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**SUBJECT: Custom Transit Strategy**

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of this report is to provide the Victoria Regional Transit Commission (the “Commission”) with an update on BC Transit’s Custom Transit Strategy **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 (reservation) trips to meet specific medical, social, shopping and recreational needs.

A majority of custom transit trips are provided using wheelchair accessible minibuses (dedicated vehicles). In Victoria, handyDART is operated by one of BC Transit’s contracted operating companies, Transdev. Taxis also augment custom transit service through the Taxi Supplement program, whereby trips that cannot be met with dedicated 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 of 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 taxi vouchers for \$40.

handyDART operates on a call-in reservation system. The operating company builds daily schedules with a mix of subscription trips that are booked far in advance, and reservation (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”.

As a first step to countering the challenges faced with this service, BC Transit partnered with a consultant, Left Turn Right Turn, to develop a 5-year Custom Transit Strategy between October 2023 to March 2024. Through the consultation process, the consultant conducted a market scan through which they looked at and compared BC Transit’s custom transit service with that of other transit agencies; in addition, BC Transit requested they recommend data requirements and metrics to manage operational performance and support future planning efforts; finally, it was requested that they develop a roadmap to guide towards a future state that utilizes technology

(such as a custom dispatch solution) and also takes into consideration data and customer expectations.

## **DISCUSSION**

The Strategy resulted in 13 recommendations, ultimately formalizing much of what BC Transit knows about custom transit, and its challenges, and sets forth a roadmap for moving forward and implementing change. The recommendations are split into short, medium and long-term actions, which are summarized graphically in Appendix 1. The recommendations themselves focus on:

- The development of standardized operational and customer service key performance indicators (KPIs) and standards to ensure a consistent customer experience across the province
- Modernizing the service to include technology as an expectation, inclusive of a universal dispatch software, as well as the eventual introduction of electronic fare payment solutions and the ability to easily manage customer registration, booking and the status of rides through a digital solution
- A continual review of the registration and assessment process to ensure continuous improvement
- A review and potential update to the Taxi Saver program based on usage and industry best practises
- A name change to better reflect the population this program serves (moving away from the current “handyDART” branding)

At the recent BC Transit Annual Workshop, the Strategy was presented to Local Government and Operating Partners for feedback on recommendation prioritization, and this input is guiding this work moving forward.

### Custom Transit Solution Project

The Custom Transit Solution project (formerly the Custom Dispatch project) is foundational to improving this service. Modernizing the Custom fleet through the integration of technology was an underpinning of multiple recommendations throughout the Strategy. Data and the corresponding metrics for custom transit are currently self-reported by operating companies, and this process leads to both consistency and validity errors. The project, which will give BC Transit access to standardized data and enhanced efficiency and reporting capabilities is currently in the Negotiated Request for Proposal (NRFP) phase, with the NRFP posting closing in late September/early October. The scope of the project includes:

- A Custom dispatch solution, standardized across all 28 Custom systems, which automates trip scheduling, dispatching, and the reporting of KPIs, while preserving the operational autonomy of each Operations Company
- Installation of in-vehicle technology in the form of mobile data terminals (MDTs) with automatic vehicle location (AVL) capabilities, to enhance the communication and operational safety of operators and riders through real-time tracking of the custom fleet
- A 24/7 multi-channel booking portal which is responsive, customizable and accessible via web and mobile applications
- A solution which facilitates seamless, real-time, on-demand data access for BC Transit, allowing for efficient data management and utilization throughout the contract period
- The ability to integrate with fare payment systems
- A Centralized Registration Platform that optimizes online applications and integrates user profiles seamlessly across booking and dispatch systems to enhance operational efficiency

- A solution which can integrate battery electric buses (BEB) into its dispatching and fleet management platforms

In terms of continuously enhancing the custom transit program, the Custom Transit Strategy will be complemented by the opening of the handyDART Facility in View Royal in 2025, and the opportunities for service expansion that this brings. BC Transit will continue to keep the Commission updated as the recommendations from the Strategy are implemented.

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## APPENDIX 1 – Custom Transit Strategy Recommendations

