



## TRANSIT AND PARKING STRATEGY MEMORANDUM

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**TO: MAYOR J. LEHMAN AND MEMBERS OF COUNCIL**

**FROM: B. FORSYTH, DIRECTOR OF TRANSIT AND PARKING STRATEGY**

**NOTED: R. JAMES-REID, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ACCESS BARRIE**

**RE: BARRIE TRANSIT UPDATE**

**DATE: SEPTEMBER 21, 2020**

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The purpose of this Memorandum is to provide members of Council with an update on the Transit stream of funding included in the recently announced Safe Restart funding program, as well as planned and potential service adjustments for Barrie Transit.

Prior to the pandemic, transit ran on hourly service from approximately 5:30am to 12:30am, with 30-minute frequencies on most routes throughout of the day. Early in the pandemic, Barrie Transit had experienced a reduction in ridership to as low as 25% of its regular ridership. At that time, without a funding commitment from other levels of government, Barrie Transit reduced its service hours to approximately 65% of its regular service levels to mitigate further financial losses. The reduction in service maintained hourly service and coverage throughout the entire City to support essential travel.

Currently ridership is approximately 40% of pre-COVID ridership. Barrie Transit (like several transit agencies within the province) are not expecting ridership (and revenue) to return to pre-COVID levels until 2022/2023. Some of the reasons for this include:

- Remote learning at Georgian College, where students account for 35-40% of the systems total ridership
- Residents are finding alternative modes of transportation, either due to the reduced levels of transit services causing longer travel times, or general concern of personal safety.

Since returning to paid transit service on August 1, 2020, and consistent with current ridership levels, revenue is approximately 40% (or \$200K per month) of the original budget of approximately \$500K per month.

Recently, the provincial government announced the Safe Restart Funding Program, with a dedicated funding stream for Transit. There are 2 phases of this funding program.

Phase 1 is designed for immediate relief from the financial pressures of COVID-19, specifically for lost revenue and additional expenditures from April 1, 2020 to September 30, 2020. As part of Phase 1, the City of Barrie received approximately \$2.5M. As a result of the requirement to move to rear door boarding and suspension of transit fares, the City has estimated revenue loss of \$500K per month from April to July. In August and September, lost revenues are estimated to be approximately \$300K per month for a total of \$2.6M in the initial phase of the safe restart funding program.

Phase 2 is intended to assist with ongoing financial pressures to the end of the provincial fiscal year covering from October 1, 2020 to March 31, 2021. The details on this phase of the program have not been released and funding has not been committed or allocated at the municipal level to date. Depending on the details of the program there is a risk the City of Barrie is not eligible for funding, however, the province has initially indicated that in order to be eligible for phase 2 funding the City of Barrie will be required to:

1. Engage in consolidated procurement opportunities leveraging Metrolinx and other provincial procurement tools



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2. Review the lowest performing bus routes and consider whether they may be better serviced by microtransit.
3. Work with the province and Metrolinx where appropriate to determine the feasibility of implementing microtransit options on viable routes.

Staff plan to participate as directed by the province above to leverage funding as part of phase 2 and assist with continued anticipated financial shortfalls. However, without the firm funding commitment from the other levels of government the reintroduction of full transit service comes with significant financial risk to the municipality. It is very importantly to note that as it stands now there is no further funding support planned post-March 31, 2021 to assist municipalities with the expected continued shortfall in transit revenues.

If Barrie Transit was to return to full service, the unfavorable budget impact would be approximately \$300K per month. The funding provided as part of the Safe Restart Agreement can potentially assist up to March 31, 2021, however if additional sustainable funding does not present itself to cover post March 31, 2021, further service level adjustments will need to be considered as part of the 2021 budget, or potentially sooner as staff learn more about the safe restart funding program.

Staff are planning to rebuild service in a steady and fiscally responsible manner with the hopes of encouraging the return of ridership. The next step is to increase transit service on September 27, 2020 to approximately 85% of pre-COVID levels. This adjustment will maintain the hourly service on all our routes, to ensure base coverage throughout the entire City, with 30 minute frequency at peak times on our core routes (Routes 1, 6, 8, and 100).

We currently have 21 buses in service, with an additional 4 cover buses staged around the City throughout the day. As we are currently limited to 20 passengers per vehicle, the cover buses are meant to be quickly deployed into service where passengers have been turned away due to capacity limitations. When we increase the service on September 27<sup>th</sup>, we will have 29 buses in service, but will no longer provide the cover buses to assist with the potential capacity issues. In consultation with the Health Unit, we are hopeful in the future we will be in a position to remove the capacity limitations. We are expecting that running more frequent service will help to mitigate capacity issues, however by eliminating the cover buses from the service model, we do run the risk of not being able to accommodate ridership in a timely manner.

Staff will report back to Council later this fall with additional data and feedback from these service adjustments, including any additional details released from the provincial government on the next phase of the Safe Restart Funding.