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**Item No. 8**  
**Halifax Regional Council**  
**September 10, 2024**

**TO:** Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

**FROM:** Cathie O'Toole, Chief Administrative Officer

**DATE:** August 16, 2024

**SUBJECT:** Evaluation of Ferry Staffing

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### **INFORMATION REPORT**

#### **ORIGIN**

May 21, 2024, Halifax Regional Council motion (Item No.15.3.1):

MOVED by Councilor Austin, seconded by Councilor Mancini

THAT Halifax Regional Council direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to provide a staff report on ferry staffing levels. The report should include:

1. An overview of current staffing levels.
2. Options to increase the number of relief staff to provide more capacity in the system; and
3. Revisit the possibility of adding an additional crew, which could be used to allow for increased service levels during special events like Pride and Canada Day.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The report outlines a high-level service delivery model for Halifax Transit ferry service, detailing the factors contributing to service delivery. It includes statistics on service loss over recent years and examines the impact particularly due to staffing challenges in 2024. The report also presents current and future strategies to address staffing challenges and improve service reliability. These strategies encompass recruitment initiatives, training programs, and collaborative efforts with various stakeholders including Amalgamated Transit Union local 508 to build a robust and resilient workforce.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Halifax Transit ferry service is the longest continuously operating saltwater ferry system in North America, dating back to 1752. The original route linked Halifax and downtown Dartmouth, and a second route was added in 1987 linking Halifax and Woodside. This report provides an overview of the current staffing levels and proposes strategies to increase service reliability and to potentially increase service for special events. This report identifies reasons for service disruptions, including but not limited to staffing levels.

### Ferry Service and Service Hours

The current Halifax Transit ferry service consists of two fixed routes linking the Halifax, Alderney, and Woodside Ferry Terminals. The Halifax – Alderney service operates 17.5 hours per day, Monday to Sunday with a frequency of 15 minutes during peak periods<sup>1</sup> on weekdays; and 30 minutes outside peak periods. On holidays and weekends, the Halifax - Alderney service operates with service every 30 minutes throughout the day. The Halifax – Woodside service operates 15 hours per day with a frequency of 15 minutes during peak periods and 30 minutes outside peak periods, Monday to Friday excluding holidays.

The table below summarizes the operating frequency for each terminal:

<b>Ferry Service</b>	<b>Weekday Frequency</b>	<b>Weekend Frequency</b>
Alderney Ferry Service	15 mins during peak service or 30 mins outside peak service	30 mins service
Woodside Ferry Service	15 mins during peak service or 30 mins outside peak service	No Service

*Table 1: Ferry Service*

The vessels have a maximum capacity of 300 passengers with four crew members and a maximum capacity of 390 passengers with five crew members. During 2023, Halifax Transit ferry services provided a total of 57,109 trips, serving 1,531,336 riders compared to 1,314,673 riders in 2022 representing a 16% growth in ridership.

### Resources and Staffing

The Halifax Transit ferry service operates five vessels with a team of 48 staff. Staff are divided into two categories: service delivery roles and non-service delivery support roles. Service delivery roles directly operate and maintain the ferries and provide the service, while support roles manage administrative and functional tasks including procurement and logistics.

To maintain a week of full ferry service, 32 crew members from service delivery roles are required along with Shore Engineers for shore-based maintenance support. This includes 8 Masters (Captains), 8 Mates, 8 Deckhands and 8 Engineers. For planned and unplanned absences, a crew consisting of 5 Relief Mates, 1 Relief Deckhand, and 1 Relief Engineer, are scheduled to fill the vacant shifts. Each crew member works 40 hours per week resulting in 1,170 scheduled sailing trips.

## **DISCUSSION**

### Loss of Service

Halifax Transit operates a fixed-route ferry service with scheduled departures and arrivals each day. However, disruptions occasionally impact service. These impacts can be caused by many factors such as

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<sup>1</sup> Peak period: Alderney ferry service 7:00 am to 8:15 pm and Woodside ferry service 6:37 am to 10:37 am and 2:37 pm to 6:07 pm for Monday to Friday

mechanical failures, staffing, adverse weather conditions, harbour special events or emergencies. The graph and table below show the trend of “Trips Scheduled” and “Service Cancellations” from January 1, 2021, to August 15, 2024.

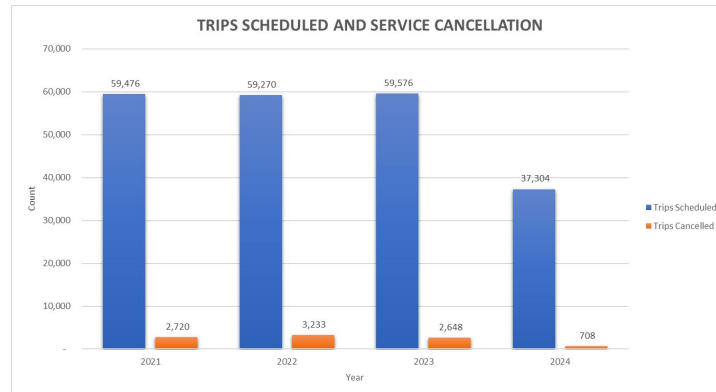


Figure 1: Scheduled trips and service cancellation

Year	Full Year	Mid Year
2021	4.6	5.3
2022	5.5	4.9
2023	4.4	0.7
2024	NA	1.9

Table 2: Service Loss comparison percentage

*Note: Additional service is provided for certain special events. These trips do not form the base schedule and is not included in this analysis. Full year duration is from January 1 to December 31 and Mid year duration is from January 1 to August 15 of the same year.*

In recent years, the ferry service has experienced a loss ranging from 4% to 6% of the scheduled service annually. This has been attributed to various factors including, but not limited to, weather conditions, maintenance requirements, staffing issues, COVID-19 pandemic, and other operational events. However, a comparison of mid-year service losses between 2023 and 2024 reveals an increase, with the loss more than doubling during the same period. Staffing challenges have been identified as a key contributing factor to this increase.

The Halifax Transit ferry service was disrupted in 2021 and 2022 due to the impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, which were essential for safe operations during the pandemic. In 2023, from late September to early November, unexpected mechanical issues impacted the service, reducing the fleet by three vessels and resulting in 2,201 missed ferry trips.

### Transport Canada Regulations

Transport Canada serves as the federal regulatory authority responsible for the formulation and compliance of policies and procedures within the marine industry in Canada. Transport Canada administers the Canada Shipping Act, 2001, responsible for all aspects of the marine industry including stability, construction, and machinery installation. The Canada Shipping Act and Marine Personnel Regulations stipulate the minimum staffing requirements for every vessel. For Halifax Transit vessels, the requirement is four distinct ranks namely, Master (Captain), Mate, Deckhand, and Engineer. Each rank requires specific qualifications and certification levels to perform their duties. Failure to meet these requirements inhibits the ability of Halifax

Transit to operate the vessel and provide service. Halifax Transit manages distinct employee pools based on ranks to facilitate crew scheduling.

Using the resources from these employee pools is limited due to specific qualifications and certifications required for each rank. In addition, crew members are required to undergo continued proficiency training and participate in scheduled marine safety and security audits and inspections at periodic intervals. Transport Canada may conduct unscheduled inspections to ensure adherence to Transport Canada's Acts and regulations.

### Maintenance

Halifax Transit operates a fleet of five vessels, each subject to periodic scheduled maintenance as recommended by the manufacturers or required by Transport Canada regulations. In addition to ongoing planned and preventative maintenance, there is a statutory requirement for out-of-water hull inspection that occurs once every five years for each vessel. For example, one vessel is scheduled to be removed from service every year for approximately seven weeks or more, resulting in a reduced fleet of four operational vessels during this time.

As the current fleet ages, the maintenance demands increase, necessitating increased time and financial resources. To proactively address potential breakdowns, Halifax Transit prioritizes preventative maintenance. This approach allows Halifax Transit to avoid sudden service disruptions and maintain a reliable ferry system. However, unforeseen circumstances occasionally lead to unscheduled maintenance, resulting in temporary service loss.

When a ferry has unforeseen maintenance issues the response time to restore service typically ranges from a minimum of two to four hours or more, depending on the availability of internal staff, third-party vendors, access to the vessel storage site and weather conditions. Historically, maintenance-related issues have caused service interruptions, prompting Halifax Transit to collaborate closely with vendors and devise strategies to mitigate such losses. In summary, optimizing the spare ratio for ferries and procuring or building a proper marine maintenance facility with adequate floating docks will significantly contribute to minimizing service disruptions due to maintenance.

### Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), Local 508 Agreement and Absenteeism

The ATU signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) agreement with the Halifax Regional Municipality on August 14, 2024, to suspend the terms of the Collective Agreement that governs internal employee movement from Mate to Captain, and to create a new employee classification as Relief Captain.

Some of the recent and ongoing ferry service disruptions are attributed to staffing shortages primarily due to unplanned absences, where staff report as sick or unavailable. In 2024, there have been 44 hours of lost ferry service due to staffing issues across multiple instances from January 1 to August 15, 2024, representing a loss of less than 1% of scheduled service. The addition of the Relief Captain classification can help address staffing shortages due to both planned and unplanned absences.

For planned absences, qualified Relief crew are scheduled in 40-hour blocks of work. Single-day absences are covered by Relief crew in the same classification if available; otherwise, overtime rules apply. Relief crew work 40 hours per week and can be reassigned to cover sudden absences only if available. A 2021 arbitration decision ruled that full-time Relief crew are not part of the "Relief list" for unplanned absences, leading to inefficiencies and additional costs when they cannot be assigned work outside their classification.

Finding qualified personnel in the highly regulated marine industry is challenging, further complicating the recruitment of part-time crew, and impacting the Relief pool. Attempts to hire retirees and former employees on a short-term basis have been unsuccessful. Halifax Transit is promoting cross-training and professional development to encourage existing crew to gain higher certifications.

Staffing limitations

The combined impact of factors such as Transport Canada regulations, work rules as outlined in the ATU Collective agreement and a recent arbitration decision, limited crew, and a shortage in the marine labour market complicates daily ferry operations and often leads to staffing shortages and service disruptions. This issue is not due to a single cause; instead, it is the interaction of these various elements that collectively affect service levels. Supervisors make multiple adjustments to minimize service disruptions, but the combined constraints often make some service losses due to staffing shortages inevitable. Thus, the challenge involves balancing regulatory requirements, labour agreements, and workforce management to maintain effective and safe operations.

Strategies for Improving Service Reliability

1. Halifax Transit leadership is collaborating with HRM Labour Relations and the ATU to support the ferry crews and ensure reliable service. An initial Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to amend the Collective Agreement to include qualified full-time employees and offer work to any employee on the Relief list regardless of the classification in which the work falls was rejected by the ATU, but efforts to find solutions continue wherein recently Halifax Transit leadership team and ATU are working together on the process for staffing Relief Masters (Captains).
2. To reduce the risk of service disruptions, Halifax Transit is recruiting an additional total of 14 relief staff in the following classifications: 3 Masters (Captains), 5 Mates, 4 Deckhands and 2 Engineer/Deckhands internally through succession planning and externally. The estimated cost for these hires is approximately \$1.2 million to be managed through monthly budget projections. While additional crew will improve service reliability, recruitment challenges and a 7 to 9 weeks onboarding and training period are expected.
3. Halifax Transit is working with the ferry crews to reduce unplanned absences and promote health and wellness, emphasizing the importance of attendance and punctuality.
4. Halifax Transit will explore different streams of recruitment such as foreign workers with specialized skills for ferry service delivery roles. In collaboration with Human Resources, community organizations, federal agencies (Transport Canada) and other marine industry partners, Halifax Transit will develop a long-term strategy to expand on recruitment efforts and ensure all prerequisites are met. This includes targeted outreach, streamlined processes, and comprehensive training programs.
5. Halifax Transit would work towards partnerships with educational institutions such as Nova Scotia Community College, high schools and local universities for apprenticeship programs. These partnerships would allow Halifax Transit to build a sustainable and resilient workforce for the long-term growth of the ferry service.

Halifax Transit is committed to finding long-term solutions to staffing challenges in collaboration with the ATU and other stakeholders to best support ferry staff and maintain the ability to provide reliable service to the public. In alignment with Strategy No. 2, Halifax Transit has commenced the recruitment process for service delivery roles. The table below outlines the progress made in hiring staff.

Classification	Total	Filled	Vacant
<b>Relief Captain</b>	3	0	3
<b>Relief Mate</b>	5	4	1
<b>Relief Deckhand</b>	4	4	0
<b>Relief Engineer/Deckhand</b>	2	1	1
<b>Total</b>	14	9	5

*Table 3: Recruitment*

Out of the 14 relief positions, 9 have been filled, of these 4 are fully trained and 5 are in orientation and familiarization. Hiring remains challenging in the highly skilled marine industry; however, Halifax Transit continues to make progress.

Upon implementation of these strategies, Halifax Transit will work towards enhancing service reliability as per the scheduled service. With increased service reliability, Halifax Transit will investigate offering additional services for special events. The provision of these additional services will be contingent upon various factors, including mandatory rest hours for employees, preventative maintenance for ferries, unforeseen breakdowns, and out-of-water hull inspections, among others.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Additional recruiting is required to reduce the risk of service disruptions. With potential hires of various positions within Halifax Transit, the estimated cost in Fiscal 2024/25 would be approximately \$1.2M. These costs will be offset through vacancy savings and other surplus opportunities managed through the financial projections. Budget pressures beyond 2024/25 Fiscal will be presented as part of the annual proposed Halifax Transit operating budget process.

### **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

No community engagement was required.

### **LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY**

Section 7A of the *Halifax Regional Municipality Charter* provides that:

- 7A** The purposes of the Municipality are to
- (a) provide good government;
  - (b) provide services, facilities and other things that, in the opinion of the Council, are necessary or desirable for all or part of the Municipality; and
  - (c) develop and maintain safe and viable communities.

Section 69 of the *Halifax Regional Municipality Charter* provides that:

- 69** (1) The Municipality may provide a public transportation service by
- (a) the purchase of vehicles or vessels and operation of the service;
  - (b) providing financial assistance to a person who will undertake to provide the service; or
  - (c) a combination of these methods.

Section 188 of the *Halifax Regional Municipality Charter* provides that:

- 188** (1) The Council may make by-laws, for municipal purposes, respecting
- (a) the health, well being, safety and protection of persons;
  - (b) the safety and protection of property;
  - (c) persons, activities and things in, on or near a public place or place that is open to the public;
- ...

Policy T-5 of the 2014 *Regional Municipal Planning Strategy* provides that:

- T-5** Transit Service Plans shall be prepared at regular intervals for consideration by HRM. These plans will be developed in consultation with the public and other stakeholders and,

upon adoption by HRM, shall provide guidance for investment in transit services.

**ATTACHMENTS**

No attachments.

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A copy of this report can be obtained online at [halifax.ca](http://halifax.ca) or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210.

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