

BC Transit Ticket Assistance Program

Caledon's 'community snapshots' present brief overviews of initiatives founded by Vibrant Communities and other local organizations. The Community Council convenes the Quality of Life CHALLENGE in BC's Capital Region and has been a partner in Vibrant Communities since 2003.

Challenge

All transit systems within British Columbia outside of Metro Vancouver are coordinated by BC Transit – a provincial crown agency that serves more than 50 communities. In each of these communities, local transit authorities make decisions about fares, routes and services for their passengers in collaboration with BC Transit. In the case of the Victoria Region, the Victoria Regional Transit Commission is the local authority with responsibility for setting passenger fares.

When the Victoria Regional Transit Commission was increasing the price of transit tickets in the mid-1990s, a group of people living on very low incomes recognized that even a small fare hike was more than they could afford. They organized a protest and their story was picked up by the media.

Transit Commission members took the situation to heart and began working with BC Transit staff to investigate options for making public transportation more accessible to people on low incomes. It was decided that distributing transit tickets through social service agencies would be an efficient way to reach people in need. The Community Council's extensive partnerships made them the logical choice to coordinate the initiative. At that time, few local social agencies recognized affordable transportation as a critical service.

Response

In 1997, the Transit Commission decided that it would provide 5,000 tickets for agencies to distribute at no charge to their clients, and the Community Council agreed to act as a central administrating agency. It brought together a range of social service providers to develop the criteria

for the program. In order to participate in the BC Transit Ticket Assistance Program (BCTTAP), it was determined that agencies must:

- have a mandate to work primarily with people living on low incomes
- provide assurance that the tickets would be distributed free of charge to assist people with low income with urgent transport needs
- complete the necessary Ticket Assistance Program reports and return them to the Community Council.

The Community Council and its BCTTAP partners developed a system by which social service nonprofit agencies would distribute the tickets to people living on low incomes. Agencies buy tickets from the Community Council and their purchases are matched 1:1 by free tickets from the Transit Commission, effectively doubling the number of people assisted.

In 2005, the Transit Commission began including monthly passes in BCTTAP. These allow individuals and families to move beyond using transit for the narrow definition of urgent transportation needs, thereby encouraging greater involvement in family and community life. Over time, the Commission has increased its maximum annual allocation from 5,000 to 40,000 tickets and from 110 to 220 bus passes. Thanks to the agency matching process, 80,000 tickets and 440 passes are now available annually to residents in need of transportation. In 2008-09, some 67 community agencies were involved in the program.

The Transit Commission and community agencies recognize that the number of tickets given out is not a measure of need, but rather an indicator of the limited capacity of the agencies which purchase tickets at half price. Over the years, more agencies have included “transportation” as a line in their budgets, and have raised funds to purchase bus tickets. Unfortunately, some have reported decreased funding prior to the economic downturn that hit in the fall of 2008. This situation is expected to worsen during 2010. Many BCTTAP partners are concerned that they will not be able to continue making available the passes and tickets. BC Transit is monitoring the situation.

Outcomes

In the 13 years since BCTTAP was founded, the Community Council and local agencies have continued to hold annual meetings to review ticket usage and identify transportation needs and service gaps. Social agencies have worked through questions regarding how tickets and passes are handed out. Some prefer that clients request them, some choose to do the asking, while others use a combination approach. Use restrictions vary by agency; tickets and passes were initially provided to allow people entering the labour market to get to work. Over time, ‘urgent need’ gave rise to a deeper understanding of the link between quality of life and transportation.

Working with transit officials, agencies have compiled usage statistics and discovered that tickets have allowed people to: access legal and counselling services, attend employment training, get

to child care, take classes, visit food banks, attend medical appointments, see friends, attend job interviews, look for housing and arrive at a new workplace before the first pay cheque arrives. As a result, there is increased understanding of poverty-related needs.

Says Community Council’s Christina Peacock, Director of the CHALLENGE: “From the beginning, we knew that this program was more an example of poverty alleviation rather than of poverty reduction. But by tracking the wide variety of ticket usage and listening to the partner agencies and their clients, evidence was presented to shift and expand the program to include employment-related transportation needs and other uses that some would say were not as urgent as food or shelter. The program has been responsive to the needs of the clients because of the respectful way all the partners have worked together. The Transit Assistance Program continues to be a very valuable means of providing information and requests to transit decision-makers.”

Transit officials initially believed that BCTTAP tickets would be used mainly for trips to the food bank by homeless people. As the initiative unfolded and data showed the high proportion of people using the tickets for employment-related trips, Transit Commissioners decided to increase the number of available tickets and passes. Partners learned together that affordable transportation positively affects the local economy by allowing more people to participate in paid work and access services.

My place of work is more than 6km away from my shelter. It would have been very difficult to make it without this pass. I worked for one month with little pay and had to wait until the end of the month for full pay. Thank you.

- BCTTAP pass recipient

More recently, partners have expressed the view that lower-cost passes could be distributed more broadly – to tourists and youth and to cover travel costs related to community participation more generally. Students and their families have expressed concern that the existing, pay-in-full six-month youth passes need to be replaced with a monthly pass for all children and families, regardless of income. Perennial discussions include transit routes, frequency and how to better serve underserved parts of the region.

Transit officials are continually working to improve routes and frequency to better serve their customers. One of the unexpected benefits of BCTTAP has been its impact on ridership. The program has helped instill the habit of using public transit as a preferred mode of transportation. One agency has its support workers travel with clients to appointments as a way to introduce them to the transit system. These clients tend to continue using public transportation once the orientation period is over.

BCTTAP was initiated as a direct response to the voices of people in poverty. Based on the successful pilot project in BC's Capital Region, similar programs have been instituted in Abbotsford/Mission and Kelowna, in partnership with local municipalities and United Ways.

A few transit rides do not lift people out of poverty, but the investment of a free bus ticket appears to be an essential piece of the poverty reduction puzzle. The Transit Commission, the CHALLENGE and participating agencies have worked to build trust and respect with residents in need – providing support and opportunities that help people help themselves. In BC's current economic climate, programs like BCTTAP are more important than ever.

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References

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