



WHISTLER

REPORT | ADMINISTRATIVE REPORT TO COUNCIL

PRESENTED: July 7, 2020
FROM: Infrastructure Services
SUBJECT: WHISTLER TRANSIT SYSTEM UPDATE AND SERVICE CHANGES

REPORT: 20-066
FILE: 527

COMMENT/RECOMMENDATION FROM THE CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

That the recommendation of the General Manager of Infrastructure Services be endorsed.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council authorize staff to work with BC Transit to produce an online public engagement process in July 2020 related to the proposed fall 2020 restructuring of the Whistler Transit System schedule.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this Report and accompanying presentation is to update Council on the performance of the Whistler Transit System in 2020, the modifications to the system that have taken place since March 15, 2020, and further changes that are proposed for September 2020. Council's approval for an online public engagement process is also requested.

DISCUSSION

Background

Between April 1, 2017 and March 31, 2021, Council has authorized 12,500 additional service hours at a total shared cost of \$1.8 million dollars for the Whistler Transit System. These hours have been used to increase base level service on all routes, provide free summer weekends, start winter earlier in December and implement the new Route 10-Valley Express for winter 2018/2019. This new route was initiated as a commuter oriented service running in the morning and afternoon peak periods using the majority of the 6,500 expansion hours allocated to the 2018/2019 transit year.

The 2,500 expansion hours for 2020/2021 are also focused on off-peak core network improvements and the expansion of the Route 10-Valley Express in the spring-summer-fall schedule.

The majority of the 2020/2021 expansion was scheduled into the Whistler Transit System by early January 2020, prior to the effects of the COVID19 pandemic reaching our community in March. The expansion focused on providing additional Route 10-Valley Express trips mid-day beginning on April 1, 2020. Through its second winter, the Route 10-Valley Express was experiencing higher ridership than in its first winter.

COVID19 Implications:

Sunday, March 15, 2020 can be considered the first day of the COVID19 pandemic in Whistler with the mountains closing for the winter season. Whistler experienced similar effects to the transit system as all other communities in BC, including reduced ridership due to businesses closing and work from home

directives as well as loss of fare revenue from reduced ridership and rear-door loading directed by BC Transit on March 20, 2020. Whistler funds portions of the transit service from the Resort Municipality Initiative, and revenues from parking fees, both of which have also been affected by the pandemic.

Even though the extent of revenue loss was unknown in March, it was known that there would be less revenue to pay for transit service. Therefore, in partnership with BC Transit and Whistler Transit Ltd, staff worked with the Transit Management Advisory Committee (TMAC) to suspend service where possible, as quickly as possible without jeopardizing the essential services as a cost cutting measure.

Service changes implemented almost immediately were:

- 1) Suspending weekend extra service for the last three weekends of the winter schedule
- 2) Moving the scheduled service change forward to start on Friday, March 27, 2020 instead of April 1, 2020
- 3) Delaying the start of summer service to July 1 (previously planned for June 19)

In the meantime, BC Transit directed a COVID19 response throughout the province. In March, BC Transit observed a significant drop in ridership and increasing operator absenteeism rates across the province. Under the guidance of the Public Health Office and in partnership with TransLink, BC Transit directed the implementation of physical distancing protocols limiting bus capacity to 40- 50 per cent as well as rear door loading resulting in suspending fare collection across the province starting March 20, 2020.

BC Transit also facilitated the review of service levels in all systems across the province based on ridership, new procedures for riding transit, and the BC Restart Plan announced on May 6, 2020.

As a result of reviewing the recent transportation related information collected pre-COVID19, it was decided that further modifications to the Whistler Transit System were justified. This information included the Transportation Advisory Group (TAG) Proposed 2020 Summer Transportation Actions Engagement Results, the February 2020 BC Transit on-board Customer Survey results, as well as the ridership data for Whistler by route and by hour of the day for late April/early May. Based on this information, the following recommendations are being implemented:

- 1) Maintain free Saturday, Sunday and Canadian Statutory Holiday transit service for summer 2020 from Canada Day to Labour Day.
 - a. Suspend the extra scheduled buses that normally would be added to summer weekends
- 2) Restructure the Spring-Summer-Fall base service to focus on Route 10-Valley Express from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. for implementation on Tuesday, September 8, 2020.

A further change was contemplated, but not implemented. This potential cost savings measure was the suspension of late night service until Phase 4 of the BC Restart Plan. This seemed reasonable as late night ridership was very low in April and May, and the businesses that generate late night transit ridership were not expected to reopen until Phase 4 of the BC Restart Plan. After reviewing revised information from the Pubs, Clubs and Restaurants regarding opening hours, ridership from the June 20-21 weekend, customer feedback, and information on new funding relief available from BC Transit, the Transit Management Advisory Committee recommended retaining late night service at their June 23 meeting.

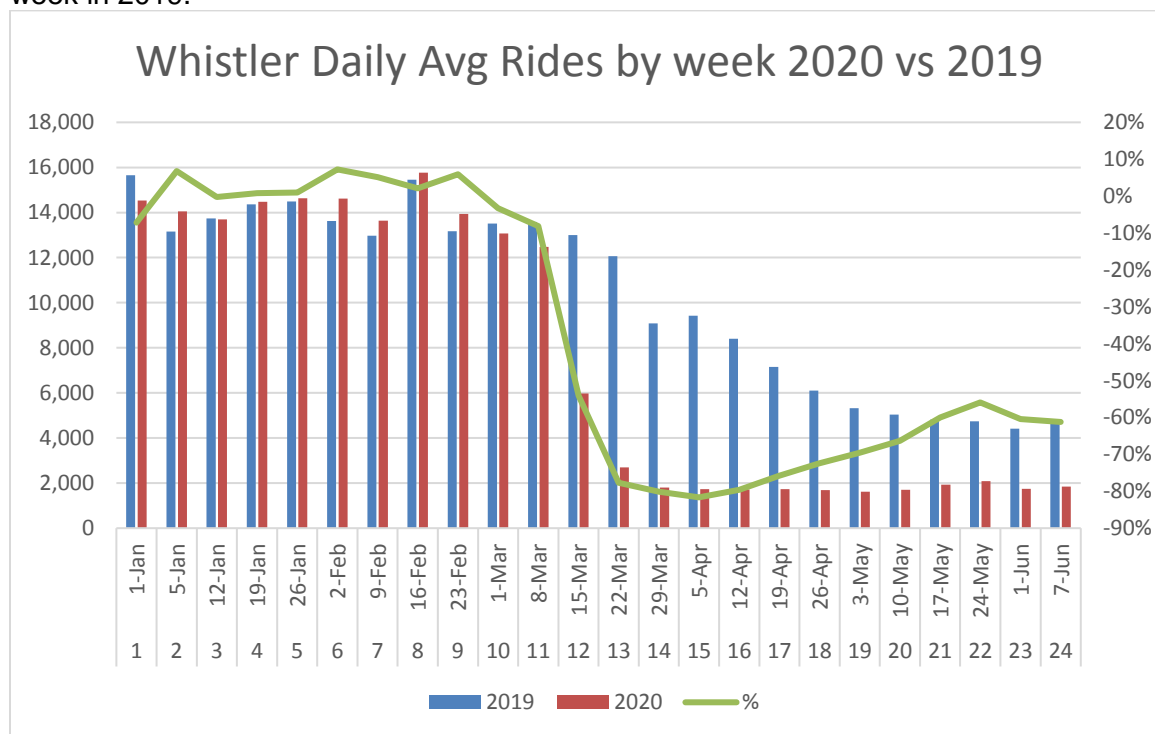
Restructuring Spring-Summer-Fall base service to focus on Route 10-Valley Express has trade-offs. We could attract more passengers back onto the transit service by reducing the amount of time on-board a bus as the trips will be shorter than on the route 20, 21, 30 or 32. However, this means that passengers may have to walk farther to get to and from the bus, and that there will be less service

during the middle of the day on routes 20, 20X, 30 and 32. Routes 20X and 32 will be used to provide additional service for Early Winter and in full Winter service. Neighbourhoods most affected by the restructuring of service are Spruce Grove and Whitegold, which will lose direct transit service during spring/summer/fall as the Route 32 will become a winter only service. Alpine Meadows and Nordic Estates will also lose some direct service between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. However, these losses are offset by walking out to Highway 99 bus stops where there will be additional Route 10-Valley Express buses from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. As such, the RMOW will continue to work toward improvements to the Route 10-Valley Express bus stops for passenger comfort and operational efficiencies.

This is a significant change to the delivery of local transit in Whistler. Therefore, to inform the public of these service changes, BC Transit in partnership with the RMOW will provide information online, and will include the option for people to receive updates on future changes.

Whistler Transit System Ridership

The chart below shows the Whistler Transit System average daily rides by week compared to the same week in 2019.



The chart indicates that late March and early April saw the largest percentage loss in average daily ridership. Even with fare collection starting again on June 1, ridership is starting to come back as more businesses are reopening every week. RMOW staff will continue to monitor system ridership on a weekly basis.

Next Steps

The RMOW will continue to work with BC Transit and Whistler Transit Ltd. to adjust transit service based on current demand and anticipated trends. Staff will return to Council in September with a revised 2020/2021 Annual Operating Agreement and update on summer transit performance.

TMAC will review the information gathered from the on-line public information session held later in July and make the decision to either proceed with the new revised Spring-Summer-Fall schedule for September 8, 2020 or to maintain the existing transit service structure until spring 2021 which is expected to allow for a more traditional public engagement process. BC Transit's traditional deadline for finalizing a transit schedule for September 8 is July 10.

Also, over the summer, staff will be working on the winter 2020/2021 scheduling process which typically must be completed by the second week of September for implementation in December.

OTHER POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Recent transit and transportation plans that are relevant to the decisions described in this report include:

- the Route 10 Valley Express Post Implementation Review (July 2019)
- the Sea to Sky Transit Future Plan (December 2015)
- the Route 1 Valley Connector Review (July 2017)
- the Official Community Plan
- the TAG Transportation Action Plan 2018-2028.

The recommended resolutions included within this report are consistent with the goals, objectives and policies included within OCP Bylaw 2199, 2018.

More specifically, the resolutions are particularly strongly aligned with Objective 11.4.1 - Give priority to walking, cycling, transit and other preferred modes over the single occupant vehicle and private automobile.

And Policy:

11.4.1.2. Strive to make preferred modes of transportation affordable, convenient, safe and enjoyable throughout the year.

The resolutions from this report also support Objective 11.4.2 - Make public transit affordable, convenient, safe and enjoyable throughout the year.

The specific Policies within this Objective supported in this report are:

11.4.2.1. Continue to operate a successful and accessible transit system in collaboration with funding and operating partners, expanding service area coverage and frequency as demand and resources permit as shown on the Whistler Future Local Transit Network Map in the Transit Future Plan Sea to Sky.

11.4.2.6. Work with the provincial government and local stakeholders to improve transit frequency and affordability.

These Policies and Objectives are included within Chapter 9 – Transportation of the current OCP.

The COVID19 Pandemic and subsequent closure of the ski hill has changed ridership patterns on the Whistler Transit System. Staff are working with BC Transit to revise the transit system in a manner that deals with the short term issues and continues to meet the long-term needs of the community in a way that the community can afford.

The transit service in Whistler (provided in partnership with BC Transit and Whistler Transit Ltd.) provides a reliable, affordable transportation option for travel within Whistler. TMAC continues to work closely with TAG and the business community to adjust the transit system to meet current needs.

Due to the COVID19 pandemic, revenue sources for the Whistler Transit System have been affected and costs have increased while revenues have dropped. Staff are working with BC Transit to cut non-essential service to reduce costs.

BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS

The Whistler Transit System is a 13 million dollar per year system where the RMOW is responsible for 53.31 percent of the cost which is \$7.014 million in 2020. The RMOW generates the \$7.014 million from a mixture of farebox/pass/tickets sales, interior bus advertising, contribution from the Resort Municipality Initiative (RMI), contribution from parking fee charges in Day Lots 1-5 through the Community Transportation Initiative Fund (CTIF), contributions from third parties and general revenue through property taxes. All of these revenue sources will be impacted due to the pandemic. Meanwhile costs have increased due to increased cleaning, driver personal protective equipment, vehicle modifications, and temporary driver washrooms. Therefore, staff have worked towards reducing costs by suspending underutilized portions of the transit service as well as looking at efficiencies.

Staff are continuing to work with BC Transit to determine the actual loss in revenue (currently estimated at approximately \$1,000,000) and actual changes in costs. RMOW staff estimate the potential of the service reductions listed above are in the order of \$180,000. Additionally, BC Transit has announced that from July to December 2020, they will not be charging local governments the monthly lease fee which is a reduction to the RMOW cost obligation of approximately \$550,000.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CONSULTATION

In February and early March, BC Transit administered an on-board Customer Satisfaction survey and the RMOW staff (in conjunction with TAG) gathered community input on the proposed summer 2020 Whistler Transportation Action Plan which included transit initiatives. Although this information was gathered before COVID19, there is information about general customer preferences that are applicable.

To inform the public of the proposed service changes for September 2020, BC Transit in conjunction with the RMOW, will provide an online public engagement process, and will include the option for people to receive updates on future changes.

SUMMARY

With the sudden closing of the ski hill on Sunday, March 15, 2020, ridership on Whistler Transit System dramatically decreased. Since then, staff have worked with BC Transit and Whistler Transit Ltd. to adjust service to meet the needs of the community both from a passenger perspective and a fiscal transit management perspective. As such, transit service was moved from the full winter service level directly to the spring-summer-fall schedule, eliminating the usual late winter service. Summer service has also been adjusted to match the BC Restart phasing.

Staff are working with TMAC to develop a new schedule that will more efficiently serve Whistler residents and visitors, focusing on reallocating more service hours to the Route 10-Valley Express in an effort to attract back transit riders by reducing on-bus travel time. To inform the public of these service changes, BC Transit in conjunction with the RMOW will provide information online with a website, and will include the option for people to receive updates on future changes. TMAC will review the

information gathered from the on-line public engagement and make the decision to either proceed with the new revised Spring-Summer-Fall schedule for September 8, 2020 or to maintain the existing transit service structure until spring 2021 which will allow for a more traditional public engagement process. Also, over the summer, staff will be working on the winter 2020/2021 scheduling process which typically must be completed by the second week of September for implementation in December.

The RMOW will continue to work with BC Transit and Whistler Transit Ltd to adjust transit service based on current demand and anticipated trends. Staff will return to Council in September with a revised 2020/2021 Annual Operating Agreement and update on summer transit performance.

Respectfully submitted,

Emma DalSanto
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for
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