

Bus Rapid Transit Timeline Extension

ISSUE

Due to public health order restrictions during the pandemic, the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project has been unable to conduct the wide, inclusive, and accessible public engagement needed for this transformative project. To provide additional time to gather important public input required for the BRT system the launch date has been extended by one year to June 2026.

BACKGROUND

In 2016, City Council approved The Growth Plan to Half a Million (Growth Plan). The plan charts a course for long-term growth and revitalization that balances and promotes quality of life, sustainability, and economic development.

A key element of the Growth Plan is rethinking the way in which the City of Saskatoon (City) provides transportation options to existing and future residents. As Saskatoon grows to 500,000 people, it will require a variety of transportation options to ensure the safe and efficient movement of people and goods throughout the city. Given this objective, the Growth Plan includes a specific Transit Plan that aims to redefine public transit in Saskatoon. The proposed Transit Plan primarily focuses on building a BRT system and identifies changes needed to the current system to support high-frequency, direct service along the major corridors.

In November 2017, City Council approved a “preferred configuration and conceptual network” for the BRT system. The preferred configuration included “runningways” or dedicated lanes along select short road sections. At its meeting held on June 20, 2018, the Governance and Priorities Committee entertained public comment on the proposed BRT configuration. During that meeting, several questions were asked, and the Administration committed to responding to the technical questions and conducting further stakeholder and public engagement prior to bringing a decision report forward to confirm the BRT and Downtown Active Transportation Networks.

During its October 15, 2018 meeting, the Governance and Priorities Committee received a report and a presentation from the Administration providing responses to the majority of technical questions raised in June 2018, and a summary of the stakeholder/community engagement activities completed to date to support the Transit Plan/BRT Plan and the Downtown Active Transportation Network.

During its April 29, 2019 meeting, City Council endorsed the proposed network and location of 38 kilometres of BRT, which consists of 35.3 kilometres running in mixed traffic and 2.7 kilometres in dedicated transit-only lanes on 1st Avenue through Downtown and on College Drive, six bus-only queue-jump locations along with 38 kilometres of fibre optic communication cable, 14 upgraded traffic signal controllers, and transit signal priority at 90 intersections.

In September 2020, City Council approved a budget adjustment for the construction of a BRT pilot station.

CURRENT STATUS

The BRT Project Team is completing construction of a pilot station, detailed design for most components of the system, land assembly, and implementation planning.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

The BRT system is intended to form the backbone of the future transit system and is seen to be a catalyst for the corridor growth component of the Growth Plan. In order to have a successful BRT system, Saskatoon needs to reconfigure its transit system around the BRT lines, and this means fundamental changes in how the transit system operates.

Key to the success of the BRT is a fulsome, inclusive, and accessible public engagement process. The BRT project was impacted by the challenges to the public engagement process that the COVID-19 pandemic created. The reduced availability of stakeholders and inability to meet in person, in keeping with the Public Engagement Policy's principles such as inclusivity and relationship building, resulted in the Administration extending the project timeline.

As a result, the Administration is planning for the system to launch in 2026 rather than 2025. Extending the launch date is necessary to gather important public input needed to ensure the BRT system meets the needs of the residents of Saskatoon.

Some previously started engagement activities, such as the work of the existing BRT Nutana Stakeholder Committee did continue virtually through the public health order (though it was delayed). This work is continuing. It is anticipated the bulk of the engagement activities will resume in the fall/winter of 2021 and into early 2022. If there are further challenges presented by COVID-19 that impact the engagement, communications will take place with the public and stakeholders as soon impacts are determined and a way forward for both the short term and long term has been decided.

The launch in 2026 and provision of a transportation system to meet the needs of our growing city is something to look forward to.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The extended project timeline will be funded from the already approved funds within the 2022 Capital Budget for Capital Project #2328 – Transit Implementation Plan.

OTHER IMPLICATIONS

A communications plan has been launched informing stakeholders and the public of the timeline extension. There are no Triple Bottom Line, policy, privacy, or CPTED implications or considerations at this time. These will be considered in other future reports as required.

NEXT STEPS

The Administration will continue to advance work on public engagement, finalization of detailed design, and implementation planning.

Report Approval

Written by: Rob Dudiak, Special Projects Manager, Technical Services
Reviewed by: Dan Willems, Director of Technical Services
Jim McDonald, Director of Saskatoon Transit
Approved by: Terry Schmidt, General Manager, Transportation and Construction

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