
TO: GENERAL COMMITTEE

SUBJECT: FREE TRANSIT FOR BARRIE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

WARD: ALL

PREPARED BY AND KEY CONTACT: T. GREEN, SUPERVISOR OF COMPLIANCE AND CUSTOMER SERVICE, EXT. 4179

SUBMITTED BY: B. FORSYTH, DIRECTOR OF TRANSIT AND PARKING STRATEGY

GENERAL MANAGER APPROVAL: R. JAMES-REID, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ACCESS BARRIE

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER APPROVAL: M. PROWSE, CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

RECOMMENDED MOTION

1. That Staff Report TPS005-20 concerning Free Transit for Barrie High School Students be received for information purposes.

PURPOSE & BACKGROUND

Report Overview

2. Council recently adopted the following motion 20-G-144 on September 28, 2020:
 - "1. *That staff in the Transit and Parking Strategy Department, in consultation with the local schoolboards, investigate the feasibility of providing free transit service to City of Barrie high school students until December 31, 2020.*
 2. *That the free transit service be only provided within one (1) hour following the end of school time and at bus stops adjacent to the City of Barrie Secondary Schools.*
 3. *That staff in the Transit and Parking Strategy Department, in consultation with the local schoolboards and the Student Transportation Consortium, investigate the feasibility of implementing a longer term solution to provide free transit service to City of Barrie high school students and report back to General Committee."*
4. The purpose of this report is to provide additional information to Council, after consulting with local school boards, the Simcoe County Student Transportation Consortium (SCSTC) and the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) regarding the feasibility of implementing free transit for high school students up to December 31, 2020.
5. As it specifically relates to item #3 in motion 20-G-144, staff will continue to work with the SCSTC and plan to report back to Council in a separate report in 2021.
6. The information contained within this Staff Report supports two objectives; to continue to examine short-term pressures for local school boards; and to identify pathways to explore the feasibility of implementing longer term transit solutions for local high school students.

7. To support the COVID pandemic, Ontario school boards have been encouraged to adopt secondary timetabling methods that emphasize cohorting of students as much as possible, to limit the number of student-to-student contacts.
8. The role of SCSTC is contracting bus operators and developing transportation services on behalf of Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB), Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board (SMCDSB).
9. Barrie Transit and the SCSTC have continued to explore partnership opportunities prior to and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic including service duplication, routing and educational opportunities, in preparation for such time that it has been indicated that the reduced risk of transmission will permit a gradual return to normal circumstances.
10. Barrie Transit staff will continue, in consultation with the local school boards and SCSTC, to investigate longer term innovative solutions that align with Council's strategic plan and which may benefit both the transit system and school communities.

ANALYSIS

School Boards

11. The SCDSB, SMCDSB, and French Language school boards have all adopted a range of innovative timetabling approaches that follow good health advice and supports productive learning environments. School boards are required to provide no less than 5-hours of instructional time for in-person learning, each day.
12. City staff reached out to the school boards to receive feedback regarding the initial motion. Feedback was received from the SCSTC and the SCDSB indicating they would not be in support of the motion if it encouraged students to depart prior to the end of the scheduled school day. However, they were encouraged that the City was continuing to explore opportunities and develop upon programs already in place between the City and SCSTC.
13. For example, school boards are trying to keep students cohorting with the same group of students throughout the school day. In some cases, the schools are offering one course per day for the full week. To accommodate these new models, the SCSTC has adjusted their transportation services to accommodate the student's transportation needs yet adhere to the required in-school time. Start and end times vary slightly per school but are all approximately 8:00am-2:00pm. Buses typically drop students off at school approximately 15 to 20 minutes prior to the morning start time. SCSTC begins their afternoon transportation services shortly after the end of the school day for all Barrie public and catholic secondary schools.
14. Unlike other school board transportation consortia in other regions of the province, SCSTC have not observed any service level concerns or pressures during the High School transportation windows either before or after school.
15. School Boards have also been instructed to limit indirect and direct student contacts as much as possible. The development and implementation of safe travel plans for students to/from school begins prior to the student arriving at the bus stop in the morning. To support this and in conjunction with their transportation providers, they have created comprehensive transportation plans, which must be followed and that include:
 - Daily self-assessments before going to their bus stops
 - Encouraging physical distancing at bus stops (2 metres)

- Wearing face coverings and follow assigned seating plans
 - Enhanced cleaning protocols for frequently touched surfaces (in accordance with Ministry of Education guidelines), including increased disinfecting protocols for frequently touched surfaces (e.g. handrails, seatbacks).
16. Due to COVID safety measures, high schools are not providing identification cards to students at the present time. Therefore, any free transit option for students, outside of the bus stops immediately adjacent to school properties and during a given time frame would require an additional method of bus pass, ride card or fare validation. The City currently offers students the opportunity to obtain a photo student ID card at the Terminal for \$5/card. As well, students have the option to purchase a discounted monthly pass or multi-ride card.
17. At the time of preparing this report staff had not received feedback from either the SMCDSB or the French Language school board.

Transit System Impact and Capacity Considerations

18. Due to impacts relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, Barrie Transit had significantly reduced its service, both in terms of service frequency and capacity. As of September 27th, 2020, Barrie Transit is operating on approximately 85% of its regular service (when compared to pre-COVID levels). Operating at these service levels ensures base coverage throughout the City of hourly frequency on all routes and a 30-minute frequency on core routes (routes 1, 6, 8, 100) during peak times.
19. Following the guidance of the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU), Barrie Transit is currently operating with a capacity of 20 riders (max) per vehicle or approximately 40% of vehicle capacity. While current ridership is only at approximately 40-50% of pre-COVID levels, when accompanied by a 60% reduction in capacity, vehicles are often operating with notable ridership loads, at times reaching capacity.
20. As a result of the capacity limitations, staff had previously implemented a system that included cover buses. Cover buses offered the flexibility of Barrie Transit to mitigate issues arising from vehicles that have reached capacity, where a bus could quickly be deployed into service to accommodate passengers have been turned away due to capacity limitations. When additional service was added back on September 27, 2020, cover buses were removed from service in order to mitigate costs. Any additional ridership loads, or surge demand experienced by in-service vehicles may not be able to be accommodated. This results in the increase risk that existing ridership will not be accommodated in a timely manner and that cascading effect of capacity will be felt beyond the initially targeted one-hour free transit window.
21. The school boards were unable to provide the number of students who require school bus transportation for each location. However, City of Barrie staff have reviewed vehicle loads and ridership capacity for the identified timeframe on Barrie Transit. The average spare capacity on routes adjacent to high schools within City boundaries would provide the following (based on September 2020 ridership data):

School	# of Routes adjacent to school	Estimated Spare Capacity per hour
Barrie North Collegiate Institute	1	16 students per hour
Bear Creek Secondary School	1	62 students per hour
Eastview Secondary School	4	123 students per hour
ES Roméo-Dallaire	1	64 students per hour
ESC Nouvelle-Alliance	1	50 students per hour
Innisdale Secondary School	3	126 students per hour
St. Joan of Arc Catholic High School	1	29 students per hour
St. Joseph's Catholic High School	1	60 students per hour
St. Peter's Catholic Secondary School	1	72 students per hour

22. It is expected that during the identified timeframe of 12:30pm-2:00pm, Barrie Transit will have limited capacity to absorb even a small percentage of the potential additional riders that may take advantage of the proposed free transit service. Based on the fact that many of these schools have 1,000+ students, there is the potential to put significant pressure on the already limited bus capacities and could negatively affect the current riders who depend on the service for essential travel to work, appointments, groceries, etc.
23. The spare capacities provided above also only considers direct route travel. Understanding that school catchment areas for city schools vary throughout the City's boundaries and without knowing the students destination, transit staff are unable to identify or estimate any ridership level impacts that student's transferring vehicles or taking multiple routes may have on the system. To fully assess this impact, staff would require a significant in-depth study in collaboration with the SCSTC to analyse, understand and implement any potential changes.

Health Unit

24. The SMDHU and Barrie Transit meet regularly to discuss health and safety related matters, as they pertain to the COVID-19 pandemic. Per direction of the health unit, Barrie Transit is operating its system with a maximum of 20 passengers per conventional vehicle and 1 passenger per specialized vehicle.
25. The SMDHU advised that continuing with distancing requirements for transit bussing is preferred. This decision is based upon trending data of increased transmission both within the city, in the County and across the province. These trends are highlighted with almost 70% of current active cases in Simcoe County and Muskoka being in a younger demographic (18-34 years of age). Further data suggests that of current active cases, 52 are in Simcoe County, with 40 in Barrie (as of September 19th, 2020).
26. While the SMDHU commends the spirit and goodwill of the motion in increasing ridership and providing benefit to students to encourage public transit as a mode of transportation, considering the region is firmly in the second wave of the pandemic there are concerns with encouraging additional ridership on the public transit system at this time.

Future Growth & Partnership Opportunities

27. To ensure Barrie Transit explores meaningful ridership growth opportunities, staff continue to meet with community partners, review ridership data and work to identify service gaps. The partnership between Barrie Transit and the SCSTC has seen some positive growth in recent years, including the formalization of the Barrie Transit Field Trip Pass program in 2019 and the expansion of the High School Field Trip Pass pilot in 2019/20 (on hold due to COVID for 2020/21).
28. City staff and the SCSTC have had initial discussions regarding the Kingston model for high school transit passes, with interest displayed by both parties. Discussions regarding shared service integration, service/catchment areas, targeted mirrored service and other similar service models and opportunities are on-going.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACT MATTERS

29. There are no environmental and/or climate change impact matters related to the recommendation.

ALTERNATIVES

30. The following alternatives are available for consideration by General Committee:

Alternative #1 General Committee could choose to offer free transit to local high school students during the identified timeframe of 12:30pm-2:00pm until December 31st, 2020.

This alternative is not recommended as it would likely cause capacity issues on Barrie Transit and would not be supported by either the School Boards or the SMDHU and would be difficult to administer a program of this nature in the short term.

FINANCIAL

31. Adoption of free transit for High School students from 12:30pm to 2pm through December 31st, 2020 would result in waving \$10,000 in estimated revenue.
32. One of objectives of this free transit program would be to promote transit to school aged students. By engaging these students, it would be hopeful that as they mature, they'll come to choose transit as their mode of transportation, increasing ridership and revenue, and thus providing a healthier transit system. However, it would be difficult to estimate the long-term impact on transit ridership and fare revenue as a result of such a program.

LINKAGE TO 2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN

33. The recommendation(s) included in this Staff Report support the following goals identified in the 2018-2022 Strategic Plan:
 - Offering Innovation and Citizen Driven Services
 - Building Strong Neighbourhoods
 - Improving the Ability to Get Around Barrie