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ADMINISTRATIVE REPORT

Title: Winnipeg Transit Plus Update

Critical Path: Standing Policy Committee on Infrastructural Renewal and Public Works

AUTHORIZATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The functionality of the RouteMatch software has been working as it was intended since implementation. During the initial implementation of RouteMatch in January 2019, Transit Plus services were impacted as a result of a variety of issues, which included two city wide power outages that affected the City's network as a whole, staff turnover in the contact centre, ongoing training of staff on the RouteMatch software, dual entry in the old and new system, a vehicle shortage and a priority system that schedules trip requests based on trip purpose when demand exceeds available vehicle resources and restricts access to available resources.

The original implementation date for RouteMatch was scheduled for spring/summer 2018. Had this been achieved, Transit Plus services would have been less affected by the winter 2019 challenges identified above. Unfortunately, several issues discovered during software testing required additional development and, once development was completed (January 2019), further postponement in the implementation of RouteMatch to the spring/summer months, when conditions are more favourable, would have resulted in significant additional costs.

Since implementation, supplemental training has been provided to all employees, drivers, and contractors and all have gained proficiency with the new software, which has improved customer service and system efficiency. The staffing complement in the contact centre was increased to improve call wait times; wait times are now an average of 2.5 minutes from a high of 13.22 minutes in early February 2019. In addition, the dispatcher complement has been increased to more effectively deal with requests for changes to ride times and to review additional ride requests. A new systems analyst (SA) position was also created and approved to oversee the performance of the software.

While the Manitoba Ombudsman found that many aspects of service provided by Winnipeg Transit Plus were reasonable, they provided recommendations for further enhancements. The final Manitoba Ombudsman's report included a total of 19 recommendations with varying timelines for implementation (see appendix A for a full list of the Manitoba Ombudsman's recommendations and progress to date). As of June 2019, Winnipeg Transit Plus has met all the timelines for the recommendation items requiring completion by April 2019 and are working on the remaining recommendations which are in varying stages of progress.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the report be received as information.

REASON FOR THE REPORT

At its meeting of May 28, 2019, the Standing Policy Committee on Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works directed Winnipeg Transit to report back to the committee within 60 days on the following;

1. How the technology deficiencies in the Winnipeg Transit Plus reservation system will be addressed in the immediate term.
2. The measures and efforts undertaken to date to improve customer service and quality assurance at Winnipeg Transit Plus;
3. The progress made to date on the recommendations from the Manitoba Ombudsman on further improvements to Winnipeg Transit Plus.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

There are no implications associated with the recommendations as this report is to be received as information.

HISTORY/DISCUSSION

Winnipeg Transit Plus (formerly Handi-Transit) was established in 1977 to provide public transportation to individuals who were unable to access the high floor fleet of buses of the time. The service was originally provided with three vehicles and now delivers paratransit with over seventy vehicles to more than 8,000 active registrants. In 2018, the service received a total of 538,189 trip requests, the contact centre received 412,039 calls, the service carried 459,470 passengers, and completed 399,813 trips.

The paratransit service has undergone changes as its policies have evolved;

Year	Council Approval	Adoption / Implementation
1976	Winnipeg Transit Plus pilot	Spring of 1977
1991	Addition of legally blind category	Adopted by Council January 22, 1992
1994	Braid Report: review of Winnipeg Transit Plus issues	Adopted by Council September 21, 1994
1994	Winnipeg Transit Plus Policy Advisory Committee	Approved by Standing Policy Committee November 29, 1994
1996	Awarding of contract: contracting out service	Adopted by Council April 24, 1996
2000	Review of policies and guidelines	Adopted by Council September 21, 1994
2000	Trip priority system – fare structure	Adopted by Council October 18, 2000
2004	Winnipeg Transit Plus Policy Advisory Committee – revised	Approved by Standing Policy Committee – June 2000
2004	Amendment to no-show policy	Adopted by Council June 8, 2004

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2006	Revised eligibility criteria and registration process	Adopted by Council April 26, 2006
2010	Adoption of Alzheimer's and related dementia criteria	Adopted by Council December 15, 2010
2011	Standardization of fares	Adopted by Council July 20, 2011
2013	Changes to fare structure – fare payment from account	Adopted by Council December 11, 2013
2015	Method of payment for seniors on Winnipeg Transit Plus	Adopted by Council December 09, 2015

The City of Winnipeg has demonstrated its commitment to meet the transportation needs of its citizens in identifying and implementing necessary changes. With an aging population, it is important to ensure the promotion of accessible transportation, given the determinants of health clearly linked with active, community participation.

The Winnipeg Transit Master Plan will serve as a guide in developing "an innovative and efficient transit plan that provides easy to use and sustainable transportation choices available to Winnipeggers" (Stantec Consulting).

RouteMatch Software
RouteMatch is a technology platform that is comprehensive software designed for paratransit solutions and used by over 400 transit agencies in Canada,the United States, and Australia. The software maintains registrant information, schedules, processes trip requests, dispatches, verifies trip data, creates contractor statements/invoices, allows for the recording of events (complaints, accidents, inquiries, commendations etc.), contract management, contractor and driver information, registrant ride and payment information, mobile data terminals for drivers, and includes interactive voice response for confirmations, cancellations, and outbound notifications. The software also has the capacity for a rider web portal and mobile application. Plans to implement the remaining functionality are currently underway and expected to go-live for the summer of 2020.

Prior to the January 2019 implementation, the system was tested in a pre-production environment. All functionality was tested and included a pilot to ensure that all information was being processed appropriately by the system and that there was a flow of real-time information from dispatch to the on-street vehicles. Contractors were also introduced to the verification and contractor modules.

The functionality of the RouteMatch software has been working as it was intended since implementation. During the initial implementation of Route Match in the winter of 2019, Transit Plus services were impacted as a result of a variety of issues, which included; two city wide power outages that affected the City's network as a whole, staff turnover in the contact centre, ongoing training of staff on the RouteMatch software, dual entry in the old and new system, a vehicle shortage and a priority system that schedules trip requests based on trip purpose when demand exceeds available vehicle resources and restricts access to available resources.

While in preparation for training of staff for implementation, the contact center had five long-term experienced employees move on to other opportunities. This left the contact centre short staffed for a period of time. New employees that were subsequently hired were unfamiliar with service policies, processes and the application of these in the use of the software, which contributed to longer wait times to process calls.

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All staff underwent a standard two week training period prior to the go-live date and were provided additional time to practice; however, the complexity and unfamiliarity of the software reduced the speed with which employees were able to respond to registrants requests for trips, scheduling and general information. To compound the issue, as a precautionary measure, a decision was made by the project team to have all trip requests entered into the existing software as well as the new RouteMatch application for go-live. The combination of these factors increased the length of time required to process a trip request, increasing the duration of calls and wait times for registrants calling into the centre.

As the days progressed, staff became more familiar and proficient; however, during the implementation period, the City experienced power outages on two separate occasions that impacted several City services including the contact centre's ability to take calls and/or schedule trips impacting timely customer service; resulting in increased wait times.

The implementation period was also challenging for the drivers because of the use of the new technology. Drivers were now expected to process trips, and fares through a technological solution which was very different from the long-standing paper method. This led to incorrect pick up/drop off locations, missed instructions about registrant's pick-up and drop off locations, and confusion related to the collection of fares. While dealing with the newness of the technology, the winter weather conditions and traffic congestion also caused significant vehicle delays impacting customer service. This increased call volumes, wait times and late pick-ups, although the drivers and contractors continued to provide service.

Another factor affecting service at the time of implementation was the fact that contractors were unable to provide additional vehicles for the increased winter demand as they had done in the past. Contractors had a shortage of qualified drivers and no extra vehicles. The extreme weather conditions also led to multiple mechanical failures that impacted vehicle resources for service. These issues led to an increase in the number of "unables" (rides that were requested but could not be scheduled) which led to higher than normal customer complaints. In addition, there are approximately 250 additional registrants that are eligible for service during the winter months (October 15 – April 15) bringing the total increase of registrants in 2019 to 480. Since go-live, there have been significant improvements in call wait times, and a noticeable decrease in the number of unables which has also resulted in a steady reduction in complaints. Complaints have been reduced from a high of 421 reported complaints in February 2019 to a low of 185 in July 2019.

The system that was purchased and implemented is performing as it was intended within the parameters (i.e. policies) governing the service. Due to the level of unables, there were numerous complaints from registrants who were unable to receive their trips for purposes such as shopping, visiting and/or other recreational activities. It is important to note that the unables were a direct result of a shortage of resources and a priority system policy that allocates how trips are scheduled and not directly related to the new scheduling software.

The priority system defines how trips are scheduled based on the purpose of the trip. This is a long-standing policy and would require Council approval to amend or change. With the current resources that are allocated for service provision, the system can routinely schedule slightly over 1500 trips per day, which includes one-way trips, and any requests beyond this result in unables. In the winter months, the service routinely receives in the vicinity of 1800-2000 requests per day.

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In 2018, the service had 7,907 unables, 8,508 no shows (a vehicle was scheduled, reserved, and sent for a trip but the ride was refused, or the registrant was not present at the pick-up location) and 75,295 cancels after resources had been allocated to meet demand.

Quality Assurance and Customer Service
Several measures were put in place to supplement training and increase familiarity with the software during implementation and improve customer service. In addition to the standardized training drivers had received on the tablets, inspectors were sent into the field to make contact with each driver and review tablet functionality in their specified vehicles. Additional coaching and support was provided to contractors and drivers requiring more training. To supplement the training, quick reference guides were provided to all contractors and drivers to keep in their vehicles. Ongoing spot checks and coaching continue as additional support for drivers; however, the service is limited by the number of inspectors (currently there is one inspector on staff) available to effectively deal with registrant and driver concerns.

CSR's were provided with multiple opportunities to practice on the new software to improve efficiency before and after implementation. Peer training and coaching was and continues to be provided on a daily basis as CSR's increase their knowledge and familiarity with the software. Calls into the contact centre continue to be recorded and scored for required coaching and quality assurance standards.

In order to improve call wait times, the staffing complement in the contact center has been increased resulting in call wait times being reduced to an average of 2.5 minutes from a high of 13.22 minutes in early February 2019. In order to support drivers and registrants, Dispatchers on shift have been increased to more effectively deal with requests for changes to ride times and to review additional ride requests.

The hiring of a systems analyst (SA) to oversee the performance of the software has provided an opportunity for additional coaching, and assistance in problem solving potential issues. The SA has created process documents, reference guides and informational materials that have been posted on an internal drive for easy access for the CSR's with reference guides provided to contractors and drivers. The SA continues to work with the system vendor, employees, contractors and drivers to improve the efficiencies of the system and provide additional support to all stakeholders, as required.

Progress of Manitoba Ombudsman's Report
The Manitoba Ombudsman's report was a result of an investigation conducted in response to a complaint filed by the Independent Living Resource Centre (ILRC). The complaint was filed in October 2015 and the report was publicly issued by the Manitoba Ombudsman in January 2019.

The Manitoba Ombudsman's report made 19 recommendations for service enhancements with associated timelines for implementation (see Appendix A for a full list of the Manitoba Ombudsman's recommendations and progress to date). The investigation focused primarily on three areas; eligibility and appeals, customer service and quality assurance, transparency and communication. The majority of recommendations in the report are directly related to improving the transparency and communication of Winnipeg Transit Plus service.

To date, five of the Manitoba Ombudsman's recommendations have been fully implemented:

- Recommendation #10 - language of no-show notification letters have been changed according to recommendations in report;

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- Recommendation #13 - updated information, definitions/language in sexual harassment policy has been enhanced in all driver manuals in alignment with the City's sexual harassment policy;
- Recommendation #14 - pre-trip inspection checklist now includes verification of functioning GPS/AVL equipment;
- Recommendation #15 - Winnipeg Transit Plus drivers now wear high visibility vests;
- Recommendation #16 - language related to cell phone use and fines has been strengthened to correspond to requirements under the Highway Traffic Act.

Recommendation #1 is for a review of the eligibility criteria. This is a longer term project that will be covered through recommendations from the Winnipeg Transit Master Plan.

Recommendations #2, #3, #7, # 9, and #17 which require that policies and practices are outlined in all of the service's written materials will be addressed when recommendation #19 is completed and the user guide is printed and distributed which will allow for corresponding updates to the website

Recommendation #4 is for the hiring of an external member for the appeal panel which will require Council approval and funding. The individual meeting the criteria identified by the Ombudsman has been selected and has agreed to participate as a member of the appeal panel once approval has been provided. A report to Council is pending.

Recommendation #5 is for the creation of an email address for registrants. The email address has been created and is currently being tested so that it can be routed through our Genesys telephony system which will allow all emails to be tracked and retrieved (this is the same process and system being tested by 311). This recommendation requires resourcing prior to implementation.

Recommendation #6 is for the establishment of procedures to respond back to all complaints received from registrants. A procedure has been developed but requires resourcing prior to implementation.

Recommendation #8 is for the continued evaluation of the scheduling system and this is an ongoing process and we continue to review the scheduling parameters to create a more efficient schedule. The systems analyst oversees the performance of the software and continues to work with the system vendor, employees, contractors and drivers to improve the efficiencies of the system and provide additional support to all stakeholders, as required.

Recommendation #11 advocates that a pre-defined period of time be provided to registrants prior to deducting no-show charge from their account. While we have changed the language in the no show letters to reflect the Ombudsman's recommendations, the software currently does not have the functionality to allow for a delay before the withdrawal of a charge from an account occurs. Additional resources will be required in order to provide a direct response to all registrants who are assessed a no-show charge. A Council report for approval of staffing resources is pending.

Recommendation #12 is a review of the no-show policy. This is a longer-term project that will be covered through recommendations from the Winnipeg Transit Master Plan.

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Recommendation #18 is for the removal of the 500-meter policy. A request for a review of the 500-meter policy and funding for the additional service required was submitted to budget review and funding was not approved for 2019. A change to this policy would require Council approval and funding.

Recommendation #19 is for the creation of a comprehensive user guide that is anticipated to be ready for distribution by the winter of 2019. The creation of the user guide will address many of the issues identified by the Manitoba Ombudsman's report which will include clarification on policies, processes and general functioning of the service.

Beyond the recommendations outlined in the Manitoba Ombudsman's report, it is important to note that the Manitoba Ombudsman's report concluded that "*the process for determining eligibility was reasonable as were letters sent to applicants*". Although they recommended the addition of an external member to the appeal panel, they did not find and any evidence of biased appeal decisions. They also found that customer service, training, quality assurance measures, driver training, driver identification, use of securements, and other operational policies were reasonable.

Finally, the Manitoba Ombudsman's office recognizes that the "*paratransit service cannot be considered a specialty service, but is part of the service delivery continuum that municipalities must, in their duty to accommodate, deliver to their citizens*". They further recognize that the demand for service will increase as the population ages as will the expectations of the paratransit service system and will require adequate resources to meet the demand.

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FINANCIAL IMPACT

Financial Impact Statement Date: August 22, 2019

Project Name:

Winnipeg Transit Plus Update

COMMENTS:

There is no financial impact as this report is for information only.

Original Signed by:
Laurie Fisher, CPA, CA
Manager of Finance & Administration

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CONSULTATION

N/A

OURWINNIPEG POLICY ALIGNMENT

N/A

SUBMITTED BY

Department: Transit
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Date: August 22, 2019