
REPORT NUMBER 209-2022-Community Services-Transit Services

DATE

PREPARED

November 18, 2022

FILE

MEETING DATE

December 5, 2022

SUBJECT

Availability of LIFT+ Specialized Service

RECOMMENDATION

For information only.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is to provide information in follow up to a deputation received by Council on August 22, 2022 relative to the availability of the LIFT+ Specialized Transit Service. The report provides Council with information regarding the five items outlined in the deputation which were referred to Administration for review. As part of the review, Administration was also asked to consult with the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and the Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC) as necessary.

DISCUSSION

At the August 22, 2022 Committee of the Whole meeting a deputation was received, and referred to Administration for further review relative to the availability of the LIFT+ Specialized Transit Service. The deputation included concerns about challenges in booking rides, the level and availability of service for LIFT+, and the quality of rides offered by LIFT+ vehicles. As part of the deputation, five key items were outlined as follows:

- increase number of units and operators employed
- evaluate frequent use of Roach's taxi
- review scheduling practices - operator schedules are too tight or have too much down time
- review ride quality of new vehicles – risk of passenger injury due to vehicle bouncing
- change practice of unfair notice to operators of last minute schedule changes.

Information for each of the above items is provided below.

Increase Number of Units and Operators

The LIFT+ fleet is comprised of 27 vehicles including 14 high floor buses, 12 low floor buses and one (1) ProMaster van. Administration believes the fleet is properly sized and has sufficient capacity to meet the daily peak vehicle requirements of Thunder Bay's specialized service and an expansion to the fleet size is not required at this time.

The LIFT+ operator complement is comprised of 11 full-time operators and 16 part-time operators. Since the pandemic, LIFT+ has been experiencing significant staffing shortages due to position vacancies and other factors such as leaves of absence and workplace accommodations. Transit Administration and Corporate Human Resources staff recognize that staffing contributes to many of the trip accommodation and scheduling issues. These staffing shortages exist across the transit industry and many industries. Workforce availability shortages is the main factor affecting the current specialized transit scheduling issues and directly impact the number of unaccommodated trip requests that customers may experience. Regular and ongoing recruitment efforts have been and will remain a high priority.

Evaluate Frequent Use of Taxi Service

Across Canada, utilizing a private sector taxi service to assist specialized transit systems with meeting the majority of all trip requests is a common industry practice and helps reduce the number of unaccommodated trip requests resulting from limited resources. In Thunder Bay, trips are delegated to a contracted taxi service only after a determination that LIFT+ resources have been exhausted and there is no ability for the LIFT+ service to complete the trip (ex. peak service hours, late evenings). The delegation of trips to a taxi service assists in reducing the number of unaccommodated trips that are tracked on a waitlist. In Thunder Bay, 96 per cent of all specialized trips are provided by LIFT+ resources and the taxi service utilization rate is four (4) percent. This ratio of trips accommodated 'in house' versus 'taxi service' is comparable to or lower than that of other specialized transit peer comparators operating in other municipalities.

Review Scheduling Practices

Specialized transit is a door-to-door service provided to approximately 1,200 LIFT+ registrants through an 'on-demand' model. 'On-demand' model means that the service provided fluctuates daily based on the demand of customers. LIFT+ registrants can request trips 7 days in advance, up to and including same day trips, at anytime during Transit's booking hours (Mon. – Fri. 8:30 am – 11 pm; Sat. 9:30 am – 11 pm; Sun./Holidays – 9:30 am – 10 pm). Common issues generally experienced by all transit systems with on-demand service models are high demand or peak times resulting from customer requests and then slower non-peak periods.

Peak Service Times – Tight Schedules

It is common to see high demand for trips during peak service hours such as 8:30 to 10:00 am, 12:00 pm to 2:00 pm and 4:00 pm to 5:30 pm. During these peak service times, it is difficult to meet the high demand even with all operators working at one time. Therefore, in order to accommodate as many trip requests as possible during these peak periods, trips are scheduled as close together as possible. To accommodate as many requests as possible during peak times, Administration will request that the customer adjust their desired trip times slightly, usually at the time of booking, or to consider the use of a taxi service to complete the trip.

Off-Peak Service Times - Downtime

There are periods of the day that have minimal trip requests which can cause downtime or slow times within operator schedules. Best efforts are made to reduce the number of in-service vehicles and operators during these times through scheduling split shifts, lunch breaks, etc. However, there are periods that are more feasible for an operator to wait out the downtime while on shift. Other causes of downtime are customer trip cancellations and no-shows. As of October 2022, there have been 2,950 passenger cancellations and 790 no-shows which results in creating an average of 12 scheduling gaps per day, with many occurring at the last minute. The ability to fill the scheduling gaps created by late cancellations and no-shows are limited to the trips taken from the taxi list or waitlist. Our ability to fill these available last minute trips are contingent on trip requests having similar pickup times and destinations.

Currently, there are approximately 5,000 trip requests per month and this number has been steadily increasing to near pre-pandemic levels (ie. 7,500 trip requests per month in 2019). Optimizing these requests to accommodate as many trips as possible is very complex and is completed using electronic scheduling software. The scheduling software reviews all trips requested based on a number of parameters such as registrant's needs (i.e. use of mobility device, attendant), map geocoding, travel times, number of available in-service vehicles, etc. in order to determine the most optimal trip schedules. The schedule is then reviewed and adjusted by a Specialized Transit Co-ordinator before being finalized.

Through the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program (ICIP) – the City is pursuing a number of public transit stream projects, including the acquisition and introduction of new On Demand mobility management software to achieve scheduling efficiencies, introduce more freedom and accessibility for specialized clients, and improve the overall customer experience for all on demand, shared ride passengers. Matching funds for this project have been approved as part of the 2020 capital budget to leverage the combined federal and provincial funding and the project remains fully funded.

Review Ride Quality of New Vehicles

The deputant's new vehicle concerns were in reference to twelve (12) 8-metre low floor Arboc Spirit of Freedom vans purchased since 2020. These vehicles represent 44 per cent of the LIFT+ fleet. This vehicle model is used commonly by other specialized transit systems - more than 248 have been purchased throughout Ontario through the Metrolinx Joint Transit Procurement Initiative of which Thunder Bay is a participating member. Outside of the concerns raised in the deputation about the ride quality of these vehicles, the number of public and internal staff complaints received about ride quality has been low. To date there have been no reported passenger or staff injuries attributed to vehicle ride quality. Fleet Services has reached out to the vehicle manufacturer and other industry users of this vehicle type to enquire about ride quality issues. To date, responses received about ride quality remain positive and no concerns have been noted.

Anecdotally, some internal staff have noticed a perceived rougher ride quality of this vehicle type; however, no mechanical defects have been confirmed to be a contributing factor.

As these vehicles are new additions to the LIFT+ fleet, Administration will continue to monitor any passenger or internal staff concerns noted about ride quality and will factor that input into any future purchase decisions.

Change Notice Practices to Operators of Schedule Changes

All work allocation/scheduling practices are subject to the rules of the collective agreement. The collective agreement is a contract between the City (the employer) and Union (employees) which outline many of the terms and conditions of employment within the bargaining unit, scheduling practices included. The collective agreement is negotiated through the collective bargaining process by both parties.

There are three (3) sign-ups per year where the 11 full-time operators choose their shifts based on seniority. Full-time operators know their shift months in advance with the exception of their start time which may vary by 30 minutes as per a provision of the collective agreement. If full-time operators work outside their regular shift, it is done with their consent such (i.e. overtime, exchange of duty with another operator).

Part-time operators do have short notice for their shift. They receive their work schedule at 2 pm the day prior to the scheduled shift. However, part-time operators are hired as a 'fill in' workforce designed to complete work that cannot be covered by full-time operators and to cover full-time operator absences. Having the ability to schedule work with short notice to part-time operators is extremely important in providing the service and reducing impact on customers for the following reasons:

- majority of operator absences are not planned (i.e. illness), leaving limited advance notice to fill vacant shifts;
- service fluctuates daily based on passenger demand; it is not possible to schedule all operators in advance and ensure flexibility in adjusting service to meet demand;
- reduced flexibility in scheduling shifts would likely result in an increase to unaccommodated trips, the inability to provide same day trips, the inability to provide waitlist trips, and increase the possibility of trips cancelled by Transit at the last minute.

Consultation with Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and the Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC)

LIFT+ operators are represented by ATU Local 966. Transit Administration and the ATU Executive participate together on a Joint Labor Management Committee which meets regularly.

The items noted in the above mentioned deputation, particularly around operator work scheduling, were discussed at a Labour Management Committee meeting held on November 3, 2022 with no significant concerns noted at the time.

Administration has not been able to schedule a meeting to consult with the AAC and report back by the Council requested due date of this report of December 5 2022. Transit Administration will request that the AAC table this matter as an agenda item for further discussion when regular committee meetings resume in 2023.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATION

There are no immediate financial implications associated with this report.

CONCLUSION

This report is presented for information. Administration will continue to regularly monitor any concerns related to the availability of LIFT+ Specialized Service.

BACKGROUND

At the August 22, 2022 Committee of the Whole meeting, Council passed a resolution directing that Administration report back on or before December 5, 2022 regarding a deputation relative to the availability of LIFT+ Specialized Transit Service. The motion recommended that the contents of the deputation be referred to Administration for review and that Administration consult with the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and the Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC) as necessary.

REFERENCE MATERIAL ATTACHED

NONE.

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REPORT SIGNED AND VERIFIED BY

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Date (11/24/2022)