

Operational Services Briefing to
Community Development Committee
2024 June 26

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Free Transit for Children 12 and Under Update

PURPOSE OF BRIEFING

This briefing presents Council with an initial findings of offering free transit to children aged 12 and under, who have been eligible for free transit since January 2023. Administration recommends maintaining free transit for this age group while conducting a thorough evaluation. Administration will return to Council with a detailed analysis as part of an overarching Fare Strategy to guide decisions for the 2027-2030 budget cycle.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Background

As part of an amendment to the 2023-2026 Service Plans and Budgets, Council approved one-time budget to eliminate fares for children aged 12 and under in 2023. During the budget adjustments in 2023, Council approved \$3 million in permanent base budget for the initiative in 2024. At that time, through a Motion Arising, Council directed Administration to evaluate the initiative and provide recommendations for potential amendments by the end of Q2 2024 to align with the goal of increasing transit ridership.

The goals of this initiative were to save families money, increase access to affordable transportation, and encourage early adoption of public transit for children. The following outlines Administration's preliminary assessment of this initiative and subsequent steps to be taken.

Findings

Since introducing free transit for children aged 12 and under in January 2023, Administration conducted a survey this year targeting adults, youth, and children. The goal was to better understand transit usage and behaviours among children and youth aged 6 to 18, as well as overall attitudes towards using transit. Here are the key findings from the report:

For children and youth:

- 53 per cent use transit regularly.
- 80 per cent feel more independent when using transit.
- 75 per cent feel comfortable asking the bus operator for help if needed.
- 74 per cent feel safe when using transit.
- 72 per cent report that using transit saves them money.
- 61 per cent enjoy taking transit, compared to 36 per cent of adults.
- 61 per cent who use transit are aware that those aged 12 and under ride free, compared to 41 per cent of adults.

For adults:

- 61 per cent felt uncomfortable with their child/ren taking transit on their own.
- 74 per cent believe that promoting children's use of public transportation will encourage continued use as they grow older.
- 89 per cent agree that allowing children aged 12 and under to ride for free is a great idea.
- Lower fares rank the lowest among various options that could potentially increase their transit usage.

The survey findings show that children and youth have a positive view of transit. They feel independent and safe while using it, and many are aware that they can ride for free. While adults expressed some safety concerns, they strongly support encouraging transit use among children and free fares for them. However, when compared to other factors like reliability, frequency, and safety, free fares are the least influential in increasing overall transit usage.

Additionally, Administration gathered feedback from bus operators regarding the initiative allowing children 12 and under to ride transit for free. Operators expressed mixed sentiments about the initiative. Some operators observed an increase in fare evasion since the initiative began, negatively impacting job satisfaction. While there is recognition that it addresses affordability concerns and aims to increase access to transit, it is unclear if these goals are being met. Affordability is already addressed through low-income fare products, and the lack of a fare product attached this pilot hinders the ability to measure ridership directly. There is no clear evidence that the free fare initiative is boosting ridership or encouraging long-term transit use.

Finally, the current estimated annual cost of providing free transit to children 12 and under is approximately \$3 million, which is covered by Council's permanent base budget allocation. However, to align Calgary Transit's long-term RouteAhead goals for an intuitive, safe, accessible, and welcoming transit system, alongside sustainable financing, ongoing analysis is necessary. This ensures Administration fulfills Council's vision of public transit as a pillar in shaping Calgary's best future.

Next Steps

Calgary Transit will continue to assess the initiative's effectiveness as part of a broader effort to increase ridership and address fare evasion. A comprehensive strategy is under development, which will include the following measures:

- Utilizing technology to analyze fare evasion patterns and identify hotspots and peak times;
- Targeting enforcement and interventions based on data and operator observations to maximize effectiveness;
- Implementing a fare payment system that allows passengers to pay fares quickly and conveniently while providing immediate data to inform decisions and allow for timely adjustments to services and products;
- Conducting a public awareness campaign to educate passengers on how fare revenue supports transit services, maintenance, and improvements;
- Reviewing fare products to ensure affordability and offer a range of options to meet diverse passenger needs utilizing a means based approach; and,
- Collaborating with school boards and organizations to understand the underlying reasons for fare evasion and developing targeted interventions.

As part of the overall strategy, Administration will provide recommendations to ensure Council has an innovative approach to fare compliance and fare products for the 2027-2030 budget cycle.

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General Manager Doug Morgan concurs with the information in this Briefing.