

Item 9.2.1

Thank you again to the committee members who were able to join us for the initial engagement on the On Demand Accessible Transportation Service which has been approved by Regional Council. I have attached here a summary of what we heard during these sessions, from both Accessible Transportation Advocates, like yourselves, and from taxi providers who currently operate this type of service. This document was attached to the report that went to Regional Council in February.

The next step in procuring this service is to create a request for proposal, which will outline the requirements and will allow accessible transportation service providers an opportunity to submit proposals on how they would operate a system meeting these specifications. To ensure the requirements accurately reflect the needs of the community, an online survey will be created on the Shape Your City platform to gather feedback from the public. Links to this survey will be shared on the municipality's social media accounts and website, will be mailed to users of Access-a-Bus, and will be distributed to those who participated in the stakeholder consultations, including yourselves, such that it can be distributed within your organizations and communities.

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What we heard from Accessibility Stakeholders

Through stakeholder engagement, a total of 25 accessibility advocates, representing more than 15 different organizations, provided their feedback in response to questions relating to how existing accessible transportation is working for users, what an ideal taxi-like system might look like for Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), and what requirements might be important if HRM were to procure taxi-like services. The following is a summary of these comments.

Key points:

- Accessible transportation should reflect what is available to others:
 - Users should be able to make trips at any time of the day.
 - They should expect a similar wait time to a passenger who does not require accessible services.
 - Users should be able to get to their destination regardless of whether their trip is deemed essential (medical/work/school) or social.
- The availability of accessible taxis should allow passengers with disabilities to act spontaneously, with autonomy and agency.
- The relationship between clients and drivers is important for private transportation. Respondents felt that existing drivers are doing a great job and that these drivers should be supported.
- Transportation services are utilized on a regular basis; daily to weekly.

What we heard about existing accessible transportation services in HRM:

Challenges

- Trips requiring accessible transportation are unable to be accommodated at least once a week.
- Basic needs like getting to the hospital in urgent but non-emergency situations is very difficult due to availability of transportation.
- There has also been confusion about how to get to a Covid-19 testing centre if you don't drive.
- Accessible transportation users have an increased burden of needing to plan their lives more fully in order to accommodate the limited transportation options. More available transportation throughout the day can help with this.
- Trips reflect those of standard transportation users and tend to be higher at peak as people travel to and from work, or appointments, making it very difficult to find transportation during these times.
- Organizations tend to forgo off site activities due to the difficulty booking transportation and individuals are excluded from social engagements as medical appointments tend to be prioritized. This can have a profound impact on the mental health of individuals.

Existing on demand services

- Taxis tend to be used for shorter distance trips, trips outside of the Access-a-Bus service area, spontaneous or short notice trips, and for trips which require pick up and/or drop off at specific times as they tend to be able to get trips with shorter time frames with this service.
- Taxis are used more regularly by those who are ineligible for Access-a-Bus.
- Taxi service benefits those from outside of the municipality as well as tourists.

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- Little access for users outside of the urban core.
- Taxis can be quite expensive.
- Rurally accessible transportation tends to focus on transportation of seniors making access for younger people difficult.
- Taxis are inconsistently available, it is likely that there would be more demand if the service was more readily available.
- Low income options should be available for private services.
- A relationship tends to be formed between accessible taxi users and drivers. Drivers tend to go above and beyond working irregular hours to assist their regular customers.

Access-A-Bus

- Access-a-Bus trips are provided at a lower cost which supports those unable to afford taxis services, although it tends to be used by individuals for repeated trips or those which can be booked in advance.
- It is advantageous for groups to use Access-a-Bus due to the size of the vehicles.
- Things like travelling for business meetings may not allow the flexibility to make multiple stops for other passengers on your Access-a-Bus trip.
- Access-a-Bus must be booked well in advance and available trips may mean you arrive very early to your destination and leave very late. Taxis tend to narrow this window but many times taxis are unavailable when called and it is unknown when accessible taxis may be available.

Stakeholder suggested standards for an on demand accessible transportation service:

- Vehicles should be spread across the municipality and should not congregate downtown.
- Service should be available in rural areas of the municipality.
- Wait times for trips should be similar to those experienced by standard taxi users.
- Vehicles should be available on holidays with additional capacity on special events.
- Service should be available at all times.
- It was understood that medical needs would be prioritized, but also noted that without capacity in the system people can become socially isolated which has an impact on mental health.
- Having phone, app & online options to reserve a trip but also the option to hail on street (though it is expected this would be used less than the other options).
- Allow clients to book and select a preferred driver to maintain the relationship. Consistency components are important within the existing accessible transportation systems. If training differed between drivers, this may entice some clients to choose to wait longer for service from a preferred driver, or from one based on high ratings from other users. However, selecting a preferred driver should not increase the overall wait time.
- Payment options should extend beyond digital and credit cards and knowing the approximate/actual cost of the trip from an app or technology within the vehicle can help those with visual impairments (this is true for all vehicles accessible or otherwise).
- Being provided audible location updates throughout the trip could be helpful to some.
- Training for all members of the organization should be mandatory, while encouraging knowledge sharing and ongoing training opportunities.
- Travel training for users.

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- Though operating transportation service in the most densely populated areas makes sense due to demand, it is important to keep in mind that housing costs here can also be higher, which may force people to live outside of this area due to financial barriers. Accessible transportation should be available in more affordable areas of the municipality to support independence.

If additional capacity was available in the system, increased use of private on demand accessible vehicles could be encouraged by:

- Communicating why accessible taxis are beneficial and available for use by ambulatory customers, ensuring that the communications use plain language and video.
- Defining the term “accessible” within this context.
- Having drivers who are well suited to work with users who may have a variety of disabilities and supporting them via training.
- Having a centralized resource for contacting a service, whether this be a list or centralized dispatch.
- Ensuring that capacity remains in the system to continue to encourage the use.
- Having communication technology available within the vehicles to assist with communicative disabilities.

It was noted that it is important to provide an integrated approach and that one solution can not meet all needs. Shifting trips between private on demand service and Access-a-Bus could help to increase the capacity of services. Although, if trips were shifted from Access-a-Bus to taxis, it should be considered for these trips to cost the passenger a bus fare instead of a taxi fare.

What we heard from Taxi Stakeholders

Five members of the taxi industry, both brokers and accessible taxi drivers, provided comments in response to questions relating to how existing accessible transportation is operating, what the barriers of entry are for accessible taxi operators, what a system might look like if Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) were to support the industry by procuring service, and what requirements might be important for this system. The following is a summary of these comments.

Key Points:

- The costs to purchase and maintain an accessible taxi is high.
- The demand for accessible trips is low compared to conventional service however many trips are being booked directly through the drivers therefore the demand is not accurately captured.
- Accessible taxis have the potential for more non-revenue time than conventional taxis.
- Having an on demand transportation system that services both ambulatory and non-ambulatory passengers is advantageous to operators.

What we heard about existing accessible transportation services in HRM:

Area serviced

- Taxi demand, for both accessible and conventional services, generally follows population density, however, socioeconomic factors as well as areas with a high proportion of low-income housing tend to have a higher proportion of taxi use.
- Accessible taxi demand is equally distributed across the municipality and doesn't tend to be higher in any particular area.
- All of HRM is serviced although suburban and rural areas have a reduced level of service due to the reduced demand.
- Previous taxi zoning was helpful to accessible service providers as it limited the amount of deadheading required to pick up passengers. Removal of the zones have reduced limitations on how the fleet is dispatched, although the historic patterns of where each company has operated has stayed the same due to the relationship with the company/operator.

Demand

- There is currently very low portion of overall taxi trips that require an accessible taxi (5-25 trips per broker per month, however, this number does not include calls made directly to the driver).
- Accessible trips are not denied unless there are no accessible vehicles logged on. Brokers are unable to control what hours accessible taxis are available as drivers are able to make their own schedules.
- The demand for taxis generally follows transit demand where peak times are higher (approximately 7:30-10:30 am and 4:00-7:00pm). There are some instances where late evenings can have very high demand, however, if passengers have regularly found that they have been unable to get trips home late in the evening due to availability, they may be less likely to go out. In the future, there may be an increase in evening demand if additional services were available.
- It benefits accessible taxis to have both ambulatory and non-ambulatory passengers. Taxis which operate serving only non-ambulatory passengers run the risk of having a large proportion of down time and/or time deadheading (driving to a location with no

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paying passenger). Ambulatory trips generally require less boarding time, which allows more trips to be completed throughout the day. Due to the higher demand of ambulatory trips, taxis are able to combine ambulatory and non-ambulatory trips to increase the amount of time they are operating with a passenger. That being said, accessible taxis ensure that trips are only filled for ambulatory users if no one in the queue requires an accessible vehicle.

- Most trips are currently being booked on the phone either via the broker or directly with drivers. It was felt that many people were phoning to book their trip as opposed to requesting a trip on the app, as they were able to question if any accessible taxis were currently available via the phone. Automated phone systems have received positive feedback as well.
- Booking apps do not currently allow you to select a driver, only a vehicle type.
- Pre-booked reservations are only done by some taxi brokers. Pre-booking allows the broker to get trips fulfilled as quickly as possible. Others do not take pre-bookings due to the uncertainty of their accessible fleet availability.

Why there are so few accessible taxis in HRM:

- The cost to convert or buy a vehicle is very high and funding sources have been removed. It costs nearly \$50,000 per vehicle and all vehicles need to be under 10 years old. Therefore, buying an older van to convert into an accessible taxi may be slightly less expensive up front, but the operational lifespan will be shorter with less chance to recuperate these up-front costs.
- The operating/maintenance costs are high due to the additional requirements on the vehicle. These vehicles are required to carry significantly more weight than your average vehicle. Additional weight has been added in the form of the ramp and most electric wheelchairs are upwards of 200 lbs. Many of these vehicles are not purpose built to regularly carry this weight, so additional reinforcement has also been added to the frame. This adds additional weight and potential failure points. This also increases the fuel cost. Additionally, if a ramp requires repair, this is an extra cost to the accessible taxi owner not required by conventional taxi owners and hinders their ability to serve their customers until it is repaired.
- Due to the low demand for accessible trips, there are often long wait times for a request and there is an increased possibility of deadheading. If the demand increases slightly, the increase in deadhead trips and wait time may further increase the per trip costs, however, if the demand increased significantly and the deadheads could be reduced this could improve the number of fares per day and improve the financial viability of the service.
- The time to serve one client is generally longer for an accessible trip than an ambulatory trip as the time spent deploying the ramp and securing a wheelchair is not required for ambulatory trips. Some of this time, would also be non-revenue time. Therefore, for two trips with the same passenger, fare may have very different costs from the requested time to the time the passenger has disembarked the taxi and the ramp has been returned to its position for travel.
- A similar door-to-door service is offered at a lower cost to the user by Halifax Transit.

How can HRM support private on-demand accessible transportation:

- Financial support for vehicle purchase.

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- Financial support for on-going maintenance.
- Regular, consistent funding so that there is guaranteed revenue for providing accessible service despite the low demand.
- Municipal purchase/ownership of vehicles.
- Legislative changes specific to accessible taxis.
- Provide training.
- Facilitate contracts with organizations.
- Create a program where there is more control over when accessible taxis are operational.
- Form a working relationship between Access-a-Bus and private providers to help fill client trips.
- Support the drivers who are currently providing the service and help to increase the demand for accessible trips.