

# Saskatoon Transit Update – Steps Being Taken to Improve Service and Reliability

## ISSUE

In the winter of 2021-22 Saskatoon Transit experienced service disruptions to fixed route transit. The City Internal Auditor is completing an audit to determine root causes and provide recommendations on actions for improvement. The audit report is expected in October 2022. While the audit is being completed and Saskatoon Transit awaits the findings and recommendations, Saskatoon Transit is actively working on a number of actions towards meeting service levels in the winter of 2022-23 and beyond. This report provides a summary of some of the major actions underway.

## BACKGROUND

The Standing Policy Committee on Transportation, at its meeting held on March 7, 2022, resolved:

“That the Administration report to the April 11, 2022 Standing Policy Committee on Transportation on the framework of the proposed investigation/internal review into transit operations as they relate to service reductions, mechanical issues, preventive maintenance, parts sourcing, impacts of fusion etc. during the 2021/22 winter.

Please include a section in the report that would detail the costs associated with having this investigation/review conducted by an independent third party, in comparison to it being done internally by management and/or the Internal Auditor.”

City Council, at its meeting held on April 25, 2022, considered the Investigation of Service Disruptions in Saskatoon Transit report, and resolved:

“That option 2, as outlined in the April 11, 2022 report of the General Manager, Transportation and Construction, be approved.”

Option 2 was that the City Internal Auditor with a Co-source Arrangement lead the investigation to complete a review of the service disruptions experienced in the winter of 2021-22.

City Council, at its meeting held on June 27, 2022, considered the Investigation of Service Disruptions in Saskatoon Transit report, and resolved:

That the Terms of Reference for the Investigation of Service Disruptions in Saskatoon Transit, as outlined in the report of the City Internal Auditor dated June 6, 2022 be approved.

## **CURRENT STATUS**

Saskatoon Transit's fixed route fleet consists of 139 buses with 79 buses required to meet morning service and 74 for afternoon service needs for the September and October schedules. The number of buses being serviced or waiting for service affects whether enough buses are available to meet full-service levels.

From mid-December 2021 to early March 2022 there were times when Saskatoon Transit experienced service disruptions due to a wide range of issues resulting in a shortage of buses to meet full-service levels. Since the first week of March, significant progress has been made in addressing the issues. As a result, a number of buses have been repaired and are now in service. The continued focus for Saskatoon Transit is to maintain full-service levels going forward.

The objective of the City Internal Auditors review is to conduct a root cause analysis of service disruptions in Saskatoon Transit which happened in the winter of 2021-2022 and provide cost effective and practical recommendations to avoid future disruptions. On completion of the Auditor's work, a detailed report is planned for submission to the Standing Policy Committee on Transportation at its November 7, 2022 public meeting.

While the City Internal Auditor's review is underway, Saskatoon Transit is actively working on a number of actions towards meeting service levels. This report provides a summary of the actions that Saskatoon Transit has undertaken or are currently underway to improve fixed route transit service.

Transit looks forward to the Auditor's report and will update the plan based on the results of the Auditor's review. Transit also plans to provide an update to the strategy outlined in this report in the Saskatoon Transit 2022 Annual Report.

## **DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS**

### **Saskatoon Transit Management Team**

Two key changes have recently occurred in the management team at Saskatoon Transit. In mid-March a change was made in the Maintenance Services section with the appointment of a new Acting Fleet and Maintenance Manager and in late May an Interim Director was appointed to backfill for the retirement of the Director of Transit. In August, the position of Fleet and Maintenance Manager was permanently filled.

An Executive Search firm has been hired to undertake a nation-wide search for a permanent Director of Transit with an expected timeframe of 8 to 10 weeks anticipated to complete the recruitment search. During this interim period, the General Manager of Transportation and Construction has been providing additional support and operational oversight at Transit.

### **Maintenance Plan**

Several initiatives are being worked on to improve workplace culture, efficiencies, and processes. These will lead to new and improved foundational processes and employee

engagement. Some activities underway include:

1. Improvements to Internal Communication

- a. Increased face-to-face and one-on-one verbal communication at all levels within Transit.
- b. Written communications to team members to summarize concepts and programs.
- c. Documentation, training, and consistent application of processes as they are developed.
- d. Increased use of internal document sharing platforms to allow easy access to processes and key information.
- e. Recommitment to internal newsletters to convey upcoming events or introduce process changes.

2. Review of and Development of Enhanced Processes and Procedures

Transit is reviewing current processes and procedures and benchmarking the current processes and procedures against industry best practices. Identifying and closing any gaps in best practices will lead to more efficient and effective work, accountability, and improved workplace culture. Initiatives underway include:

- Saskatoon Transit is researching the fleet compositions of other Transit properties, operational practices, service levels, preventative maintenance schedules, and other factors that impact dependability and reliability. As this research is undertaken and information is reviewed, the findings are being used for development and introduction of enhanced Preventative Maintenance plans based on Saskatoon's needs along with manufacturers' recommended maintenance schedules.
- As a component of the enhanced Preventative Maintenance Plans, the fleet wide installation of a previously piloted predictive maintenance program is planned. Procurement of the predictive maintenance program software is in progress.
- Current processes are being reviewed for responding to check engine lights to provide consistent guidance for mechanics and operators in relation to warning lights. An enhanced process being developed is founded on a risk management-based decision framework.
- Researching available technology and feasibility of remote diagnostics analysis for check engine lights to assist in assessing the source of check engine lights coming on without the need to return the bus to the Civic Operations Centre for diagnostics analysis.

**Purchasing and Stores**

Support from corporate Supply Chain Management has led to increased training and improved processes within the Stores section. The number of buses waiting on parts has significantly reduced over the last several months. A change in the reporting

relationship for the Stores section from Transit to Supply Chain Management in the Corporate Financial Services Division occurred in late August.

In addition, Transit is working with Supply Chain Management in reviewing existing contracts for mechanical services with local providers to repair and inspect buses off-site to have services available in a timely and cost-effective manner when needed.

### **Maintenance Organizational Structure Review**

Several initiatives are currently underway or planned to commence shortly related to the maintenance service's organizational structure. These include:

- Review of in-scope and out-of-scope supervisor job descriptions to reflect industry standards and Transit needs.
- Four Journeyman Mechanic positions are in the recruitment phase to fully staff the team of Journeyman Mechanics. An increase in the mechanics to bus ratio will provide Saskatoon Transit with more resources to perform timely repairs and preventative maintenance work needed to keep more buses on the road and get them back on the road sooner when repairs are needed.
- A review of the shift schedule for mechanics will commence shortly to schedule resources to achieve improved efficiencies, timely service response, and a better understanding of other challenges in the garage. Amalgamated Transit Union, Local 615 (ATU) has been invited to participate in this review.

### **Asset Management Plan and Funding Strategy for Fleet Replacement**

Saskatoon Transit is working alongside Corporate Finance to further explore and leverage all available government funding programs to define a long-term funding strategy for Saskatoon Transit's fleet and general operations.

In 2015, the fleet renewal strategy was adopted in principle with funding requests regularly submitted through the Multi-Year Business Planning and Budget process. Leveraging available Federal and Provincial funding to support a long-term consistent and steady funding stream for the fleet renewal strategy will provide a steady and consistent supply of rolling stock into Saskatoon Transit's fleet.

### **Productivity Committee and ATU Engagement with Transit Management**

Regular discussions between Transit Management and ATU have been beneficial in developing sustainable and effective bus routes and schedules. Ensuring these conversations occur regularly is an important strategy to combine and verify data collected through digital tools with the real-life experience and knowledge of those that operate these routes.

Regular meetings of the Productivity Committee, which consists of representation from ATU and management, were instrumental in the creation of the September and October schedule. Work of the Productivity Committee will continue for development of future schedules to assist with managing resources effectively, designing employee shifts

appropriately, and developing routes and schedules that meet service standards and maximize rider benefit.

### **On Demand Transit Revamping**

Saskatoon Transit introduced On Demand Transit (ODT) service in the summer of 2020 through a pilot program. This pilot has concluded, and to operationalize the program a revamped ODT model that is a more efficient and effective service was launched on August 2, 2022.

With the launch of the new ODT model, the city-wide pilot ODT service will come to an end and the new operational focus will shift to the new and developing neighbourhoods of North Kensington, Blairmore, Brighton and Rosewood where there is no fixed route transit service. In addition, Saskatoon Transit is shifting the ODT service to a “designated stop to transit hub” model versus the current any bus stop to any bus stop model. Through this connectivity and integration of neighbourhoods and transit hubs, customers traveling to and from these points will be able to connect with the entire transit network and to all points in the city, resulting in a more city-wide effective and efficient use of available resources to provide service to new and developing neighbourhoods.

### **Farebox and Smart Card Technology**

Saskatoon Transit’s farebox and smartcard system went live February 1, 2010. The system has now surpassed its useful life and is no longer serviced by the vendor. Ongoing issues due to the age of this equipment has negatively impacted fare collection and ridership measurements.

Saskatoon Transit has initiated supply agreements for required upgrades to restore all buses to full fare collection ability and will be reporting in late 2022 to Committee on the next steps planned for upgrades to farebox and Smart Card technology.

### **Workplace Culture**

A healthy workplace culture is a critical component of a successful organization. Establishing and maintaining a healthy workplace culture requires a sustained and intentional multi-faceted approach. Work continues within Transit to improve workplace culture at a sustained level, including:

- Weekly meetings between ATU, human resources and management to review, discuss and take a solutions based collaborative approach to human resource management, labour relations, and operational issues and concerns.
- Weekly meetings between the ATU Executive, General Manager of Transportation and Construction, and Interim Director of Saskatoon Transit to have a table for ongoing dialogue and conversations on issues of concern.
- Enhanced support from Human Resources and Labour Management to the General Manager of Transportation and Construction, and Saskatoon Transit management team to assist in resolving complex and outstanding human resource management and labour relations issues and concerns.

- Increased leadership presence and interaction with employees at various Transit operations sites including Civic Operations Centre, the Downtown Terminal, and Access Transit.
- Re-establishment of pre-pandemic team and relationship building activities such as regular appreciation events and availability of leadership for employee engagement activities.
- Encouraging managers and supervisors to provide verbal and written commendations and appreciation to staff and passing along those commendations to employees from riders when provided to the Customer Care Centre, Supervisors or through other channels.

### **Key Performance Indicators and Process Improvements**

As processes change and record keeping and data analysis becomes more important, administrative support is critical to manage the data required to measure inputs needed to measure Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). A support role is needed to allow managers and supervisors the time they need to lead their teams successfully and provide coaching and support where needed.

In July a term position Performance Improvement Coordinator was hired dedicated to the Maintenance Services section to lead and assist with reviewing current process and procedures, developing KPIs and driving towards improvement that includes adopting industry best practices, benchmarking and incorporation of accountability and performance management.

The addition of a Performance Improvement Coordinator, to work initially with the Maintenance Services section and in the future with all of Saskatoon Transit, will lead to the review and improvement of many processes currently in place or needing development. This work will be supported by the existing complement of supervisors and managers. Change management will be the responsibility of the entire department and will be delivered, in collaboration with ATU, through targeted communications before, during and after processes are changed or implemented. Targeted training will be delivered to all employees affected by the changes to ensure they are comfortable and able to succeed using the new processes.

### **Operator Recruitment**

Saskatoon Transit is facing challenges attracting qualified and talented Operators, which has been exacerbated since the pandemic. Similar recruiting challenges in neighbouring agencies, combined with high demand in the truck and transport industry, are leading to higher than typical staff turnover and shortages of qualified applicants.

To date, Saskatoon Transit has relied on the City of Saskatoon Career Postings page and local job sites to advertise open positions. Success through this has been varied and, to increase the number of applicants, Saskatoon Transit is working with Human Resources to look at opportunities for increasing the candidate pool and with Communications to explore options for marketing campaigns to extend beyond current recruitment practices.

### **Operator Barrier Supply and Installation**

In November 2020, City Council approved \$500,000 for the supply and installation of an operator safety barrier phase in program to start in 2021. Shortly after approval of the funding, a tender was released for the supply and installation of operator barriers. A Request for Proposals was advertised, evaluated, and awarded to the successful vendor for Phase 1 of the operator barrier supply and installation.

Through a collaborative process with ATU, prototype barriers were created for the three bus manufacturers in the fleet. Once the prototypes were tested and confirmed operational, the \$500,000 budget allowed for supply and installation of 47 operator barriers in Phase 1. To date, 21 barriers have been installed and the vendor has advised the remaining 26 barriers for Phase 1 are anticipated to arrive by the end of September with installation planned shortly after.

Based on the success of Phase 1, during the 2022-23 Multi-Year Business Planning and Budget deliberations, Administration informed City Council that sufficient funding had been identified in previous years capital programs for Phase 2 of the project for supply and installation of the remaining approximately 79 operational conventional buses in the fleet. Procurement for Phase 2 is currently underway and when the successful vendor has been selected and the contract awarded, Administration will know better the timelines for supply and installation of the barriers.

Operator barriers for the entire fleet were not procured in Phase 1, as at the time of tendering in early 2021 Transit was not certain sufficient funding was in place for funding the supply and installation of barriers on the entire fleet. Funding to provide for the supply and installation of barriers on the remaining fleet was not confirmed until later in 2021 after the close of the Phase 1 tender.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There will be additional costs to improve the operations and service dependability and reliability at Saskatoon Transit. Prior to bringing forward any additional funding requests, Transit will identify internal efficiencies that can be leveraged and work with Finance to identify and capture all available funding opportunities within the current budget. If after capturing all available efficiencies and funding opportunities in current budgets and additional funding is required, Transit will then work with Finance to bring forward a business case for additional funding through the regular Multi-Year Business Plan and Budget processes.

With respect to regular and sustained funding strategy for fleet replacement, Transit continues to work with Finance to explore available Federal and Provincial programs and anticipates bringing forward a separate report with opportunities and options for Committee and City Council consideration in the coming months.

### **OTHER IMPLICATIONS**

There may be human resources and labour relations implications that need to be considered as we move forward. Some of the changes proposed may need to be

negotiated through contract negotiations with ATU. Transit will seek support and expertise from corporate Human Resources and Labour Relations to work collaboratively with ATU as required.

**NEXT STEPS**

1. Saskatoon Transit will continue moving forward with the steps and actions to improve service and reliability outlined in this report. An update to the strategy will be provided in the Saskatoon Transit 2022 Annual Report.
2. The plan will be updated based on the findings and recommendations of the Auditor’s upcoming report.
3. Saskatoon Transit will work alongside Corporate Finance to further explore and leverage all available government funding programs to define a long-term funding strategy for Saskatoon Transit’s fleet and general operations and report back to Committee in the fall of 2022.
4. Saskatoon Transit will be reporting in late 2022 to Committee on the next steps planned for upgrades to farebox and Smart Card technology.

**Report Approval**

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