

November 7, 2023

PREPARED FOR: Victoria Regional Transit Commission

PURPOSE:

To provide the Commission with an update on Custom Transit (handyDART) service in the Victoria Regional Transit System, as well as information on the five-year Custom Transit Strategy, currently in the early stages of development. This report is presented for **INFORMATION.**

BACKGROUND:

Branded as “handyDART” in BC communities, custom transit is a door-to-door, shared-ride service for persons who have a disability that prevents them from using conventional transit without assistance from another person. Custom transit users must be registered and advanced bookings are required. Trips may be either subscription trips that are recurring (such as for work, school, day programs or therapy appointments) or one-time trips to meet specific medical, social, shopping and recreational needs. The majority of custom transit trips are provided using wheelchair accessible minibuses (dedicated vehicles) operated by our contracted operating company, TransDev. Taxis also augment custom transit service through the Taxi Supplement program, whereby trips that cannot be met with available transit vehicles are dispatched to non-dedicated vehicles (i.e. taxi providers). Additionally, via the Taxi Saver program, registered custom transit clients can purchase a set amount taxi vouchers at a 50 per cent discount every month, for the clients to use at their own discretion. In the Victoria Regional Transit system, registered custom transit users can purchase up to \$80 per month worth of vouchers for \$40.

handyDART operates on a call-in reservation system whereby the operating company builds daily schedules with a mix of subscription trips that are booked far in advance, and demand (one-time) trips that can be booked no more than 14 days and no less than two days ahead of the requested date. With major key institutions, such as adult day programs and renal dialysis clinics, often relying exclusively on handyDART to transport their customers, capacity on custom is heavily constrained at peak times of the day. This high subscription demand has led to very little opportunity for customers to book one-time demand trips during large segments of each weekday. While latent demand is notoriously difficult to measure, known capacity constraints are quantitatively captured as Unmet Trips, which is defined as “a requested trip, during service hours, that cannot be accommodated within an hour before or an hour after the desired time, due to vehicles booked to capacity”.

DISCUSSION:

At the September 12, 2023 meeting, the Commission heard concerns from a registered handyDART client regarding the current online booking system available in the Victoria Regional Transit System, as well as concerns about the new electronic fare collection system, Umo, being introduced for conventional transit service only. In recognition of these concerns, staff committed to providing the Commission with an update on the provincial custom transit

strategy, currently in the early stages of development. This strategy is intended to support and enhance custom transit service delivery in all transit systems offering this service type, and it will ultimately seek to enhance the customer experience.

Custom Transit Strategy

BC Transit has contracted Left Turn Right Turn (LTRT) to assist in developing a five-year strategy for Custom Transit (handyDART). This strategy will develop a desired future state for this service type and it will set forth a roadmap to achieving this end state, through the provision of goals and key performance metrics by which BC Transit can measure success.

Service Scope and Deliverables

1. Assist BC Transit in developing a five-year Custom Transit strategy, including a vision, goals, key activities and key performance indicators.
2. Review existing performance information, previously developed reports and cost effectiveness of current Custom Transit services and provide recommendations for improvement.
3. Review the current structure of Custom Transit operations and recommend best practices.
4. Compare BC Transit's Custom Transit business processes to other jurisdictions and provide suggestions for improvement or alignment.
5. Recommend data requirements and metrics to manage operational performance and planning for Custom Transit
6. Suggest an optimal organizational structure for Custom Transit and where it fits best within a transit agency.
7. Meet with key stakeholders to engage on the strategy.
8. Assist in developing a roadmap for the desired future state of Custom Transit, including technology integration, reliable, secure data, service standards and customer experience expectations.

This project includes a peer review of other transit agencies, which will include a comparison of conventional and custom fare products”.

Custom Dispatch/ Scheduling software

BC Transit has embarked on a project to bring a standardized dispatch and scheduling software application to all the systems providing handyDART service. Currently, the capability of the software systems being used in various transit systems around the province varies significantly, and some software systems are in critical need of some technology support. Furthermore, a uniform custom dispatch and scheduling software solution offers significant opportunities for scheduling efficiencies. Pre-implementation funding has been secured for this project and a project team has been assigned. Implementation schedules have not yet been created at this early stage, but the goal is to be in a pilot phase by summer 2024. This custom transit dispatch/scheduling software project will also look at opportunities for a province-wide online booking tool.

Custom Transit Survey

In order to gain an understanding of customers' perceptions and opinions of custom transit service, BC Transit's Regional Operations team is leading community-specific custom transit surveys with custom transit registrants. These surveys are conducted via telephone, and the questions are intended to help BC Transit and our Local Government Partners understand where the service is currently meeting or exceeding customer's expectations, and where there is room for improvement. Importantly, through this survey, we will be gathering community-specific feedback which can be used to identify improvements both at the local level, and on a province-wide scale. Questions in the survey gauge people's overall satisfaction with various aspects of the service including the booking process, wait times, driver friendliness, bus comfort, and experience with Taxi Supplement service. This survey process has now been completed in the Comox Valley Regional Transit System, and it is currently planned for the Victoria Regional Transit System in fall 2024.

This system-specific survey is in addition to an annual BC Transit-wide survey that is conducted by a third-party research firm, contracted by BC Transit, to measure customer satisfaction with custom transit service. The results of these surveys generally indicate a positive perception of custom transit, with the areas of highest satisfaction including driver courtesy and helpfulness, value for fare paid and vehicle safety. The top areas for improvement cited by customers are expanding custom transit service hours and availability during existing hours.

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the Victoria Regional Transit Commission RECEIVE this Custom Transit Update for **INFORMATION**.