to front door loading, or will at the same time as fare collection is being re-introduced.

OPTIONS

Option 1 – Increasing Bus Capacity and Re-Introduction of Fares on June 8, 2020

Under this option Saskatoon Transit would increase bus capacity and re-introduce fares on June 8, 2020 to align with the implementation date of Phase 3 of the Re-Open Saskatchewan Plan. Front door loading is possible with the installation of the clear (flexible) vinyl panels, and front-door loading enables re-introduction of fare collection. A prototype of the clear vinyl panel has already been tested with installation of clear vinyl panels on buses well underway and anticipated to be completed on all, or the majority of the conventional buses by June 8, 2020. Buses that do not have the clear vinyl panels installed by June 8, 2020 would continue to operate with rear door entry until such time as the clear vinyl panels are installed.

Prior to re-introducing fares, a communication campaign to riders would be undertaken. This campaign could be concurrent with the clear vinyl panel installation process. The communication campaign would advise riders and the general public that Saskatoon Transit would be increasing capacity on buses and re-introducing fares. If City Council approves the approach as outlined in this report on May 27, 2020, this leaves 11 days for a communication campaign prior to the proposed June 8, 2020 date.

For those who are still owed subscription time, (i.e. monthly pass holders are owed 10 days from their March passes), there will be additional days added to their passes at start-up. This information will be provided to those with subscriptions.

It is expected that Option 1 will see a reduction in the number of transit riders without a defined destination and purpose and would see an associated increase in available seats on individual buses and increased capacity across the system. Front door entry with clear vinyl panels at the operator station will provide an additional 3 to 5 seats at the front of the bus.

Option 2 - Continue Fare Suspension

Under this option Saskatoon Transit will still move to front door entry with the installation of the clear vinyl panels at the operator station to increase capacity at the front of the bus with an additional 3 to 5 seats, but continue with no fare collection. As the Re-Open Saskatchewan plan moves through Phase 3, 4, and 5 ridership is anticipated to increase, and with physical distancing requirements remaining, having all available capacity for riders with defined trip destinations and purposes will be critical to maximize available capacity. Not having capacity to pick up riders at bus stops due to capacity constraints will increase complaints and cause stress to riders due to pass ups or overloads on routes with high ridership.

RECOMMENDATION

Approval of Option 1 as part of a phased approach to provide additional capacity on buses to align with anticipated increased ridership associated with the Re-Open Saskatchewan plan.

RATIONALE

Saskatoon Transit Administration is of the opinion that with implementation of Phase 3 of the Re-Open Saskatchewan Plan on June 8, 2020, that it is time to make adjustments to operating procedures to maximize available bus capacity within the current physical distancing requirements. With the move to front door loading, there will be an additional 3 to 5 seating spaces opened on each bus. Suspension of fare collection was a requirement of rear-door loading, as the fare box is located directly beside the operator. It is expected the re-introduction of fares will provide additional capacity for riders with defined trip destinations and purposes. The re-introduction of fares will also require the Customer Service Centre to be re-opened for transactions in order to support the sales of low income transit passes and the DCR pass which is co-sponsored by the Ministry of Social Services. Work is currently underway to provide the necessary physical plexi-glass barriers at the Customer Service Centre to accommodate safe re-opening.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Similar to other agencies and various departments within the City of Saskatoon, COVID-19 has realized adverse financial implications on Saskatoon Transit.

The financial impacts are subject to change depending upon how the Re-Open Saskatchewan plan unfolds and, most importantly, how long the physical distancing restrictions continue. Due to the continued impacts of COVID-19, Saskatoon Transit expects only 15% of the regular revenue to be collected once fares are re-introduced.

Depending upon the success of Re-Open Saskatchewan and when physical distancing restrictions are lifted, Saskatoon Transit expects an overall deficit could vary from \$8.4 million to \$10.3 million. It is not known how long it may take ridership levels to return to pre-COVID-19 levels, and transit properties across Canada will continue to work together to monitor and develop strategies to regain ridership.

ADDITIONAL IMPLICATIONS/CONSIDERATIONS

As of May 20, 2020, the Public Health Agency of Canada recommended that Canadians wear masks on public transport.

Most Canadian transit agencies are not making decisions on whether to enforce wearing masks by passengers, however many agencies are strongly encouraging staff and riders to wear masks. Saskatoon Transit will continue to recommend that riders and staff wear masks for the protection of themselves and those around them.

Saskatoon Transit will continue to monitor the mask situation with other agencies and in concert with the Public Health Authorities to determine the best course of action.

COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

If re-introduction of fares is approved by City Council, the communications strategy will start the day after approval and consist of traditional media channels (social media and print) as well as non-traditional media (external bus announcements and terminal signage) setting expectations around the re-introduction of fares and the health and safety measures the public can expect on transit. Appendix 1 contains a sample information graphics for use on social media.

An earned media campaign will run parallel to the paid campaign to reach people at the neighbourhood level. The campaign will include sharing messages with community associations, transit stakeholder groups, and potentially influencers. The communications will kick off with a media event.

Messaging:

- We want to safely accommodate all riders wishing to use public transit
- Avoid public transit during peak hours and continue to work from home when possible
- Encourage staggered work hours
- Physical distancing remains critical
- Health and safety of our staff and the public is a key priority
- Recommend the use of masks on public transit
- While we actively support providing essential transportation while restrictions are slowly eased, we will not be enforcing physical distancing – it's up to all of us to make sure we take responsibility for keeping ourselves and each other safe

APPENDICES

1. Information Graphics for use on Social Media

Report Approval

Written by: James McDonald, Director of Saskatoon Transit,
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