



City of Richmond

Report to Committee

TO: PWT Meeting, June 20, 2012

To: Public Works & Transportation Committee

Date: June 11, 2012

From: Victor Wei, P. Eng.
Director, Transportation

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Re: Proposed Changes to TransLink's TaxiSaver Program

Staff Recommendation

That TransLink be requested to maintain the TaxiSaver Program and that any changes to the program be proposed only upon full consultation with affected user groups, including the Richmond Centre for Disability and the Richmond Seniors Advisory Committee and other relevant stakeholders, in order to jointly develop mutually acceptable improvements to the combined HandyDART system that will result in enhanced transit service levels that better meet the needs of all of its users.

For: Victor Wei, P. Eng.
Director, Transportation
(604-276-4131)

REPORT CONCURRENCE			
ROUTED TO:	CONCURRENCE	CONCURRENCE OF GENERAL MANAGER	
Community Social Services	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
REVIEWED BY TAG SUBCOMMITTEE	INITIALS: 	REVIEWED BY CAO	INITIALS:

Staff Report

Origin

The Richmond Centre for Disability has requested that Council indicate its opposition to the planned cancellation by TransLink of its TaxiSaver program and request its reinstatement. This report provides an overview of the TaxiSaver program and the changes proposed by TransLink, and requests TransLink to undertake consultation with affected users groups in order to develop mutually acceptable changes that would result in enhanced transit service levels for users.

Analysis

1. HandyDART System and TaxiSaver Program

HandyDART is TransLink's door-to-door shared-ride service that uses specially-equipped vehicles designed to carry passengers with physical or cognitive disabilities who need assistance to use public transit. TaxiSaver is a supplementary service to HandyDART and available for people with permanent disabilities who have a HandyCard, which is a personalized card that allows passengers to travel for concession fares on the bus, SkyTrain, SeaBus, and West Coast Express.

Based on information provided by TransLink, the TaxiSaver program was instituted in 1990 to fill a "service gap" as, at that time, there was limited availability of HandyDART service after 6:00 pm or on weekends and nearly all buses were high-floor and non-accessible. The program allows HandyCard customers to purchase up to \$100 of TaxiSaver coupons per month at a 50 per cent discount (i.e., customers pay 50 per cent of the cab fare and TransLink pays the other 50 per cent). The coupons allow users to book and pay for discounted taxi service directly with a taxicab company without going through the HandyDART booking system.

2. Proposed Changes to TaxiSaver Program

As part of its on-going process to achieve greater operational efficiencies, TransLink reviewed its TaxiSaver program in light of two key improvements in the past few years that TransLink believes have eliminated the past service gap: (1) HandyDART now offers service until midnight, seven days a week; and (2) the conventional transit fleet is now 100 per cent accessible.

Given that the initial rationale for TaxiSavers no longer applied due to the above service improvements plus some evidence of abuse of the program (i.e., TransLink states that currently there is no "check" to prevent approved customers from giving away or re-selling their coupons to people who may not be qualified to receive them), TransLink proposed to phase out the TaxiSaver program beginning in July 2012 with coupons no longer being accepted as of June 2013.

If eliminated, TaxiSaver is expected to save \$1.1 million per year for the next three years. In the first year, \$200,000 would be re-invested within the HandyDART system to increase the existing use of taxis to supplement service when a HandyDART vehicle is not readily available and client care is not compromised. Based on the average supplemental taxi fare of \$12.56 in 2011 and a net cost of \$10.06 to TransLink (as the customer pays \$2.50), the re-invested \$200,000 would

provide nearly additional 19,900 trips, which is more than the 18,100 trip denials recorded in 2011.

TransLink presented the proposed changes to its Access Transit Users' Advisory Committee¹, who agreed to the changes provided that any money saved would be re-invested in the overall HandyDART system. To staff's knowledge, TransLink did not undertake any other consultation at that time before presenting the proposed changes to its Board in May 2012.

Following TransLink's announcement on May 16, 2012 that the TaxiSaver program would be phased out, a number of groups who represent seniors and people with disabilities, including the Richmond Centre for Disability, the Richmond Seniors Advisory Committee, and the Richmond Seniors Network, voiced concerns regarding the planned cancellation. In response to these concerns, the TransLink Board deferred cancellation of the TaxiSaver program on May 30, 2012 and TransLink staff will be undertaking further consultation with people with disabilities, special needs and seniors.

3. Key Concerns of User Groups

User groups have identified the following issues regarding the potential loss of the TaxiSaver program.

- Loss of Same Day and Timely Service: same day and timely transportation service for people with disabilities and seniors would be effectively eliminated as HandyDART bookings typically require three to five days advance notice. Same day service may be necessary for medical appointments and to accommodate variable health conditions that make it difficult to know in advance when a person will be well enough to travel and/or the inability to be involved in a ride for one hour or more, which is not uncommon. Although the proposed changes would see \$200,000 re-invested in HandyDART for increased supplemental taxi service, TransLink staff acknowledge that it may not be possible to guarantee same day service.
- Accessibility of Bus System: while all buses are fully accessible, a TaxiSaver user who is capable of using the bus may not be able to as not all bus stops and/or the access routes to the bus stop are accessible. Proponents also claim that pass ups are higher for people in wheelchairs due to a lack of space on the buses.
- Cost-Effectiveness per Ride: as not all passengers require the higher level of service provided by HandyDART, the TaxiSaver program is a far more cost-effective service based on per ride cost data available from the Canadian Urban Transit Authority. TransLink staff agree that, on a per ride basis, HandyDART service has an overall higher cost due to the higher cost of the vehicle and the driver, who is more highly trained and provides a greater level of

¹ Members of the Access Transit Users' Advisory Committee must be: a user of the TransLink system; a person with a physical, sensory or cognitive disability; or a senior (defined as age 60+); or a parent, guardian or caregiver of a person with a disability; or a representative for people with disabilities who attend educational institutions, from medical service agencies, or from social service agencies supporting or representing immigrants and new Canadians. The current Committee has 18 members with three members from Richmond.

service than a taxicab driver. TransLink staff recognize that there is an optimal balance to be achieved between the use of HandyDART versus taxi services to ensure that the range of transportation options available meets the varying needs of users.

- *Alleged Fraudulent Use of Coupons*: advocates note that TransLink has checks in place as users must show their HandyCard photo identification to the taxi driver and their HandyCard number is recorded on every TaxiSaver coupon, which would prevent people from giving or selling the coupons to persons who would not match the photo identification. Additional potential security measures, which are used by other transit systems in North America, include spot checks by TransLink staff of taxi driver compliance with verifying the HandyCard photo identification, and requiring taxi drivers to fill out a charge slip for each TaxiSaver ride that would be submitted with the coupon for reimbursement. As the charge slip includes pick-up and drop off locations and the user's signature, the forms can be spot checked for signature accuracy and address consistency.

4. Next Steps

With the recent direction of the TransLink Board, TransLink staff will be undertaking a more comprehensive public consultation process on the future of the TaxiSaver program during Summer 2012 with the intent of reporting back in Fall 2012. A range of stakeholder groups will be invited to express their concerns and provide feedback on the proposed changes. Staff have already notified TransLink staff that, at a minimum, the Richmond Centre for Disability, the Richmond Seniors Advisory Committee and the Richmond Seniors Network, should be included in these consultations.

Financial Impact

None.

Conclusion

Accessibility is a cornerstone of any public transit system. The use of supplemental taxi service within custom transit is a key element to ensure that a full range of public transit options are available to meet the needs of people with disabilities and seniors. Only through constructive consultation and dialogue will users and service providers be able to jointly develop and agree upon a revised TaxiSaver program that addresses concerns with the current program while also improving overall service.



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