



MEETING OF THE ST. JOHN'S TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

REGULAR BUSINESS

A meeting of the St. John's Transportation Commission was held on Thursday, December 16th, 2021 at approximately 12:00 PM at the Metrobus Transit Centre, 25 Messenger Drive.

Present at the meeting were:

Paul Walsh	Chair
Ian Froude	Vice-Chair/City Councillor
Kirsten Morry	Commissioner
Lynn Zurel	Commissioner
Tolulope Akerele	Commissioner
Ron Ellsworth	Commissioner/City Councillor
Maggie Burton	Commissioner/City Councillor
Kevin Breen	City Manager
Judy Powell	Metrobus General Manager
Joan Mahon	Administrative Assistant
Donna Power	Manager, Accessible Transit Services

Absent with apologies:

Derek Coffey	Deputy City Manager, Financial Management
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I. PROCEDURAL

- The Chair called the meeting to order at 12:10 pm.
- J. Mahon recorded the minutes of the meeting of this date.
- The Chair welcomed Councillor Ron Ellsworth as the newest member of the commission.
- The General Manager introduced Donna Power as the replacement for the Administrative Assistant position following Joan Mahon's retirement January, 2022.

II. APPROVAL OF AGENDA/MINUTES

➤ AGENDA

Vice-Chair Froude added to New Business – Holiday Service – Paratransit and Commissioner Ellsworth added Paratransit, which will be included in the agenda item – Paratransit Issues Including On-Demand. It was moved by Commissioner Burton and seconded by Commissioner Akerele that the amended agenda for this meeting date be approved.

➤ MINUTES

It was moved by Commissioner Morry and seconded by Vice-Chair Froude that the minutes of the November 25th, 2021 regular business meeting of the Commission be approved with the following amendment:

Geothermal System - Maintenance

ACTION:

- The commissioners agreed to go ahead with the project.
- K. Breen suggested that this item should be deferred to the Legal Department at the City of St. John's.

Amendment:

ACTION:

- The commissioners agreed to go ahead with the project.
- K. Breen suggested that this item should be **referred** to the Legal Department at the City of St. John's.

III. BUSINESS ARISING

1. COVID-19 - Update

- The General Manager reported that ridership for Metrobus at the end of November was 85% of 2019 ridership levels and GoBus was approximately 70%. Compared to other transit properties across Canada we are doing quite well.
- Chair Walsh questioned if we were in the position to pivot if need be given the climate in the country with regards to Covid. The General Manager responded that we are prepared, if the need arises.

2. On-Demand Software Update

- This item was deferred to New Business – Paratransit Issues Including On-Demand.

3. Committee Membership

- The General Manager tabled the list of committees within Metrobus with commission representation. If a member of the commission would like to remain or serve on a committee, please contact the General Manager.

4. Youth Focus Committee

- A new on-line based Youth Engagement Working Group at the City of St. John's was implemented. Metrobus could tap into a developing resource of the City's advisement committee to refer items pertaining to Metrobus. The General Manager agrees that this is a great resource to utilize.

IV. NEW BUSINESS

1. Executive Summary – November, 2021

- The November Executive Summary was tabled for members' information.
- Vice-Chair Froude noted that there were eight (8) assessments completed for paratransit and questioned if it made sense to continue with the same provider. D Power, Manager Accessible Transit, has had conversations with the provider on concerns with the speed that assessments are progressing. Commissioner Zurel commented that their contract and relationship is not working. She would like to see the assessments continue as she sees value in the assessment process but at an increased pace. The General Manager responded that shortly after the contract with Telus Health Care Centre began, Covid 19 arrived, there were shut downs, Snowmageddon happened and Telus Health Care Centre moved offices. They have had staff turnover and an ownership change.

ACTION: The General Manager will get an update for the next commission meeting on the percentage of assessments that have been completed.

It was moved by Commissioner Zurel and seconded by K. Breen that we request a timeline for a completion schedule from Telus Health Care Centre. There was no one opposed.

Chair Walsh indicated that he would like the provider (Telus Health Care Centre) to have the information requested for the next commission meeting.

2. Paratransit Tender

- The General Manager advised that the tender for 14-18 paratransit buses has been cancelled. There were two bidders and neither completely met the specifications. After meeting with the Purchasing and Legal Departments at the City of St. John's a decision was made to cancel the tender and reissue it with a closing date of January 12th, 2022 for 18 buses. The delivery date will remain November 30, 2022. The following discussion occurred:
 - Commissioner Burton questioned if 18 buses are required to run an on-demand system? The General Manager responded that we are still gaining experience with the new software. We have discussed options as we are having issues with the taxi service with regards to dependability and availability. One of the things we are looking at is supplementing the fleet - it doesn't necessarily have to be buses – it may be mini vans or cars. This will be looked at in the next few months as a lot of the clients are ambulatory. It has been noted that the number of passengers per hour have increased and D. Power, Manager of Accessible Transit, is watching the data and reports that it is trending in the right direction. Commissioner Burton was interested

2. Paratransit Tender cont'd

in seeing research on what the optimum number of buses a city of our size would need using an on-demand service.

- Vice-Chair Froude noted that previously we needed 14 buses and if we needed 18 we would consider four (4) electric or hybrid buses and he would like to know what has changed in four months. We need 18 buses and we are being more efficient – what does that mean for the possibility of purchasing electric buses by mid-2022? The General Manager noted that some of the modelling for the on-demand software indicated that we might not need 18 buses. We had put in a range of 14 – 18 buses. Currently, it indicates we need all 18 buses which are being utilized. Since that time we have had more of an issue with taxi availability and reliability and want less reliance on that resource. There has been a shortage of drivers in the taxi industry which has impacted the availability. We have concerns with reducing the fleet so we need all 18 buses at this point. Vice-Chair Froude noted that the assumption is that the taxi issue will be the same in late 2022. He thought the intention was to bring dispatch in house eventually and, in that case, we would have a choice on whether to send out the most efficient mode of transportation – a bus or taxi. The General Manager stated that right now we are utilizing all 18 buses and are struggling with the current state of taxis.
- Commissioner Zurel stated that we want to reduce our reliance on taxis.
- Commissioner Ellsworth commented that reducing our reliance on taxis is not a fair statement from his point of view. It doesn't matter what carries the rider – taxis were added to add flexibility plus seats. Short rides make more sense to get a taxi which is a ride cost reduction for us if dispatch was in-house. I would see our use of taxis increasing as we move forward with capacity.
- Chair Walsh asked if we should be ordering 18 buses? Commissioner Ellsworth agrees that we should. That would give us 16 buses on the road taking into consideration breakdowns. If we were moving to a truly on-demand system, which we are not there yet, our number of riders is going to be going up with an aging population, with people coming from across the province for services that are only available in St. John's and making life choices – our demand is not going to go down it will be going up.
- Vice-Chair Froude doesn't see the merit in purchasing 18 buses. He was told that the on-demand software would not lead to an increase in ridership. He understands that there are additional people coming to the system but the system would be more efficient. This would be an opportunity to purchase hybrid or electric buses as we would not need a full fleet of large buses. He does not want to spend money that is not needed. Taxis are a good option for clients to travel around on and would like to leave the options open for an electrification plan which should be completed by-mid 2022.
- K. Breen stated that he is not confident that the taxis are going to be straightened out by the end of 2022. He would be in favor of purchasing 18 buses.
- Commissioner Akerele stated that in 5 years – 2027 – we could consider purchasing electric buses if we go with a non-electric fleet now.
- Commissioner Burton commented that the argument at that time will be made to buy a couple of electric buses to try them out. We need to do that now up front to see how they go. They are new to the market. She supports the study that Edmundo Fausto, Sustainability Coordinator, City of St. John's is preparing but the wheels need to be put in motion to order two electric buses. She doesn't think that on-demand is going to reduce the pressure on the system – it is going to increase the number of buses. On demand needs more vehicles on the road. We could order 14 buses and buy vans to supplement as needed in case the taxi situation does not work out.
- Commissioner Morry agrees with Commissioner Burton.
- Chair Walsh stated that the issue is that management is moving forward with a tender for 18 fossil fuel buses and if we want to change that we need a motion to do so.
- K. Breen questioned that if we were to purchase 16 buses and 2 electric buses is there a contingency in place for the maintenance of those buses.
- The General Manager stated that we are concerned with the delay. We would need to research electric buses. The concern is the delay that we will have with a reduced fleet because we need to apply for funding and then tender for the electric buses. It is not always a one to one replacement. A lot of research and planning have to go into this. That is not saying that when we get the 18 buses in place we could not order one or two electric buses in addition. Our concern is the delay and now we are struggling with capacity with eighteen buses.
- The Chair questioned what type of fuel will the buses take? The tender is for gas buses because the amount of the funding would not cover the cost of electric buses. We can still apply under the same program for electric buses but the prices are not going to come in the same.

2. Paratransit Tender cont'd

A motion was put forward by Vice-Chair Froude and seconded by Commissioner Burton to purchase 14 buses not 18. Further discussion took place.

- The General Manager stated that the on-demand software provides the ability to dispatch directly to taxis. That is our intention when the contract is up with MVT as a cost savings measure. The taxi company is moving into a fully automated dispatch system in the new year. We are hoping that their new software will communicate with our on-demand software, which will make the transition easier. We went with the range of 14 -18 buses when the tender was developed the on-demand software was not introduced but the modelling showed that we could reduce the fleet but we were not sure where we would fall in that range. We are struggling with capacity with 18 buses on the road. This is the basis of our recommendation.
- Commissioner Burton supports purchasing 14 buses right now so that it gives us the option next year to order supplementary buses or vans or vehicles. I don't think we should replace the entire fleet. The intention before the tender was cancelled was to purchase 14 – 18 buses. It doesn't make sense for us to have approved the on-demand software with the idea that it would reduce ridership but now we are having capacity issues so we have to buy more buses. I think we have the current on-demand software that works with less buses or we have a different system in place with more buses.
- Commissioner Akerele stated that based on what the General Manager said we currently have 18 buses and are struggling with that. The General Manager noted that the life span of a bus is five years. Maintenance costs increase and there is more down time on the buses. In the last paratransit fleet some of the buses did not last the five years. Taxi reliance increased while we waited for the new fleet to arrive.
- The General Manager questioned the statement that we expected a reduction in demand with the new on-demand software. On-demand software is just a scheduling software which would not affect demand.
- Commissioner Burton reiterated that the idea was that we would be able to maintain the current service we have even with more people on board. The on-demand service was to make the system more efficient overall.
- Commissioner Ellsworth questioned if there were any buses currently in the fleet that could be utilized with the new buses? If 2 or 3 buses currently in the fleet could be maintained for a year with 14 new buses and then make a purchase of electric buses the following year. If this is not possible, I would be willing to accept that. The General Manager noted that a life span analysis of the fleet can be discussed with MVT as they are responsible for the maintenance of the fleet.
- K. Breen thinks we should pursue contacting MVT with the intention of keeping the best 2-3 buses in the fleet beyond their life span as we would expect these to stay on the road for an additional couple of years and then purchase 14 new buses.
- Commissioner Morry agrees with K. Breen and thinks there is value in preserving some scope to get electric buses sooner rather than later.
- Commissioner Zurel agrees as well.
- The General Manager stated that until she gets feedback on the condition of the fleet it is hard to comment.
- Chair Walsh clarified that the motion on the table was to limit the guaranteed portion of the purchase to 14 vehicles with the flexibility to move to 18. This motion was carried unanimously.

3. Paratransit Issues Including the On-Demand Software

- Commissioner Burton is concerned that there are still a lot of problems with the new on-demand software and there does not appear to be any accountability for these issues.
- After a lengthy discussion, the following motion was tabled:

ACTION: Commissioner Ellsworth put forth a motion to create a short-lived ad-hock committee comprising of the General Manager, Manager, Accessible Transit Services and himself along with representation from MVT and Newfound Cabs. This motion was seconded by Vice-Chair Froude and carried unanimously.

4. Update on the Discussion Around Stop Announcements

- Commissioner Burton noted that the goal surrounding the stop announcements topic was to bring a report to the Commission by September, 2021. The General Manager stated that a lot of research has to go into that report and, currently, Metrobus staff has a full agenda.

ACTION: The Chair requested to have Stop Announcements placed on the agenda for February's commission meeting.

5. Winter Bus Stop Bench Placement at King's Bridge Road/Across From Dominion

➤ This item will be deferred to the City of St. John's as it is a City owned bench. K. Breen will look into this matter for Commissioner Burton.

6. Update on New Shelters – Progress Made to Date

➤ The General Manager had emailed Commissioner Burton with an update in mid-November on the bus shelter installations. There are ten listed which are in various stages of approval in terms of traffic, cable, NL Power and landowners but we cannot move forward with any tenders until funding is approved. Once we receive the approval, we will have to go through the tender process for installations. The shelters cost approximately \$10,000 each with an additional \$3,000 - \$4,000 for the shelter pad.

ACTION: Commissioner Ellsworth requested a report from the Transit Planner with a breakdown of where we stand with regards to the ten shelters awaiting approval. He would also like the rationale surrounding the 15% of bus stops becoming shelters. He would like a realistic goal.

Vice-Chair Froude would like to know what the standard is across the country for the percentage of shelters versus bus stops.

7. Gathering Place Bus Stop Signage

➤ Commissioner Burton questioned why the bus stop and shelter next to The Gathering Place on Military Road are in different locations. The General Manager reported that in consultation with the City there is only a certain place to erect the shelter and the bus stop could not go next to it because of the turn of the road and the location of the crosswalk.

ACTION: It was suggested to post a sign in the shelter indicating that the bus will stop at the bus stop even if they are waiting in the bus shelter.

8. Request to Move the Bus Stop Nearer to the Crosswalk by the Library, Allandale Road

➤ Commissioner Burton asked if this bus stop could be moved closer to the crosswalk. The General Manager responded that if you move the stop further up Allandale Road, there is heavier traffic at peak times and the bus has to cross over three lanes of traffic to make a left-hand turn. It is too close to the intersection.

ACTION: This item will be discussed with the Transit Planner and Operations.

9. Paratransit Holiday Service

➤ Vice-Chair Froude understands that there is service provided for this calendar year for all paratransit users for December 25th and 26th. In 2022 on December 25th and 26th there will no longer be service unless you are a bus only designated customer. His concern is that he understands the rules and changes coming into place in 2022 but what about January 1, 2022 – New Year's Day. Giving people a couple of weeks' notice is too short for the change in service for January 1st, 2022. He suggests keeping the service for this Christmas and New Years. He would suggest reconsidering the decision to eliminate the service for Christmas and New Years for future years; service should be provided on January 1st, 2022 to all paratransit users.

ACTION: Vice-Chair Froude made a motion to reinstate the paratransit service on January 1st, 2022 and to revisit the decision on holiday service. Commissioner Burton seconded the motion. This motion was carried unanimously provided MVT can provide the service.

➤ The General Manager stated that hours of service for paratransit had been in discussion a while ago because the new hours were in the RFP for the service contract. This was discussed at the Inclusion Advisory Committee at the City and the Paratransit Working Group and they understand as to why the changes were being made. It has been discussed for a period of time. It is another step to align GoBus with Metrobus service hours and make it more equitable service.

St. John's Transportation Commission

December 16, 2021

REGULAR BUSINESS

Page 6



9. Paratransit Holiday Service cont'd

- Vice-Chair Froude also mentioned the reduction in hours to 8 pm on Sundays as a struggle for customers.
- The decision was made that the hours of service for paratransit will remain the same and will be reviewed early in 2022.

IV. OTHER

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VI. ADJOURNMENT

- There being no further regular business to discuss at this time, the meeting adjourned at approximately 2:10 pm.
- The next regular business meeting of the Commission will be held via Webex at 12:30 pm on January 26th, 2022.

Respectfully submitted,

Paul Walsh
Chair

Joan Mahon
Recording Secretary