**Agenda – Council – October 28, 2021**

**Report – Standing Policy Committee on Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works – October 12, 2021**

**Item No. 1 WINNpass Program – One Year Evaluation**

STANDING COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION:

On October 20, 2021, the Executive Policy Committee concurred in the recommendation of the Standing Policy Committee on Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works and submitted the following to Council:

1. That this report be received as information

2. That the Winnipeg Public Service be directed to report back to the Standing Committee on implementing a reduced e-cash fare option for individuals approved within the WINNpass program, during its report on the Transit Fare Structure and Fare Reductions in May, 2022.

3. That the Proper Officers of the City be authorized to do all things necessary to implement the intent of the forgoing."

**Report – Standing Policy Committee on Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works – October 12, 2021**

DECISION MAKING HISTORY:

EXECUTIVE POLICY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION:

On October 20, 2021, the Executive Policy Committee concurred in the recommendation of the Standing Policy Committee on Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works and submitted the matter to Council.

STANDING COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION:

On October 12, 2021, the Standing Policy Committee on Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works concurred in the recommendation of the Winnipeg Public Service, with the following amendment:

- Add the following new Recommendations 2 and 3:

    "2. That the Winnipeg Public Service be directed to report back to the Standing Committee on implementing a reduced e-cash fare option for individuals approved within the WINNpass program, during its report on the Transit Fare Structure and Fare Reductions in May, 2022.

    3. That the Proper Officers of the City be authorized to do all things necessary to implement the intent of the forgoing."

and submitted the matter to the Executive Policy Committee and Council.

COUNCIL DECISION:

On October 24, 2019, Council concurred in the recommendation of the Standing Policy Committee on Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works and adopted the following:

1. That the program policy as described in Appendix A be approved, forming the baseline parameters for the program.

2. That the budget impact from the program be referred to the 2020 budget process.

**Report – Standing Policy Committee on Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works – October 12, 2021**

DECISION MAKING HISTORY (continued):

COUNCIL DECISION (continued):

3. That the Public Service report back to Council in October, 2021 with an evaluation of the first full year of the program and include any recommended changes to the program policy based on feedback and experience with program administration.

4. That the Public Service be directed to seek an agreement with the Province of Manitoba specifying that Employment and Income Assistance transportation costs will not be transferred to the City of Winnipeg once the Low Income Transit Pass program is implemented, and include the progress of these discussions in the report to Council in 2021.

5. That the Proper Officers of the City be authorized to do all things necessary to implement the intent of the foregoing.

# ADMINISTRATIVE REPORT

**Title:** WINNpass Program – One Year Evaluation

**Critical Path:** Standing Policy Committee on Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works – Executive Policy Committee – Council

## AUTHORIZATION

| Author | Department Head | CFO | CAO |
|---|---|---|---|
| L. Fisher | G. Ewankiw | N/A | M. Jack |

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The WINNpass program was launched on May 1, 2020 after a one-month postponement as a result of the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first year, 82% of the 1,017 applications received were approved. Of the various submission options available, the vast majority, (80%) of applicants submitted their application through the online portal. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact the uptake in the program with applications being submitted well below anticipated levels.

Regardless of the slow start, a recently completed stakeholder and customer engagement survey indicates the program is well received by individuals participating in the program:

- 84.7% of customers found completing the application form very easy or easy
- 89.7% of customers would re-apply for the program
- 88% of customers rated the overall customer service received from the WINNpass office as excellent or good

See Appendix A for the Stakeholder and Customer Engagement Summary.

Currently, Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) clients who receive a transportation subsidy to purchase a monthly bus pass are not eligible for the WINNpass program. If the eligibility for the WINNpass program was amended to allow EIA clients who receive a transportation subsidy from the Province for the purchase of a monthly pass, the Province would realize an estimated $2.0 million in budget savings by essentially transferring that cost to the Transit Department.

In response to Transit's proposed funding strategy (presented to them on March 2, 2020), the Province advised the City on October 15, 2020 and confirmed on February 17, 2021 that it was their position the City should allow EIA clients to be eligible for the WINNpass program without any Provincial subsidy to support the related lost revenue for the Transit Department.

Further, they took the additional 'consequential' step of unilaterally terminating the information sharing agreement that had been signed on May 28, 2020 which eliminated an administrative process that had been implemented. The elimination of the administrative process ultimately negatively impacted the low-income applicant by shifting the burden to provide the required documentation back on them.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

That this report be received as information.

## REASON FOR THE REPORT

On October 24, 2019, Council concurred with the recommendation of the Standing Policy Committee on Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works and directed the Winnipeg Public Service to report back to Council in October, 2021:

- with an evaluation of the first full year of the program and include any recommended changes to the program policy based on feedback and experience with program administration, and
- that the Public Service be directed to seek an agreement with the Province of Manitoba specifying that Employment and Income Assistance transportation costs will not be transferred to the City of Winnipeg once the Low Income Transit Pass program is implemented, and include the progress of these discussions in the report to Council in 2021.

Additionally, the Standing Policy Committee on Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works directed the Winnipeg Public Service to consider the recommendation of the City Centre Community Committee during the Low Income Transit Pass policy roll-out and when reporting on the first full year of the program in October, 2021, namely:

- additional options for existing low-income transit pass holders to requalify annually to ensure the process does not create any unintended barriers for users of the program.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

There are no implications to receiving this report as information.

## HISTORY/DISCUSSION

On March 20, 2019, Council adopted the 2019-2021 Operating Budget which included the recommendation to establish a Low Income Bus Pass Program (branded as WINNpass) effective April 1, 2020. The program was to offer discounted fares commencing at 30% off the price of a full fare monthly pass at date of implementation, 40% in 2021 and 50% in 2022.

With the approved discount levels, effective April 1st of each year, the monthly WINNpass fare product is priced at:

2020 - $71.45
2021 - $62.40
2022 - $53.00 (estimated)

**Program Launch**

The April 1, 2020 launch date was postponed because of adjustments that had to be made due to the arrival of the unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic. The delay was as a result of key staff being re-assigned to address the COVID-19 emergency, staff being transitioned to work from home or subject to self-isolation rules and the closure of customer service centres in accordance with public health directives. As a consequence, the program launch was postponed by one month.

The WINNpass program was soft launched on May 1, 2020. While at that time individuals could apply for the program, the customer service centres remained closed.

**Program Statistics and Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic**

The application rate for the program started very slow. With restaurants, gyms and retail locations closed combined with a large number of people working from home, demand for the program, similar to demand for Transit in general, was significantly reduced.

Key program statistics for the first year of operation (May 1, 2020 – April 30, 2021) are as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| Total Applications Received | 1,017 |
| Total Applications Approved | 832 |
| Total Monthly Passes Sold | 2,599 |

82% of total applications received were approved for the program.

The application rate was approximately 15% of the volumes that had been originally estimated. The low application rate is a result of individuals not requiring the use of Transit as a result of loss of employment, working from home or other factors attributable to the pandemic as well as the cost of the monthly pass still being too expensive for some people. These reasons were also identified by participants in the public engagement.

Further, for those individuals who did apply for the program, 62% did not require a WINNpass every month which reduced the number of monthly passes sold. Program statistics indicate that 11% of customers surveyed who were approved for the program did not purchase any monthly passes at all.

Applications were received through various methods; however, the vast majority (80%) of individuals submitted applications through the online application portal:

| | |
|---|---|
| Online | 809 |
| Mail | 85 |
| In Person | 64 |
| Fax | 53 |
| Drop Box | 6 |
| | 1,017 |

Of the applications that were not approved, the reasons were as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| Missing information not subsequently provided | 107 |
| Household income exceeds Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) | 41 |
| Receiving transportation allowance through EIA | 29 |
| Other | 8 |
| Total | 185 |

Beyond the slow application rate for the program, the partner agencies who participated as part of the stakeholder engagement process also experienced more urgent priorities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, some of the planned joint initiatives like promoting the program through their facilities or acting as a drop off location have been postponed at this time.

Applications were received from all wards within the City; however, the three wards with the most applications received and approved are:

Fort Rouge - East Fort Garry (12.6%)
Daniel McIntyre (12.5%)
Point Douglas (9.9%)

**Survey Results**

Despite the initial lower than expected participation in the program, a recent stakeholder survey indicates the program is well received from the individuals who have made use of it.

Key findings from the WINNpass program survey indicated the following:

- 84.7% of customers found completing the application form very easy or easy
- 65.5% of applications were processed in two weeks or less
- 88.1% of customers rated the timeliness of response from the WINNpass office as excellent or good with 90.5% indicating the quality of information they received was either excellent or good
- 88% of customers rated overall customer service received from the WINNpass office as excellent or good
- 89.7% of customers stated that they would re-apply for the program

See Appendix A for the Stakeholder and Customer Engagement Summary.

**Provincial Support**

Currently, Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) clients who receive a transportation subsidy to purchase a monthly bus pass are not eligible for the WINNpass program. If the eligibility criteria was amended to include this group, the Province would realize an estimated $2.0 million in budget savings by essentially transferring the cost difference to the Transit Department.

On March 2, 2020, Transit staff met with the Department of Families to discuss a proposed funding strategy that would facilitate the calculation of a Provincial subsidy based on actual monthly pass sales and allow the Province to retain a percentage of their savings in acknowledgement of their administrative effort in support of the program.

In response, the Province advised the City on October 15, 2020 and confirmed on February 17, 2021 that it was their position the City should allow EIA clients to access the WINNpass program without any Provincial subsidy to support the related lost revenue.

The Province also took the additional 'consequential' step of unilaterally terminating the information sharing agreement that had been signed on May 28, 2020. The agreement enabled the WINNpass office to communicate directly with EIA via an information sharing portal to confirm an applicant's eligibility. This administrative process reduced manual work for both offices but most importantly eliminated the need for the applicant to gather and provide the required documentation. This was an unfortunate decision as it most significantly impacted the low-income applicants by shifting the burden to provide the required documentation back on them.

**Re-application Process**

Eligibility for the program is maintained for one year from the application approval date. After one year, individuals must re-apply to confirm they still meet the program criteria. Applicants can re-apply to the program through a simplified process which includes:

- A shorter application form - re-applicants are able to complete a condensed application form.
- A completely remote application process - the re-application process can all be completed on-line eliminating the need for the applicant to come in to the office provided they have re-applied prior to the expiry of their current eligibility period.
- Once re-approved, and provided the application process is completed prior to the expiry of the eligibility period, WINNpass holders can continue to use their existing peggo card, seamlessly transitioning to the next approval period.

The re-application process has been evaluated and steps have been taken to reduce any anticipated barriers and to simplify the process. The re-application process is explained to successful applicants at the time of approval; however, further work is being done to improve communication to program participants to provide a reminder of the one-year term of the program. Staff are always available to assist participants in navigating the re-application process when needed.

**Next Steps**

Work is ongoing with the Community Services Department to establish a single application that would assess eligibility for both the WINNpass and the Recreation Services Fee Subsidy programs.

In response to feedback received in the customer survey, Transit will explore the feasibility of adding additional, shorter term fare product(s) to the WINNpass program (i.e. single ride). This option has been discussed as part of the Poverty Reduction Strategy and will be investigated as part of the fare structure changes proposed in the Winnipeg Transit Master Plan to be reported back to the Standing Policy Committee on Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works in May, 2022.

An assessment is currently underway to determine the most accessible location(s) for the WINNpass program or if the location at 510 Main is sufficient and other options to best address the demand in the various geographical areas of the City.

Transit will also continue advertising and promotional campaigns to promote awareness and communicate information about the program such as where the monthly pass can be purchased, how much it costs and how to apply for the program. Further, third party agents are receiving additional training on the program to try to address some of the incidents of miscommunication that have been reported at the point of purchase.

**FINANCIAL IMPACT**

## Financial Impact Statement **Date:** September 16, 2021

## Project Name:

## WINNpass Program – One Year Evaluation

**COMMENTS:**

There is no financial impact from the recommendation in this report as it is for information only.

**Original Signed by:**

Laurie Fisher, CPA, CA
Manager of Finance & Administration

## CONSULTATION

This Report has been prepared in consultation with:

N/A

## OURWINNIPEG POLICY ALIGNMENT

The recommendations align with Our Winnipeg strategic goals for sustainable transportation. Section 01-1b promotes the creation of a safe efficient and equitable transportation system that encourages active, accessible and healthy lifestyle options.

## WINNIPEG CLIMATE ACTION PLAN ALIGNMENT

This report is in accordance with the Winnipeg Climate Action Plan (WCAP) as per Directions 3.1 *Increase Use and Efficiency of Public Transit Systems* (p.46).

Relevant actions include: Deliver continuous improvement in transit service with a focus on customer service, reliability, and route connectivity, and public education found on page 46 of the WCAP.

## SUBMITTED BY

Department: Transit
Division: Finance and Administration
Prepared by: Laurie Fisher, Manager of Finance and Administration
Date: September 16, 2021

Attachments:

Appendix A – Stakeholder and Customer Engagement Summary