

Saskatoon Transit – Implementing Free Child Fare

ISSUE

Saskatoon Transit will begin offering free fare for children on September 1, 2024 on public transit and Access Transit to provide a low-cost transportation option for families. What operational details and implementation plan should be considered for the elimination of child fares starting September 1, 2024?

BACKGROUND

At its meeting held on August 15, 2023, the Governance and Priorities Committee considered the Transportation Business Line Information [report](#) and resolved, in part:

“That, ahead of the final 2024/25 budget meetings, the Administration report on the impact of eliminating fares for children 5 to 13 years of age (under 13). The report should incorporate details from Regina Transit related to their elimination of fares for children under 13.”

At its meeting held on November 8, 2023, the Governance and Priorities Committee considered the Impacts of Elimination of Child Fare on Saskatoon and resolved:

1. That the implementation of fare elimination for children be considered at the 2024/25 budget deliberations for implementation in September of 2024 with no impact to Saskatoon Transit 2024 revenue budget and if an impact is realized in 2024 that it be brought forward to future budget deliberation;
2. Prior to implementation Admin report back on a) operational details/implementation plan for the elimination of child fares, and b) engagement with stakeholders.”

City Council, at its 2024/2025 Preliminary Corporate Business Plan and Budget meetings held [November 28 to December 1, 2023 \(pages 59 and 60\)](#), considered the Governance and Priorities Committee’s report entitled “Impacts of Elimination of Child Fare on Saskatoon Transit” and resolved:

“That City Council direct implementation of fare elimination for children beginning in September 2024 with no impact to Saskatoon Transit 2024 revenue budget. Prior to implementation, Administration report back on:
a) operational details/implementation plan for the elimination of child fares; and
b) engagement with stakeholders.”

Bus Riders of Saskatoon has recommended to City Council that Saskatoon Transit follow several other jurisdictions in Canada and offer free child fare to reduce transportation expenses for families. The union representing Saskatoon Transit employees, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 615, has expressed concerns that introducing free child fare would increase fare evasion and further burden frontline transit workers dealing with increased aggressive behaviour and fare disputes from customers.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

Children younger than five years ride public transit for free in Saskatoon when accompanied by an adult. Child fares are in place for children over 5 years and up to and including grade 8. In 2023, Saskatoon Transit sold 2,532 monthly child passes, 6,784 child single rides and 3,440 child 10-ride packages; and tracked approximately 240,903 child rides. Based on the most recent census data, there are approximately 47,000 residents 13 years old and younger in Saskatoon.

Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement activities related to the elimination of child fares occurred between February and May 2024 to assist Saskatoon Transit in determining how best to design and implement an effective program that meets the community's needs and improves the accessibility and affordability of public transit. See Appendix 1 for a stakeholder engagement details.

Definition of Child for Eligibility

Participants in all engagement activities identified that Grade 8 and under was the highest ranked option for eligibility for free child fare [elementary school representatives (84%), Saskatoon Transit employees (39%), community groups (52%) and residents in the public survey (44%)]. The community groups at facilitated sessions proposed free fare for those 18 and under, which was repeated in the comments for all surveys. The ATU Local 615 agreed that grade is appropriate for determining eligibility rather than age.

Eligibility Verification

The community groups in the discussions at in-person sessions, 75% of elementary schools, 62% of residents who participated in the public survey and Bus Riders of Saskatoon prefer that children not be required to scan a pass or provide identification of age when boarding the bus. These groups preferred no pass, adult accompaniment or proof of age be required to board to reduce barriers and make it easy for everyone to use. Additional community groups not present at the in-person sessions who took the survey were split on whether a verification method was necessary or not. If verification was deemed to be required, 63% of that group, 56% of the public survey, 56% of Saskatoon Transit employees and 81% of elementary schools preferred a physical or mobile child pass (rather than showing identification or having an adult accompany them).

ATU Local 615 has expressed to City Council and to the Administration that the preference of operators is that the City require a child pass or similar method to assist operators with age verification for children, noting concerns that free child fare will become an opportunity for teens and adults to exploit the fare policy, which could worsen the problem and lead to more fare disputes with frontline transit workers.

The top concerns with free child fare from the Saskatoon Transit employees survey were the safety of unaccompanied younger children, increased disruptive incidents with

groups of older children on the bus and more fare disputes with adults and high school students.

Elementary Schools

Elementary school representatives from Saskatoon Public Schools and Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools (Transportation Committee) indicated that some classes use public transit for class field trips, but rarely for transportation to and from school; however, 81% said free child fare will increase public transit use and student attendance/punctuality.

The top concerns for survey participants were safety with more young children riding alone on the bus (88%) and a rise in disruptive incidents among youth (74%). Elementary school representatives indicated they do not provide identification for students and cannot manage the distribution of a free public transit child pass to elementary school students. However, the schools can help promote the free child fare program to their family communities through newsletters and other communication tools.

City of Saskatoon's Current Approach

Saskatoon Transit fee structure is free for children under 5 years old, \$2.25 for a child (kindergarten to grade 8) and \$2.75 for high school (grades 9-12). Riders can purchase tickets or a reloadable GoPass from registered vendors or at the Customer Service Centre and a mobile ticket on the TGo or Transit apps. A customer is not asked for proof of age or other eligibility to purchase a child or other pass. An exception is the subsidized child pass passes where the customer must provide the birthdate of each dependent to be eligible for the discount.

When riders board the bus, they tap their pass or scan their mobile ticket. This pays the fare and tracks ridership values and stop location. Saskatoon Transit's planning team uses this information to monitor and adjust service levels and allocate bus resources. Ridership data is also required for requesting and reporting to funding agencies.

Approaches in Other Jurisdictions

The Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA) coordinated a benchmark survey on behalf of Saskatoon Transit. Responses were submitted by 15 transit agencies. 93% of those who completed the survey have free child fare, mostly for those 12 years and under. Of those, 71% rely on the child to self-identify (no pass or verification). While half are not experiencing issues, the other half reported an increase in fare evasion among teens and adults. Regina Transit has free bus fare for children 13 and under who self-identify when boarding. The Administration and transit union representatives, through separate surveys, identified an increase in fare evasion and older children on buses.

While they did not participate in the survey, all transit systems in British Columbia have free child fare for children 12 and under. In Saskatchewan, Regina Transit is the only agency to offer free child fare, which applies to ages 13 and under. A breakdown of the benchmark survey results is included in the public engagement summary.

Appendix 2 includes information on child fare programs at transit systems that did not participate in the benchmark survey using publicly available information.

OPTIONS

There are two decision points, the first related to the applicable age, and the second regarding whether or not the City should require a pass of some form for children. As such, the options are broken out into two lists and two recommendations below. There are no significant incremental costs to current operations for the options presented below.

1. Applicable Age Options

Option 1A - Children in Grade 8 and under ride free

This option proposes individuals in Grade 8 and under ride Saskatoon Transit for free. Typical grade 8 students are 13 or 14 years old.

Advantages:

- Survey respondents for all groups preferred this eligibility criteria.
- This aligns with the current Child Pass (Kindergarten to Grade 8) and the High School Pass (Grades 9-12).
- Bus operators could be confident that students are in Grade 8 or younger when boarding the bus at or near an elementary school.

Disadvantages:

- Does not align with most other transit agencies (13 of 14), including Regina, that use age as a determinant.

Option 1B - Children 13 years and under ride free

This option proposes all individuals 13 years and under ride Saskatoon Transit for free.

Advantages:

- This aligns with the City of Regina and is consistent with the approach in other jurisdictions to use age as a determinant; however, in other jurisdictions ages vary between 11 or 12 and under.

Disadvantages:

- The eligibility for free bus fare for high school students who are 13 or present as 13 may create confusion and conflict when boarding the bus, particularly near high schools.
- Teachers using transit for a class trip will have to arrange payment for Grade 8 students who are 14.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Standing Policy Committee on Transportation recommends City Council direct the Administration to pursue Option 1A Children in Grade 8 and under ride free.

Rationale for Recommended Applicable Age

- Survey respondents for all groups preferred this eligibility criteria.
- Aligning with the current eligibility for the child pass reduces the impact on the other fare products and for current riders.
- All elementary school children will be eligible for free child fare.

2. Verification Options

Option 2A – Children self-verify to ride free

This option proposes individuals inform the bus operator that they are a child when they board the bus to ride for free.

Advantages:

- The majority of the groups and people involved with the public engagement preferred having no age verification that could present barriers for children to participate in this program.
- Occasional and spontaneous riders and families will have easy access when they take public transit.
- It is consistent with the majority (9 of 14) of the transit systems in the benchmark survey with free child fare, including the City of Regina.

Disadvantages:

- Without a pass to scan, bus operators will be required to track ridership manually to determine program usage, which can be less reliable.
- Saskatoon Transit employees and ATU Local 615 are concerned about an increase in fare evasion if no pass is required. In the benchmark survey, 43% of transit systems that rely on self-verification noted more high school students and/or adults presenting as a child.

Option 2B - Children ride free with a Child Pass

This option proposes the current child pass for elementary school students in kindergarten to Grade 8 be free. The parent or guardian would pick up a new annual child pass from various vendors across the city or on mobile apps.

Advantages:

- A child pass for children to ride free is preferred by Saskatoon Transit employees and ATU Local 615.
- The bus operator can assume a parent gives their express consent for a child with a pass to ride on public transit.
- Maintaining a child pass does not require the bus operator to manually count each child for tracking purposes.

- There are no costs to change the price of a mobile ticket to zero or to transition current pass holders to a free pass. The administrative cost for new passes is anticipated to be minimal and is dependent on the uptake of new riders.
- Other transit agencies with a pass for free fare report no increase in fare evasion, and those that introduced a pass after the program was in place noticed a reduction in fare evasion. Two agencies that already offer free child fare plan to introduce a pass.

Disadvantages:

- Families would be required to obtain a pass in the mobile app or from a designated vendor. It would be cost-prohibitive to distribute a pass to all families.
- Fare evasion by high school students and adults using a child pass obtained for a younger family member may occur.
- Barriers identified during the engagement phase are a child's access to a mobile device for mobile ticketing and a higher risk that a child will lose their pass.

Option 2C - Children ride free when accompanied by an adult

This option proposes a child may ride Saskatoon Transit for free provided they are with a fare-paying adult.

Advantages:

- May address safety concerns of small children riding alone expressed by elementary schools, community groups and Saskatoon Transit employees.
- Minimal barriers for families to save on transportation costs, as requested by the community groups and in the public survey.
- The Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools Transportation Committee recommended that grade six and under be accompanied by an adult in the elementary school survey. The community groups were equally divided, with 47% in favour of and 47% opposed to adult accompaniment for free child fare.
- May reduce instances of groups of older children riding unaccompanied without a destination.

Disadvantages:

- Without a pass to scan, bus operators will be required to track ridership manually to determine program usage, which can be less reliable.
- In the public surveys, 46% of participants did not support mandatory adult accompaniment for children, 35% favoured it and 19% selected "no opinion".
- Bus Riders of Saskatoon submitted that the adult responsible for a child older than five should determine their capability of boarding a bus unaccompanied—not Saskatoon Transit—and suggested that parents would accompany children under five years.
- Children without an adult would pay bus fare to ride.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Standing Policy Committee on Transportation recommends City Council direct the Administration to pursue Option 2A Children self-verify to ride free.

Rationale for Recommended Verification Method

The Administration sees Option 2A and 2B as equally ranked options. Option 2A is recommended primarily because the majority of the groups and people involved with the public engagement preferred having no age verification that could present barriers for children to participate in this program.

Further, this approach makes public transit affordable and fully accessible for families, which was what the community groups, schools and residents preferred. Occasional and spontaneous riders and families will have easy access when they take public transit.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Universal Low Income Subsidy project included a transit fare review. Data and policy analysis work is underway with a report to the Governance and Priorities Committee expected in late 2024.

The Saskatoon Fire Department’s Community Support Officer (CSO) Program will hire more uniformed employees in July 2024 and expand its scope to include Saskatoon Transit bus and transit terminals targeted patrolling. The program takes a proactive approach to public safety by building trust and relationships with community members in need and connecting them with social support programs.

NEXT STEPS

Saskatoon Transit will develop an extensive advertising campaign to promote the program throughout the summer up to the September 1 launch. The communications strategy will use school and community partner channels to encourage families to subscribe for email updates on free child fare before school lets out in June for updates through the summer. The first email will update all survey participants who shared their email addresses with the survey results and the final program eligibility.

The website and other fare products will be updated as quickly as possible.

The intent of implementing free child fare in September 2024 was to have no impact on Saskatoon Transit’s 2024 revenue budget. If there is an impact in 2024, it will be reported back for future budget deliberations.

APPENDICES

1. Saskatoon Transit – Implementing Free Child Fare Engagement Report
2. Public Transit Child Fare - Canadian City Comparison

Saskatoon Transit – Implementing Free Child Fare

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