

# Information Report

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Service Area	Public Services
Date	Friday, September 22, 2023
Subject	<b>Increasing Access to Transit Passes for High School Students and Seniors</b>

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## Executive Summary

### Purpose of Report

To report to Council on a recommended approach for making transit passes more accessible for high school students and seniors.

### Key Findings

The City made several investments in 2023 to ensure that Guelph residents have greater access to Transit. These include the Affordable Bus Pass Sliding Scale (\$400,000), the Kids Ride Free program (\$155,000), and the implementation of the Fare Capping program.

Based on findings from the Fare Strategy community engagement and exploration of comparator municipalities, it is the staff recommendation to focus on reducing barriers for high school students and seniors in financial need to have better access to existing programs, including the Affordable Bus Pass (ABP).

Barriers to access can be reduced by developing a specific ABP in-take and approval process with local school boards for high school students, targeted outreach to seniors about the ABP program, an increase in overall awareness of the program through promotional efforts, and the inclusion of some ABP users in the new fare-capping program.

### Strategic Plan Alignment

Foundations 5.3: Remove barriers by integrating Guelph's Equity Lens into everything we do.

City Building 8.2.3: Develop an integrated fare structure for transit, parking and other City-offered transportation modes.

### Financial Implications

There is no financial cost to the measures being recommended by staff to make transit passes more accessible for high school students and seniors.

## Report

### Details

In April 2023, Council passed the following resolution:

That Council direct staff to report back, in advance of consideration of the 2024 – 2027 multi-year budget, on the recommended approach for making transit passes more accessible for high school students and seniors, including review of best practices from comparator municipalities.

This report presents the staff recommended approach for increasing access to transit for high school students and seniors.

### **2023 Programs to Increase Access to Transit**

The City made several investments in 2023 to ensure that Guelph residents have greater access to transit. These include the Affordable Bus Pass Sliding Scale (\$400,000), the Kids Ride Free program (\$155,000), and the implementation of the Fare Capping program:

- The Affordable Bus Pass sliding scale, made permanent in 2023, includes eligibility for high school students and seniors living with low income. Under the sliding scale program, youth and seniors can get access to monthly passes between \$4.00 and \$32.00 per month
- Kids Ride Free was made a permanent program in program in 2023. Kids Ride Free extends free passes to children ages 12 and under
- The Fare Capping Program was approved by Council in 2023 as part of the new Transit Fare Strategy. Fare capping will help monthly pass holders that ride less to save money.

### **Previous Exploration of Age-Based Passes**

In the development of the 2023 Fare Strategy, Transit staff explored a number of options for transit fares and discounted rates for high school students and seniors. A survey conducted by Guelph Transit showed that only 8.5 percent of people surveyed thought that kids between the ages of 12 and 18 should ride free. Offering free rides to seniors was a more popular choice with 28.9 percent of respondents indicating this group should ride free.

In looking at comparator municipalities in the development of the 2023 Fare Strategy, staff found that only Kingston offers free transit for everyone under 18 years old. Burlington recently has offered youth ages 13-19 to ride free on weekdays after 6pm and all day on weekends and that seniors will ride free. Barrie offers free rides to seniors on Thursdays only.

No other comparator municipalities offer free rides for seniors or youth ages 13-19. In looking at Kids Ride Free, notably all comparator municipalities (with the exception of Sudbury) offer free rides to children 12 and under.

### **Implications of Free Transit for High School Students and Seniors**

One option to increase access to transit for high school students and seniors is to provide a monthly pass for free – similar to the Kids Ride Free program. However, staff are not recommending this approach due to the potential for a significant loss of revenue and an increase in costs related to route capacity and extra buses at peak times.

Based on current usage, free rides for seniors would lead to a loss of revenue of \$270,000. Free rides for high-school aged youth would lead to a loss of revenue of

\$680,000. This leads to a total loss of revenue of \$950,000 annually. This number does not include loss of revenue from any new customers riding transit.

In addition, three of seven high schools' routes are already at bus capacity. Making high school kids ride free would likely require approximately three additional buses and approximately six operators, plus the costs of fuel and maintenance. This assumption is based on the uptake of this program in our comparator municipal agency (Kingston Transit). The anticipated increased cost to the City to meet demand would be \$1.04 million in operating (six operators, fuel, and maintenance) and \$4.2 million in capital for three buses.

### **Recommended Approach to Make Transit More Accessible for High School Students and Seniors**

Based on the important work the City has done to increase access to transit in the past year, and the significant costs to making transit free for certain age groups, staff recommend the following two approaches to increasing access to transit for high school students and seniors:

First, reduce barriers for high school students and seniors to existing programs, namely the Affordable Bus Pass. Staff will work with local school boards to develop a formal approval process to ensure high school students in financial need are able to access the program. Staff will conduct targeted outreach to seniors through the use of existing networks and increase public promotion of the program. There are not additional costs to the City beyond the existing base budget.

Second, to further reduce cost barriers to the Affordable Bus Pass program, staff will be extending fare-capping to Tier B and Tier C Affordable Bus Pass users. This will allow those using transit less frequently to receive even further costs savings.

### **Financial Implications**

There is no financial cost to the measures being recommended by staff to make transit passes more accessible for high school students and seniors.

To provide free transit passes to high-school students and seniors, there would be a revenue loss of at least \$950,000 per year, and an operating expense increase of \$1.04 million plus a capital budget increase of \$4.2 million to add the necessary additional bus service on three routes that service high schools.

### **Consultations**

Guelph Transit staff

### **Attachments**

None

### **Departmental Approval**

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