

Saskatoon Transit Bus Network Redesign Strategy

ISSUE

Saskatoon Transit is in the early stages of redesigning the bus route network to modernize and align with the implementation of Link (BRT), scheduled to launch in the spring of 2028. Extensive public and community group engagement will be involved throughout the planning process. This report outlines the intended strategy and engagement plan towards developing the new transit network.

BACKGROUND

City Council, at its meeting held on April 25, 2016, approved the Growth Plan to Half a Million [report](#), which will shape growth patterns and increase transportation choices by focusing on fundamental shifts through the main initiatives of corridor growth, transit and core bridges.

City Council, at its meeting held on November 20, 2017, considered the Bus Rapid Transit Preferred Configuration [report](#) for the Bus Rapid Transit system and resolved: “That the preferred configuration and conceptual network for the Bus Rapid Transit system, as outlined in the report of the General Manager, Community Services Department dated November 6, 2017, be approved as the basis for further engagement and design.”

City Council, at its meeting held on April 29, 2019, received the Bus Rapid Transit Route and Configuration for Downtown [report](#) and resolved: “That City Council approve the 1st Avenue option as the north-south Downtown connection for the Bus Rapid Transit network.”

City Council, at its meeting held on April 29, 2019, received the Bus Rapid Transit Route and Configuration for Nutana [report](#) and resolved: “That City Council approve Option 2: Broadway Avenue Mixed Flow as outlined in the report of the General Manager, Transportation & Construction dated April 29, 2019.”

City Council, at its meeting held on April 29, 2019, received the Bus Rapid Transit Route Network and Configuration [report](#) and resolved: “That City Council approve the Bus Rapid Transit route network as proposed, including dedicated transit lanes and conceptual station locations and including any decisions on the Downtown and Nutana segment options, which are dealt with in preceding reports.”

City Council, at its Public Hearing Meeting held on June 29, 2020, received the Official Community Plan [report](#) and passed [Bylaw 9700 - Official Community Plan Bylaw, 2020](#). The plan includes objectives and policies for the transit system service to key destinations and along high-frequency corridors – see section H4 Transit.

City Council, at its meeting held on November 1, 2021, approved the Saskatoon Transit Service Standards [report](#) that defines Saskatoon Transit's level of service. It serves as a framework for expanding service and budget requests influenced by population growth, neighbourhood development and transit ridership statistics.

The Governance and Priorities Committee, at its special meeting held on August 15, 2023, reviewed the Transportation Business Line Information [report](#) and resolved:

“That Administration report back to Standing Policy Committee on Transportation, and separate from the 2024/25 budget process, on transit service options such as on demand transit on low ridership routes and/or at low ridership times while maintaining service level.”

The Standing Policy Committee on Transportation, at its meeting held on July 17, 2024, received the Bus Rapid Transit – Project Update [report](#), which confirms that all funding is in place and provides a construction timeline for the project to launch in 2028.

The Standing Policy Committee on Transportation, at its meeting held on September 3, 2024, received the Overcapacity Bus Management Policies in Canadian Cities [report](#) describing how most cities add frequency on routes experiencing high ridership and full buses or add extra buses during peak times when available.

CURRENT STATUS

Saskatoon's transit network continues to grow, having reached and surpassed pre-pandemic ridership monthly numbers by the end of 2024. There are routes with challenges managing peak-period passenger loads and schedule adherence, some of which will be addressed with the availability of more buses in the coming years through a fleet renewal strategy.

Continued population growth and changes in travel trends have also led to customer expectations for improved transit connectivity to destinations across the city and for travel during off-peak periods.

The current bus network primarily focuses on broad coverage to all communities, short walking distances to bus stops, and few or no transfers. This works for people who are more willing to accept longer wait times, travel only during peak times and take a longer ride to their destination. A coverage-focused network is more complex, with overlapping bus routes and possible duplication of services, and can be confusing for new riders or for making a spontaneous trip.

DISCUSSION

Saskatoon Transit is in the early stages of a redesign of the current transit network to reflect the emerging needs of a growing city, support the long-term growth strategy, and enable public transit to become a preferred travel option for more residents to meet Official Community Plan objectives. Saskatoon Transit will leverage the capital investment and timing of the three Link lines to complete the redesigned bus network for the launch of Link in the spring of 2028.

Ridership-focused Network

A modern transit network should be connective, direct, frequency-oriented and operate all day. As a market-driven service, Saskatoon Transit bus routes should be designed to maximize ridership by prioritizing service frequency and moving more people to popular destinations. The trade-offs might be less or no service to less popular destinations. Walk distances to bus stops may increase modestly, but most people will remain within a five-minute walk of transit service.

Frequent and reliable public transit offers more people the freedom to travel across the city. Many cannot drive or do not have access to a vehicle, and more drivers would appreciate convenient integrated options to walk, cycle, or take public transit.

Network Design Principles

A combination of past public engagement and transit industry planning best practices have informed the proposed key network design principles. (Appendix 1).

1. A connective network has fewer, more frequent routes. Although more transfers may be required, increased frequencies will mean wait times and travel options will be improved.
2. Direct routes are shorter and have fewer stops, allowing customers to spend less time on the bus during their trip. Some people may have a longer walk to the bus stop, but the bus travels close to popular destinations.
3. Frequency-oriented networks have fewer routes and shorter routes, focused on busy corridors. There are shorter wait times for the next bus, but there may be a longer walk to a stop and more transfers.
4. An all-day network serves customers travelling at most times of the day, making transit an option for most trips. It extends service beyond the peak travel times for more equity.

Bus Route Design

The proposed network design principles will be included in the future proposed transit network. While the overall network will shift towards a ridership-focused design, some areas may continue to need coverage-focused service. Individual routes can be designed to provide varying degrees of balance between these goals. For example, Link rapid transit lines place greater emphasis on ridership-focused principles such as speed, reliability, and directness of service to accommodate higher passenger demand. Conversely, OnDemand service is well suited for areas with lower ridership demand, fragmented street networks inhibiting efficient routing, or a need for local connectivity. A conceptual example of current route types defined in Saskatoon Transit's Service Standards, and how they balance these principles, is provided in Appendix 2.

Public Engagement

Public engagement for the Bus Network Redesign will begin with a survey to understand how much of a shift towards a proposed ridership-focused network people are willing to support. The next phases will focus on creating and consulting about a proposed network design based on this direction and refining this plan to be ready to implement the new network concurrently with Link in the spring of 2028.

These will be addressed in phases, in consultation with the Public Engagement team, to reach the appropriate community partners and affected groups.

2025 Phase 1 (Design Principles): The public will provide feedback through a survey about the proposed network design principles and inform the degree to which each should be reflected or prioritized in the plan. Feedback is used to inform updates to Saskatoon Transit's Service Standards and the development of a proposed transit service plan. No proposed changes to routes are shown in this phase.

2026 Phase 2 (Proposed Plan): A proposed service plan for a redesigned network is created and presented to the public for feedback in-person and online through a comprehensive engagement strategy. Residents, riders and community groups are invited to comment on proposed routes and how well they meet or do not meet their travel needs.

2027 Phase 3 (Revised Plan): Based on the feedback collected in Phase 2, Saskatoon Transit will undertake revisions and adjustments to the proposed plan. A revised proposed service plan will be prepared and presented to the public. An additional engagement opportunity will be provided, with specific proposed strategies subject to the level of changes made (i.e., engagement may be tailored to specific communities or areas where more revisions are made).

2028 Phase 4 (Implementation): The service plan will be finalized and prepared for implementation. The public will be informed of the final route decisions, including how engagement feedback was used to influence and inform these decisions. A communications plan will focus on ensuring the public is aware of the changes and how their trips will be impacted once the new routes start.

Administration will report to the Standing Policy Committee on Transportation after the completion of each phase of the public engagement process.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Funds under the Ridership Growth Initiatives will support the Bus Network Redesign public engagement process. This is estimated at \$100,000 over the next three years.

OTHER IMPLICATIONS

There are no privacy, legal, social, or environmental implications identified.

NEXT STEPS

Unless directed otherwise, Saskatoon Transit will begin Phase 1 of the public engagement process in May 2025. When Phase 1 engagement has been completed, Administration will report back to the Standing Policy Committee on Transportation on the findings and next steps in the Bus Network Redesign Strategy.

APPENDICES

1. Bus Network Redesign – Design Principles
2. Route Typologies and Network Design Principles

Report Approval

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