

COUNCIL STATEMENT

March 14, 2019

CITY OF ST. JOHN'S IMPLEMENTS INTERIM GOBUS RECOMMENDATION

As part of the ongoing review of public transit that is intended to help Council improve both conventional and paratransit services, the Transportation Commission asked for and has received preliminary recommendations to address rising costs and issues with the GoBus system.

While all public transit systems need municipal investment to offset the difference between revenue generated from passenger fares and the cost to operate the system, our current costs for GoBus are substantial. The City of St. John's invests \$13.7 million annually towards Metrobus operating costs and \$3.9 million annually towards GoBus operating costs; in 2018, the net cost per ride (operating cost minus passenger fare revenue) that the City invests in GoBus transit is \$24.3 per ride, or a 90 per cent subsidy.

To be clear, Council understands the need for and values the GoBus service and is deeply committed to ensuring that the services continues. We are also very aware of the need to provide this service in a sustainable way and to make every effort possible to manage the costs of operating this valued service. This is why we asked Dillon consulting to make some recommendations now that we can begin working on for 2019.

The recommendations focus on two main topics – eligibility requirements and contractual matters with our service provider, MVT.

In terms of the contract with MVT, the consultant has made some suggestions related to contract language which we can use in the development of our next contract, as our current contract continues until 2021. However, there are also some things we can change as part of our existing contract:

- Change the current definition of “no shows” from 90 minutes to 45 minutes and discontinue paying for no shows at 90 minutes.
- Work to ensure that all passenger-paid fees for taxi rides and no shows are collected from the users.

Eligibility for GoBus service is a complex issue; barriers to using conventional transit, either permanently or due to a short-term health issue, are not always obvious and require sensitivity and understanding of differing needs. Over the past five years, we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of individuals seeking approval to use GoBus services and our staff, while knowledgeable, are not equipped to assess recommendations from family physicians for GoBus passes. For this reason, it is recommended we contract a third party, skilled in this area, to determine and approve eligibility. Once approved by Council, Metrobus will issue a request for proposals to identify a qualified organization to offer a new assessment and approval process.

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We have consulted with our own Inclusion Advisory Committee as well as the Paratransit Working Group, Network of Disability Organizations at Metrobus and CODNL on these recommendations and will work closely with these groups on the development of the eligibility requirements as well as the request for proposals for the third-party assessment company.

One unfortunate impact of this recommendation will be the need for all GoBus users to confirm their eligibility by having it reassessed. Even though some users may have been with us for many years, it is important that we start with a clean slate and we apologize for any stress or concern that this may cause our clients. The City's Inclusion Advisory Committee is working closely with Metrobus staff and advocacy groups to make this process as easy possible and will ensure that supports are in place for all users who wish to seek continued eligibility on GoBus.

Contracted third party organizations would typically employ a registered occupational therapist, nurse, M.D. and so on; assessments will be confidential and provided at no cost to users, and once a long-term eligibility is approved, the process will not ever have to be repeated.

These changes would not be immediate, and users can continue to book rides as they have done previously. These recommendations will be discussed at Committee of the Whole on March 20, 2019 and will be voted on at a future Council meeting.

We are currently communicating with all registered GoBus users and will continue to share information and timelines as they become available. We also welcome feedback from the community either through advocacy groups (many of whom are members of our Inclusion Advisory Committee), by email at inclusion@stjohns.ca or by contacting Metrobus directly.

It is our hope that third party assessments will help us manage the growing demand by determining who needs the service; reduce the current 24-hour advance booking notice in the future and increase the potential for same day bookings; and include education to support use of conventional Metrobus services.

We're working with the disability community to explore options to expand our accessibility so that we create a fully inclusive transit system.

As a Council, we understand the importance of creating opportunities for inclusion within the conventional Metrobus service that foster independence and a greater connection to the community for persons with disabilities, which is why we will continue to invest in features such as wheelchair accessible buses as part of the on-going improvements to public transportation. All buses within the Metrobus fleet have the ability to "kneel to the curb" and bus ramps can currently be deployed at over 80% of stops along six wheelchair-accessible routes – and we're working on more.

The Transit Review is focused on improvements to the frequency of service, route design, operating hours and passenger amenities that are the most beneficial and cost effective for the residents of St. John's; recommendations from the full review will guide how transit is planned, implemented, and funded over the next five to ten years and are expected to be released this spring.

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