



Calgary Transit Free Fare Zone review

May 2026



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Executive summary



This report provides a comprehensive review of Calgary Transit’s downtown Free Fare Zone. It evaluates potential impacts of keeping or removing the zone and makes a recommendation.

The Free Fare Zone is a legacy service that was introduced in 1981 as a pilot project to encourage early adoption of the new CTrain service. Today, the Free Fare Zone extends roughly 2.5 km across 7th Avenue South between Downtown West/Kerby station and City Hall/Bow Valley College station (see map in Appendix A). The Free Fare Zone allows riders to hop on and off at

no cost, if their trip remains within the zone.

There are significant benefits and trade-offs associated with keeping or removing the Free Fare Zone. Since removing the zone is expected to reduce disorderly behaviour and improve perceptions of safety, which is the biggest concern among transit riders and a significant barrier to using transit, Administration recommends removing the Free Fare Zone. We also recommend that Council consider reinvesting the new fare revenue to advance improvements in transit safety, support for events, and support for vulnerable populations, as part of the 2027-2030 budget deliberations.

Impact of removing the Free Fare Zone

Key benefits	Key challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in disorderly behaviour on downtown trains and platforms, and across the entire transit system, since downtown is a common entry point for disorder. • Improved perceptions of safety over time. • Frees up train capacity during peak travel times downtown. • Improves fairness across the system and aligns with RouteAhead’s direction toward fare discounts based on ability to pay. • Increased fare revenue of up to \$5 million annually, which could be reinvested in other programs and services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong support for the Free Fare Zone from downtown residents, business owners and non-profit organizations. • Doesn’t address root causes of disorder, which is likely to displace to nearby areas. • Impact on downtown events and conference attendees. • Impact on some low-income riders and Calgarians experiencing vulnerabilities. • Requires thoughtful infrastructure changes to downtown platforms to clearly delineate the fare paid zone.

In response to Council direction, we also considered a third option – remove the Free Fare Zone but charge a lower fare price (\$2.00) for trips in the zone. This option would achieve the same safety benefits associated with removing the Free Fare Zone and increase fare revenue up to \$2.5 million per year. However, it would still introduce a fare where none existed previously and would create a more confusing fare structure for customers. This option has not been as thoroughly investigated, given limited time for analysis, but is presented for Council’s consideration.

Research approach & inputs



In 2025, Calgary Transit began reviewing the Free Fare Zone to assess its continued alignment with strategic objectives, in anticipation of an updated fare strategy. This work was bolstered by Council direction in February 2026 to conduct an in-depth review of the Free Fare Zone and bring back a recommendation (EC2026-0106).

Extensive research, engagement and analysis was undertaken to assess impacts in four key areas: safety & community, ridership & equity, operations, and financial.

Key inputs

- **Background:** Reviewed the history of Calgary's Free Fare Zone and previous Free Fare Zone evaluations.
- **Jurisdictional scan:** Scanned 12 Canadian and U.S. fare-free transit programs to define the current landscape and evaluate lessons learned from transit agencies that have implemented or removed free fare zones.
- **Public engagement:** Conducted extensive public engagement to understand public sentiment and perceptions of the Free Fare Zone, including an open survey to the public, a survey of downtown business owners and various meetings with interested parties. See Appendix B for a complete summary of engagement and Appendix C for detailed survey results.
- **Customer intercept survey:** Conducted a customer intercept survey to understand current usage and user behaviour within the Free Fare Zone, and to estimate the potential impact of removing the zone on ridership and revenue. See Appendix C for detailed survey results.
- **Strategic alignment:** Assessed Free Fare Zone alignment with City of Calgary strategies, plans and policies to ensure potential impacts are understood. See Appendix D for a summary of strategic alignment.

Key report references

- *Calgary Transit Focus Groups: Usage and Attitudes* report (Jan 2026, Leger)
- *Calgary Transit Customer Journey Map* (Oct 2025, Leger)
- *Calgary Transit Customer Journey Focus Groups Report* (Aug 2025, Leger)
- *Fare-Free Transit Evaluation Framework* (2023, Transit Cooperative Research Program)
- *Evaluation of an Extension of Calgary Transit's Free Fare Zone* (Jun 2011, Calgary Transit, LPT2011-61)

Jurisdictional scan



The jurisdictional scan reviewed the overall findings of the *Fare-Free Transit Evaluation Framework* report and examined 12 transit agencies across North America that currently have, or previously had, a free fare zone.

Free fare zones are not common in large transit agencies across North America, especially today. While in past decades they were more common, several have been scaled back or eliminated in recent years. Calgary Transit is the only large transit agency in Canada with a free fare zone.

Agencies included in the jurisdictional scan

Full free fare zones	Partial free fare zones	Former free fare zones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Roam Transit (Canmore, Alberta) Orangeville Transit (Orangeville, Ontario) Bus Mont-Tremblant (Mont-Tremblant, Quebec) Sun Tran (Tucson, Arizona) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pittsburgh Regional Transit (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) Regional Transportation District (Denver, Colorado) Utah Transit Authority (Salt Lake City, Utah and region) QLine (Detroit, Michigan) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TriMet (Portland, Oregon) King County Metro (Seattle and area, Washington) The Rapid (Grand Rapids, Michigan) RideKC (Kansas City, Missouri)*

*RideKC is reinstating fares on buses in June 2026 but the streetcar will remain fare-free.

Reasons for free fare zone removal

Transit agency	Reasons for removing free fare zones
TriMet (Portland)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Budget troubles Concerns with fare enforcement and evasion Equity and fairness issue Lower concern about downtown air quality
King County Metro (Seattle & area)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential impacts on service without fare revenue Reduce fare evasion, operator conflicts and safety issues (bus system) Concerns with subsidizing downtown trips over other riders
The Rapid (Grand Rapids)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of broader strategy to update fare structures and policies Reduce confusion and fare evasion
RideKC (Kansas City)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial unsustainability Unique funding challenges due to the shared financial model between municipalities

Common impacts of free fare zones across jurisdictions

Positive impacts	Negative impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ridership: Fare-free transit almost always causes an immediate increase in ridership. Transit agencies reported increases in ridership ranging from 10% to 100%. • Equity: Fare-free access reduces financial barriers to transit for low-income users. • Operational: Free boarding within designated zones can sometimes reduce dwell times, minimize station bottlenecks, and simplify boarding during peak times, depending on the design of the transit system. • Environmental: Encourages increased transit use, which can reduce car traffic and congestion and improve air quality. • Tourism: Makes it easier for tourists and visitors to get around within the zone. • Fare enforcement: Can reduce the number of fare enforcement conflicts with operators, for some on-board fare validation systems. • Economic: Benefits local businesses located near the free fare zone. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revenue loss: Challenges related to foregone revenue and broader financial pressures experienced across the public transit industry. • Safety: Increases in social disorder and disruptive riders. Heightened safety and security concerns. • Fairness: Partial free fare zones can disproportionately benefit certain neighbourhoods and riders over others. • Fare evasion: Riders are more likely to board within a free fare zone and continue travelling beyond the boundary without paying a fare. • Customer experience: Partial free fare zones add complexity and confusion for some customers who are unaccustomed to the system, such as infrequent riders and visitors.

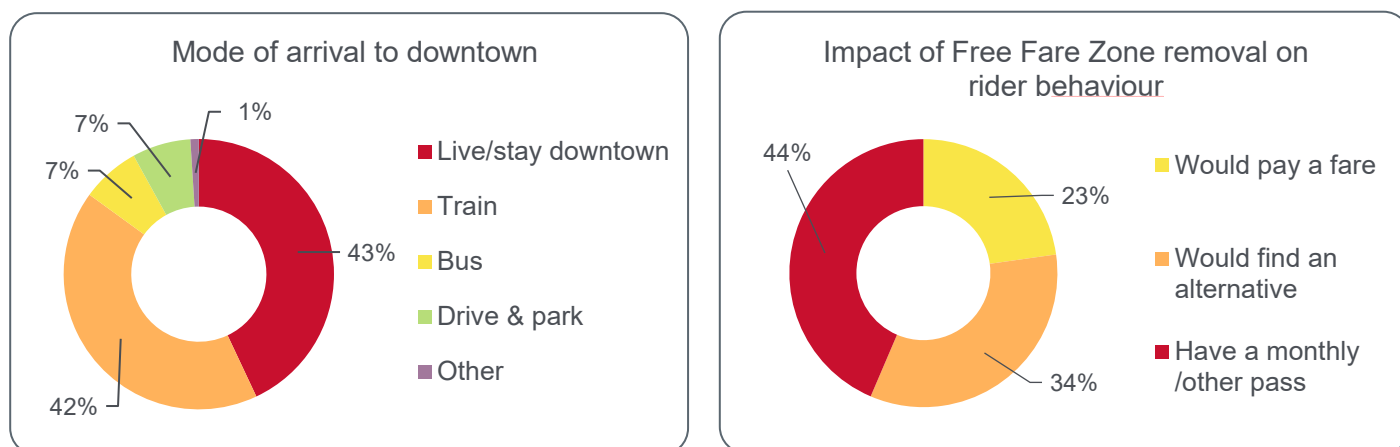
Customer behaviour



A customer intercept survey was conducted at all CTrain platforms in the Free Fare Zone from 2025 November 15 to 30. The survey captured weekday and weekend travel across all times of day, resulting in approximately 6,000 responses.

The Free Fare Zone sees different customer behaviour depending on time of day and day of the week. Overall, the most common use of the Free Fare Zone is for downtown residents to travel to work. If the zone were removed, 34% of riders would find an alternative rather than pay a fare, which suggests that removal would result in behavioural changes.

Figure 1: Customer intercept survey results



Travel dynamics

- **Morning rush:** Usage is driven by downtown residents who use the Free Fare Zone for commuting to work, many of whom do not hold a transit pass.
- **Evening rush:** Most riders are non-downtown residents who are commuting home from work, which suggests the zone functions as a downtown distribution layer to other parts of the transit system.
- **Mid-day and off-peak:** Mid-day usage is balanced between downtown and non-downtown residents. Trip purposes are more varied (e.g. work, shopping, recreation, school) at this time.
- **Weekdays:** Usage is heavily commuter-oriented.
- **Weekends:** Weekend patterns shift toward more localized use and supporting lifestyle activities (e.g. social, recreation and shopping).

See Appendix C for more detailed results of the customer intercept survey.

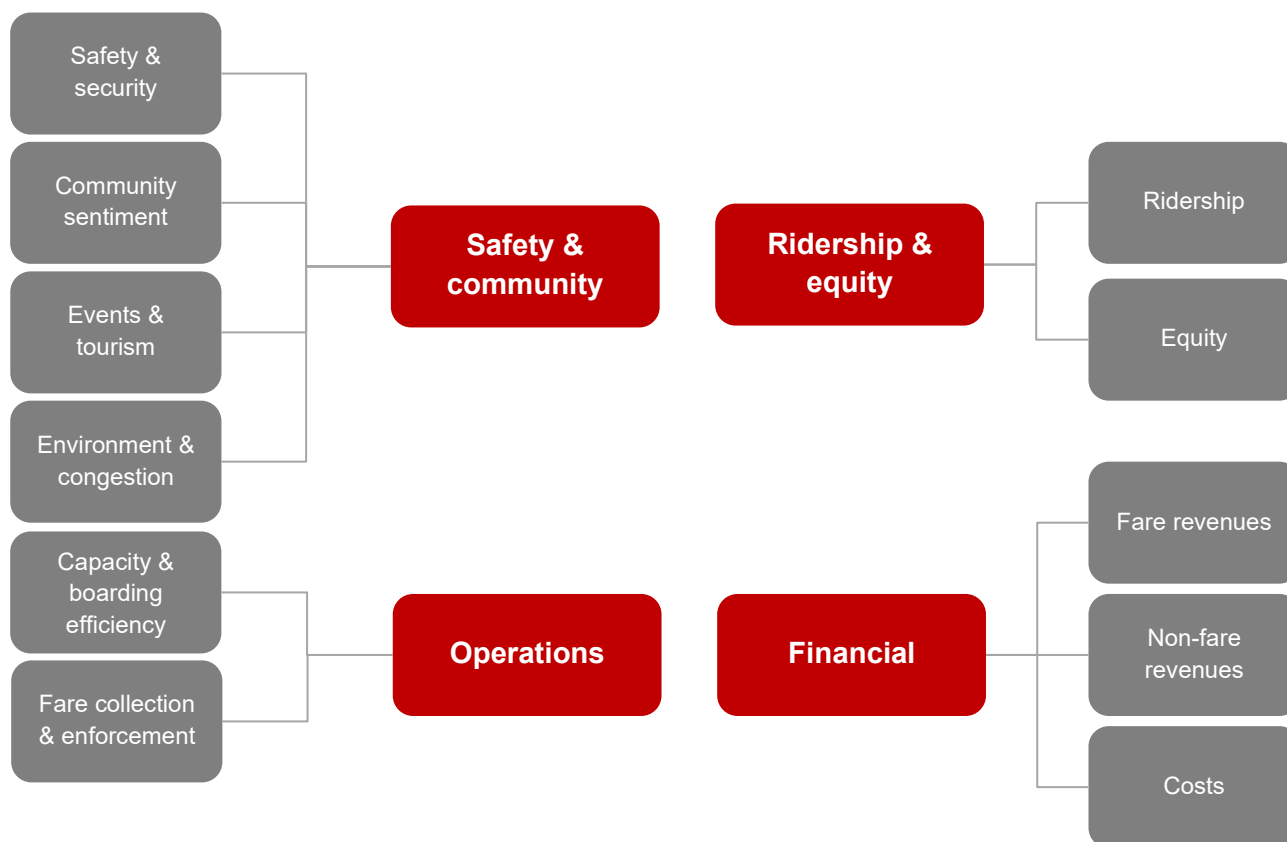
Impact assessment



The framework used for the impact assessment was adapted from the *Fare-Free Transit Evaluation Framework* report, modified to reflect Calgary Transit's local context while remaining consistent with industry research and best practices. The framework was also updated to ensure alignment with assessment areas directed by Council (EC2026-0106).

This framework was used to systematically assess the benefits and challenges of keeping or removing the Free Fare Zone, which are outlined in subsequent sections of this report.

Impact areas analysed in the Free Fare Zone review:



Safety & community

This focus area evaluates the impact of the Free Fare Zone on safety and security, community sentiment, events and tourism, and the environment.

Safety and security

At a city-wide level, safety continues to be a growing concern. In the recent spring survey, 21% of Calgarians mentioned “crime, safety and policing” as the most important issue requiring attention from local leaders.

This is the second most important issue overall – after traffic and roads – and has gone up 3% since last year. Specific to transit, safety continues to be the biggest concern raised by Calgary Transit customers. Safety is not a secondary factor for riders – it is a primary decision-making factor that determines when, where, and whether people use transit at all.



Safety and security: Key takeaways

- Safety is the primary concern of Calgary Transit riders and is a barrier to using transit.
- Removing the Free Fare Zone would give officers lawful authority to remove disruptive riders earlier, address loitering, and intervene before issues escalate.
- This would support system-wide safety, since downtown is a common entry point for disruptive behaviour across the transit system.
- Reduced disorder on trains and platforms should improve perceptions of safety over time.
- Increased presence of transit peace officers on trains and platforms would help address the increasing and complex social disorder occurring on the transit system.
- Social disorder is likely to move to areas just outside stations, meaning overall downtown safety continues to require an integrated approach.

Perceptions of safety in the Free Fare Zone

Findings from customer journey mapping and focus groups have consistently found concerns with safety at downtown CTrain stations, especially after dark and on weekends.

- Safety is a gatekeeper variable, meaning ridership gains from service expansion, fare pricing or messaging are limited unless safety issues downtown are addressed first.
- Downtown stations are described by customers as the least safe part of the transit system, often more concerning than trains themselves.
- Visible drug use, loitering and lack of supervision were cited as key drivers of fear.
- Fear is amplified when there are empty platforms, poor lighting, vandalism and limited activity.
- Calgary Transit riders have empathy for vulnerable populations downtown but emphasized that unmanaged disorder increases fear for riders.
- Focus group participants noted that perceptions alone were enough to change travel behaviour, even without direct experience of incidents.
- Transit users want visible staff presence, controlled or gated station access.

Safety and security: Impact of removing the Free Fare Zone

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would enable transit peace officers to intervene earlier and remove disruptive riders from trains and platforms. • Would also make it easier for Calgary Police Service to locate people and find criminals on trains and platforms. • Would improve system-wide safety, since the downtown core is a common entry point for disruptive riders across the transit system. • Over time, there should be improved perceptions of safety. • Officer deployment would not be impacted as there is already a downtown team. • New fare revenue could be reinvested to increase the presence of transit peace officers on the transit system, further enhancing safety. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disorder is likely to disperse to nearby areas, meaning overall downtown safety continues to require an integrated approach. • For some, taking the train for short trips downtown can feel safer than walking, especially after dark.

Community sentiment

The Free Fare Zone has been in place since 1981 and has become a staple of Calgary’s downtown for many residents and businesses in the area. Removing the Free Fare Zone would likely be met with some public criticism, particularly from those who live and work downtown. Public opinion survey results found strong support for maintaining the Free Fare Zone, though respondents living near the zone and frequent transit users were significantly over-represented.



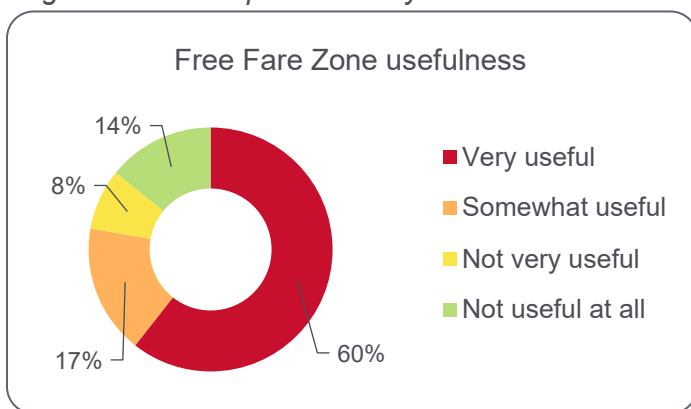
Community sentiment: Key takeaways

- Residents within walking distance of the Free Fare Zone perceive it as delivering high value and supporting downtown livability, with benefits that outweigh any concerns.
- Downtown businesses see the Free Fare Zone as a valuable downtown mobility tool that improves access for employees and customers and supports downtown vibrancy.
- Among survey respondents, 85% of downtown businesses feel removal of the Free Fare Zone would negatively affect their business.

Public opinion survey

A public opinion survey was conducted from 2026 February 15 to March 8 to assess sentiment toward the Free Fare Zone. The open survey collected 10,800 responses and was promoted through multiple channels, including Calgary Transit’s website, a news release, and social media. Customers were asked to indicate their level of support for the Free Fare Zone and to share preferences regarding its future.

Figure 2: Public opinion survey results



Survey results indicate strong overall support for the Free Fare Zone, though respondents living near the zone and frequent transit users were significantly over-represented. Most respondents (77%) find the Free Fare Zone somewhat or very useful.

Support for using funding from property taxes to keep the Free Fare Zone is mixed. While 63% of frequent transit users support using tax funding, support drops to 47% among infrequent users and 28% among non-users.

While 37% of respondents reported no concerns with the Free Fare Zone, safety was the most frequently cited issue. Safety concerns were expressed by 28% of frequent users, 22% of occasional users, 33% of infrequent users, and 44% of non-users.

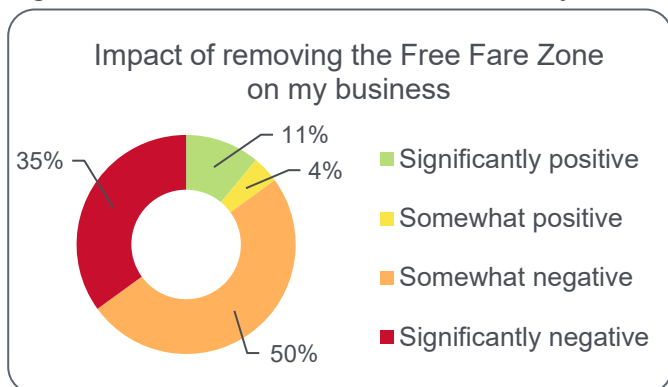
What should happen to the Free Fare Zone?	Frequent riders	Occasional riders	Infrequent riders	Non-users
Keep it the same	31%	36%	39%	29%
Expand it	45%	44%	29%	18%
Make it paid at current cost	13%	10%	17%	33%
Make it paid at lower cost	8%	7%	12%	18%
Other	3%	3%	4%	3%

Most transit users surveyed support keeping or expanding the Free Fare Zone, with frequent and occasional riders preferring expansion. Non-users were more likely to support making it a paid zone at either the current or a lower fare price.

In comments, many respondents noted they would like to see cheaper fares for shorter trips, as short trips feel too expensive. More detailed results can be found in Appendix C.

Downtown business survey

Figure 3: Downtown business owner survey results



A survey was distributed via the Calgary Downtown Association to downtown business owners between 2026 March 26 and April 7, collecting 29 responses. Results highlighted the perceived benefits of the Free Fare Zone for downtown businesses, particularly for supporting their employees and customers to move across downtown during the workday.

A combined 85% of respondents anticipated a negative outcome for their business if the Free Fare Zone were removed.

A small number of respondents believe transitioning to a paid zone may benefit the downtown core by improving safety and encouraging transit use overall. More detailed survey results can be found in Appendix C.

Post-secondary institutions

Engagement with downtown post-secondary institutions found that their employees benefit from the Free Fare Zone for short, frequent trips between work, restaurants, and services. Students and learners without comprehensive UPass coverage also benefit, particularly those in short-term or intensive programs.

Community sentiment: Impact of removing the Free Fare Zone

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some support for removing the Free Fare Zone, particularly from non-users. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong support to keep the Free Fare Zone, particularly from downtown residents and businesses.

Events and tourism

The Free Fare Zone supports tourists and event attendees to easily move through the downtown core at no cost. Tourism Calgary has noted that the Free Fare Zone is a competitive advantage for attracting events to Calgary. The benefits of the Free Fare Zone in supporting events and tourism are limited by the fact that it does not reach the BMO Centre or Stampede Park, where many events occur.



Events and tourism: Key takeaways

- Removing the Free Fare Zone could change visitors' behaviour and discourage exploration and local economic activity from attendees at downtown conferences and events.
- Alternatively, increased walking and pedestrian activity could improve downtown vibrancy.
- Calgary Transit already has agreements with some events outside the Free Fare Zone. These agreements could be expanded but would require additional funding.

Events supported by the Free Fare Zone

Tourism Calgary emphasized that larger events rely on downtown mobility and that delegate dispersal increases as event size grows. While it is unlikely that conference attendees are unable to pay a fare, some may be dissuaded from exploring or switch to other modes of transportation if the zone is no longer free. The Free Fare Zone supports many events at the TELUS Convention Centre but does not extend to the BMO Centre or Stampede Park. With the entertainment district increasingly shifting toward the Stampede area, the Free Fare Zone may be less influential in supporting the attraction of events.

Supporting events outside the Free Fare Zone

Calgary Transit has an agreement with Tourism Calgary that supports transit travel between downtown and the BMO Centre, but this is currently only in place for a small number of events (approximately 10 of 200). If the Free Fare Zone is removed, Calgary Transit could explore expanding these agreements or pursue other options to integrate transit access for event attendees into their event credentials – however, this would require additional funding.

Events and tourism: Impact of removing the Free Fare Zone

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May encourage walking as an alternative, increasing downtown vibrancy. • Reduces inequity of providing free transit to tourists and conference attendees who can usually afford to pay transit fares. • Creates fairness for events that are within the Free Fare Zone and those that are not. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May discourage exploration and local economic activity from attendees at downtown conferences and events. • Could impact Calgary's competitive advantage in event attraction.

Environment and congestion

Public transit provides a transportation option that reduces traffic congestion and improves air quality. The Free Fare Zone allows riders to take short trips across downtown without driving or hailing a car. If the Free Fare Zone were removed, the impact on environmental outcomes and traffic congestion heavily depends on behaviour changes and the alternative options people would use to reach their destination.



Environment and congestion: Key takeaways

- Impacts on the environment and congestion are highly dependent on transportation options people would use instead of the Free Fare Zone.
- Greenhouse gas emission impacts are likely minimal on a city-wide scale, given the relatively small geographic area of the zone.
- While there would be an immediate dip in short transit trips downtown if the Free Fare Zone is removed, addressing safety concerns should increase overall public transit use in the long term.

Congestion and parking

34% of people who use the Free Fare Zone would look for another way to travel in the downtown core if the zone were removed. Some may choose to walk, bike or scooter – while others may drive or hail a ride, which could increase car use and traffic congestion.

Currently, some Calgarians commute to work by driving to parking lots on the edge of downtown and riding the Free Fare Zone to get to their destination. Removing the Free Fare Zone could reduce parking at these downtown-edge parking lots – some may choose to purchase a transit pass and start their trip closer to home, which would change the distribution of parking across the city. Others may choose to drive and pay for parking downtown, which would increase parking pressures in the downtown core.

Environment and congestion: Impact of removing the Free Fare Zone

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City-wide transit use should increase in the long term if safety concerns are addressed, which would reduce overall congestion and greenhouse gas emissions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential increase in car trips and ride hailing in the downtown core, which could lead to a slight increase in greenhouse gas emissions. • Potential increased pressure on downtown parking and traffic congestion.

Ridership & equity

This focus area evaluates how the Free Fare Zone impacts transit riders, including ridership and equity.

Ridership

In 2025, about 38% of all CTrain boardings started at stations in the Free Fare Zone. Findings from our customer intercept survey indicate that, of the passengers who board in the Free Fare Zone, 28% stay within the zone for their entire trip. This represents about 5.4 million trips per year, out of a total 50.4 million CTrain boardings across the network.



Ridership: Key takeaways

- 34% of people who use the Free Fare Zone would look for another way to travel if the zone were removed, which could result in 1.8 million fewer trips per year, particularly at peak times.
- There may be a long-term positive impact on ridership if removing the Free Fare Zone improved perceptions of safety, since safety is consistently described as a barrier to using transit.

Potential decreases in ridership

Our jurisdictional scan found free fare zones consistently lead to increased ridership, so it is expected that ridership would decrease if it were removed. Of customer intercept survey respondents, 34% said they would find an alternative to using transit. This could mean up to 1.8 million fewer CTrain trips per year and up to 10% fewer downtown boardings, with the biggest decrease expected during weekday mornings.

Potential increases in ridership

Calgary Transit focus groups found that transit users and non-users would take transit more often if it felt safe, predictable and reliable, particularly downtown. Safety was repeatedly described as the gatekeeper variable, meaning ridership gains from service expansion, pricing, or messaging are limited unless safety issues downtown are addressed first. Therefore, there may be a positive impact on ridership if perceptions of public safety improved because of removing the Free Fare Zone.

Ridership: Impact of removing the Free Fare Zone

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ridership should increase long term if perceptions of safety improve. • Reduced crowding during peak times would improve the experience for fare-paying customers. • Requiring fare purchases would improve Calgary Transit's ability to collect ridership data for service planning purposes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likely reduction in Calgary Transit ridership in the short term. • Lower ridership could impact transit system efficiency, such as cost per trip and vehicle utilization.

Equity

At The City of Calgary, equity means adjusting conditions to reflect people's diverse needs, strengths, and social realities. It requires recognizing that different barriers, often systemic, affect individuals and groups in different ways. Equity discussions require nuance, as people experience overlapping barriers related to poverty, mobility, safety, mental health, age, and systemic inequities. These must be weighed carefully when evaluating the benefits of maintaining free fares and the consequences of their removal.



Equity: Key takeaways

- Many services – such as crisis supports, the courthouse, homeless shelters, and social service agencies – are located within or near the Free Fare Zone.
- Removing the zone would negatively impact individuals who cannot afford a ticket and face barriers to getting a low-income transit pass – the Free Fare Zone supports them to take trips in a specific area, but it does not address broader transportation barriers for trips outside of the zone.
- The Participation and Integration in the Community program helps reduce barriers to accessing transit for our most vulnerable populations. This program could be expanded but would require additional funding.
- While the Free Fare Zone helps reduce cost barriers to transit use, its limited geographic scope means the benefits are concentrated downtown and are less accessible to residents travelling from other parts of the city.

Low-income transit pass program

This program provides discounted transit passes to reduce financial barriers for low-income populations, with a sliding scale that assigns a purchase price based on income. A limitation with the low-income transit pass is that eligibility requires applicants to provide residency, income and age documentation through the Fair Entry program. For some individuals, particularly those facing housing instability or difficulty accessing documents, these requirements can create barriers. From an equity perspective, the most significant impact of removing the Free Fare Zone would fall on individuals who cannot afford a ticket and do not qualify for the low-income transit pass due to eligibility constraints and documentation requirements.

Participation and Integration in the Community program

This program provides free single-ride transit tickets to Calgarians experiencing vulnerabilities who use the services of many different social service agencies. A limitation with the program is the shortage of available tickets – the number of tickets given to non-profits is limited and organizations can run out of tickets quickly. In addition, clients must travel to the organization's location in the first place to receive a single transit ticket, which can itself be a barrier. Expanding this program could offset the impacts of removing the Free Fare Zone, though additional funding would be required. The intended purpose of the program is mainly to support emergent transportation needs and would not provide stable ongoing transit support.

Community Court

Community Court is an alternative justice program that supports Calgarians who receive bylaw tickets by focusing on rehabilitation rather than punishment. People experiencing homelessness, poverty, addiction or other forms of trauma may be diverted from fines and connected to community supports instead, which sometimes includes Calgary Transit passes to support transportation needs. By helping participants address underlying needs such as housing, health and social services, the program can result in tickets being withdrawn, reducing barriers from unpaid fines and breaking cycles of repeated enforcement.

Removing the Free Fare Zone could increase transit fare infractions and therefore direct more individuals to the Community Court program. While this program provides access to critical social supports and helps break the cycle of enforcement, it may not currently have the capacity to handle higher volumes.

Equity: Impact of removing the Free Fare Zone

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced crowding on downtown trains and platforms would provide a better experience for seniors, people with mobility challenges and families. • Other fare discounts are already in place to provide reduced prices for low-income riders, seniors, students and children (free under 12 years of age). • Creates consistency across the system, regardless of geography – downtown riders who can afford to pay have to pay, as in other parts of the city. • The limited boundaries of the Free Fare Zone can be confusing and create unintended barriers for riders with disabilities, newcomers, and visitors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The biggest impact would be on low-income riders who make daily trips for essential services within the downtown core and face structural barriers to getting a low-income transit pass. • Alternative programs that can help offset the equity impacts of removing the Free Fare Zone face funding and capacity limitations. • Increased transit fare infractions, which can exacerbate stress, mental health challenges, and instability for low-income riders.

Operations

This focus areas evaluates the impact of the Free Fare Zone on Calgary Transit's ability to operate an efficient service, including train capacity, boarding efficiency, fare collection and enforcement.

Capacity and boarding efficiency

Overall, overcrowding is not a major concern in most parts of the Calgary Transit system. However, downtown stations within the Free Fare Zone are the most common source of overcrowding issues, especially during peak times.



Capacity and boarding efficiency: Key takeaways

- Removing the Free Fare Zone would reduce the volume of short trips on the CTrain downtown and would ease crowding at peak periods, especially on weekday mornings.
- Less crowding would improve the experience for fare-paying customers who are travelling to, from or across downtown.

Train capacity and crowding

The Free Fare Zone encourages higher ridership, especially among those that live and work downtown, which can increase passenger volumes on trains and platforms. While this supports overall transit use and capacity utilization, it can also lead to crowding during peak times, potentially affecting comfort and perceived service quality for paying customers. Calgary Transit focus group participants described peak-period overcrowding that disproportionately affects seniors, people with mobility challenges, and parents with strollers. Overcrowding at stations was a concern raised by only 10% of Free Fare Zone survey respondents, though this concern would likely increase over time with population growth.

Boarding efficiency

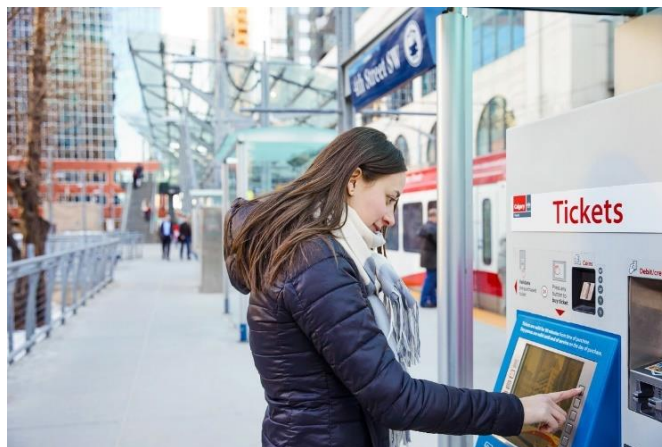
On-board fare validation systems (like Calgary Transit's bus system) require customers to pay fares or show proof-of-payment upon boarding. In these cases, Free Fare Zones can improve boarding efficiency and reduce dwell times, improving overall efficiency. However, since the CTrain operates on a proof-of-payment system with multi-door boarding, removing the Free Fare Zone is not expected to meaningfully impact boarding efficiency.

Capacity and boarding efficiency: Impact of removing the Free Fare Zone

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased train capacity and reduced crowding at peak times, especially on weekday mornings. • Improved passenger data for planning. • No expected impact on boarding efficiency. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None

Fare collection and enforcement

The fare structure defines what, how and when riders are required to pay for transit. Fare evasion occurs when those rules are not followed, and fare enforcement is the mechanism used to uphold them. The Free Fare Zone creates a geography-based zoned transit system within Calgary, where fares are different prices for different types of trips.



Fare collection and enforcement: Key takeaways

- Eliminating the Free Fare Zone would mean riders would need to pay the full transit fare even for short trips downtown, though this is already the case in other parts of the city.
- Removing the Free Fare Zone creates the need for fare enforcement downtown, where it is not currently required – this would not impact officer deployment since there is already a dedicated downtown team.
- Increased fare compliance could generate additional revenue for Calgary Transit.
- Delineating fare paid zones on downtown train platforms would require clear signage and thoughtful infrastructure changes, particularly since platforms are integrated into the public realm.

Fare evasion

Current fare evasion rates across the system are estimated at 11%, representing approximately \$17 million in lost revenue annually. The jurisdictional scan found that people boarding within a free fare zone and riding outside of it leads to higher rates of fare evasion. While fare evasion will remain a challenge for Calgary Transit with or without the Free Fare Zone, evasion rates may decline if the zone is removed.

Fare enforcement

Although fare enforcement is not currently required in the Free Fare Zone, there is a dedicated team of transit peace officers that supports the downtown area. Officer deployment would therefore not be impacted if the Free Fare Zone were removed, but fare enforcement would be a new responsibility of the downtown team.

Effective fare enforcement would require signage and clearly-defined boundaries between public and fare paid areas, which is more complicated on open downtown platforms. To effectively delineate paid zones from the public realm, additional analysis would be required to fully assess different options, costs and implementation timing. It would also require coordination with Emergency Management & Community Safety to inform design standards and enforcement considerations.

Fare collection and evasion: Impact of removing the Free Fare Zone

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May improve fare compliance from riders currently boarding inside the Free Fare Zone and riding beyond the zone without a fare. • A single fare structure is easier for customers to understand and navigate, particularly for infrequent riders and visitors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Riders would pay the same price to travel short distances downtown, which may be perceived as unfair – though this is already the case in other parts of the transit system. • Downtown stations were designed to be integrated into the public realm – thoughtful changes to infrastructure would be required to clearly delineate the fare paid zones. • Fare enforcement on the trains may be challenging due to the short distance between downtown stations.

Financial

This focus area evaluates the impact of the Free Fare Zone on Calgary Transit's financial wellbeing, including fare revenue, non-fare revenue and costs.

Fare revenues

Fare revenue is generated from the sale of tickets and passes. Changes in fare revenue are driven by increases or decreases in ridership, fare prices and fare evasion rates. Calgary's Free Fare Zone reduces fare revenue by effectively providing a subsidy for people to ride free within the zone.



Fare revenues: Key takeaways

- About 23% of Free Fare Zone riders said they would pay a fare if the zone were removed, which would increase fare revenue by up to \$5 million per year (43% of zone users already pay fare).
- Maintaining a separate downtown zone at a lower fare price would also create new revenue, but not as much as the regular fare option. For example, a \$2.00 fare for trips within downtown would increase revenue by up to \$2.5 million per year.

Increased fare revenue

Based on results of the customer intercept survey, 43% of Free Fare Zone riders already hold a transit pass or ticket. This suggests that a large portion of existing riders would not generate any new fare revenue if the zone were no longer free. The estimated \$5 million in new revenue expected from removing the Free Fare Zone is associated with the 23% of trips identified in the intercept survey where customers indicated they would pay a fare if the zone was removed. Additional fare revenue could also be generated in the long-term if ridership increased because of improved perceptions of safety and if fare evasion rates decreased.

Reduced fare option

As an alternative option, Council could choose to maintain a separate downtown zone at a reduced price. This would provide the safety benefits of giving lawful authority for officers to manage disruptions earlier. However, it would still introduce a fare where none existed previously and would create a more confusing fare structure for customers. The table shows impacts of charging a regular fare versus a reduced fare – these are estimates, and the elasticity of additional riders who would pay a fare at lower rates is not known.

Fare Paid Zone (regular \$4.00 adult fare)	Fare Paid Zone (reduced \$2.00 fare)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implemented by August 1, 2026 • Customers pay standard fare for trips across the transit system • \$5 million in new fare revenue per year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implemented by January 1, 2027 • Customers pay reduced fare for trips within the downtown zone (current Free Fare Zone) • \$2.5 million in new fare revenue per year

Given the additional complexity, implementing a reduced fare zone would require a longer implementation timeframe, with the earliest implementation date being January 1, 2027. Implementing this change in the middle of winter would not be ideal for the customer experience, as some transit riders would need to establish new routines and transportation choices.

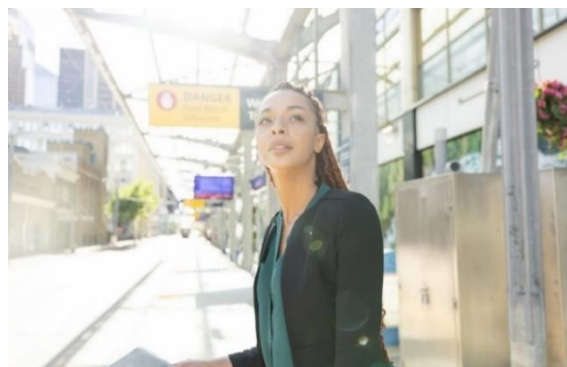
Calgary Transit is working on an updated fare strategy, which will include more in-depth analysis of options for the overall fare structure, for Council’s consideration in 2027.

Fare revenue: Impact of removing the Free Fare Zone

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Estimated increase in fare revenue by up to \$5 million (or \$2.5 million at a reduced price), which could be reinvested in other programs and services. • May lead to increased ridership in the long term due to improved perceptions of safety, which would further increase revenue. • May help reduce fare evasion rates overall, leading to some additional revenue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None

Non-fare revenues

Non-fare revenue refers to revenue generated by Calgary Transit from sources other than transit tickets and passes, including advertising, sponsorships, activations, partnerships, parking and fines. Non-fare revenue makes up a small portion (4%) of Calgary Transit’s overall revenue.



Non-fare revenues: Key takeaways

- Non-fare revenue would largely be unaffected if the Free Fare Zone were removed.
- Downtown CTrain stations are in a high ridership and high-visibility part of the city that attracts sponsorship and advertising regardless of whether the zone is free or not.
- Sponsorships and partnerships are often connected to major events, product releases and film premieres. These partnerships are largely supported through bulk purchase discounts for event organizers, which is unrelated to the Free Fare Zone.

Advertising, partnerships and activations

The concentration of downtown events and festivals creates opportunities for advertising, partnerships and activations. Calgary Transit has multiple advertising contractors that manage assets within the Free Fare Zone and other areas, including Pattison, Astral (Bell Media) and FarWest Outdoor. Advertising contracts often include responsibility for the maintenance of transit shelters, benches, and digital displays. Due to high foot traffic, downtown will always be attractive for activation (e.g. pop-up events), filming and advertising.

Sponsorship

Calgary Transit has explored a range of sponsorship opportunities to generate non-fare revenue. Some opportunities did not attract the market’s attention, while the Free Fare Zone did. Calgary Transit could seek another sponsorship agreement for the 7th Avenue transitway in the future, even if the Free Fare Zone were removed. Sponsorship deals are complex negotiations that require significant legal and procurement resources, as well as administrative resources for ongoing contract management. We have also experienced the risk of contract termination before the expiration date, and frequent changes in sponsorship can create customer confusion and the need to update all public-facing materials and technologies.

Non-fare revenue: Impact of removing the Free Fare Zone

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertisers may be more interested in downtown stations if safety is improved, as advertisers may avoid locations with safety concerns or negative public perception. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None – downtown stations will always be attractive, regardless of the Free Fare Zone.

Costs

Operating costs represent the ongoing funding required to deliver day-to-day transit service. Capital costs, by contrast, reflect long-term investments in vehicles, stations, facilities and infrastructure. Overall, removing the Free Fare Zone would not significantly change the operating or capital costs of running Calgary Transit.



Costs: Key takeaways

- Overall, there are no significant operating or capital cost impacts to remove the Free Fare Zone.
- Implementation would require between \$730 thousand and \$1 million in one-time costs for new signage and ground marking to distinguish fare paid zones on downtown platforms.
- Transit peace officer deployment would not be impacted as there is already a dedicated downtown team.

New signage costs

Eliminating the Free Fare Zone would require one-time investment to communicate fare rules and enforcement boundaries. Clearly delineating station areas from the public realm would require further assessment to determine appropriate materials, signage placement, design standards and phasing. Given variations in station layout, implementation costs are expected to vary by station. The total cost is estimated between \$730 thousand to \$1 million, though actual costs will depend on final design requirements. There would also be some minimal increased operating costs to maintain the new signage infrastructure.

Transit peace officers

Transit peace officer staffing levels or costs would not be expected to increase solely as a result of removing the Free Fare Zone, and there is already a dedicated downtown team. Increasing the number of officers on the transit system would support overall safety outcomes, though this need is unchanged whether there is a Free Fare Zone or not.

Costs: Impact of removing the Free Fare Zone

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No change to ongoing operating costs of Calgary Transit. • Increased train capacity at peak times could help avoid future cost increases. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation would require between \$730 thousand to \$1 million in one-time capital costs for new signage and ground markings.

Conclusion

The Free Fare Zone creates interconnected benefits and challenges across safety, community, ridership, equity, operations and financials. There are some significant benefits and trade-offs with keeping or removing the zone. The table below provides an overall snapshot of how removing the Free Fare Zone would impact performance in key areas. The expected improvement in overall perceptions of safety on transit is the key driver for the recommendation to remove the Free Fare Zone.

Performance snapshot: Impact of removing the Free Fare Zone

Impact area	Measures	Estimated impact of removing the Free Fare Zone
Safety & community		
Safety and security	Perception of safety on transit	Improve over time
Community sentiment	Downtown resident support	Low support
	Downtown business support	Low support
	Non-user support	Moderate support
Events and tourism	Downtown event attraction	Potential decrease
Environment and congestion	Traffic congestion	Potential slight increase
	Greenhouse gas emissions	Potential slight increase
Ridership & equity		
Ridership	CTrain trips downtown	4% reduction (especially at peak times)
	Boardings at downtown stations	10% reduction (especially at peak times)
	Overall Calgary Transit ridership	Potential increase in long-term
Equity	Impact on downtown vulnerable populations	Negative impact
	Ability-to-pay fare model alignment	More aligned
Operations		
Capacity and boarding efficiency	Boarding efficiency	No change
	CTrain capacity	Increased capacity
	Crowding on trains and platforms	Reduced crowding
Fare collection and enforcement	Fare structure complexity	Reduced complexity
	Fare evasion rates	Potential decrease
Financial		
Fare revenues	Total annual fare revenue	Up to \$5 million increase
Non-fare revenues	Total annual non-fare revenue	No change
Costs	Operating costs	No change
	Capital costs	\$730 thousand to \$1 million for signage and ground marking

Implementation considerations

Both options of keeping or removing the Free Fare Zone carry implementation risks that can be mitigated with clear communication and ongoing monitoring of impacts. The analysis in this report relies on predicting how customers will change behaviour and adjust their travel patterns. With either option, it will be important to continue monitoring trends and performance to ensure desired outcomes are being achieved.

Appendix A: CTrain map

Below is a map of CTrain routes and stations, which shows the current Free Fare Zone and the stations that fall within the zone.



CTrain Map



FREQUENCY OF SERVICE IN MINUTES

Weekdays			
AM Peak	Midday	PM Peak	Evening
4-7	10	10	15

Saturday and Sunday	
Day	Evening
10-15	10-15

Appendix B: Engagement summary

Category	Engaged group	Date
Surveys	Customer intercept survey	Nov 15 to 30, 2026
	Public opinion survey	Feb 15 to Mar 8, 2026
	Downtown business owners survey	Mar 26 to Apr 7, 2026
Business and tourism	Tourism Calgary	Feb 27, 2026
	Chamber of Commerce	Feb 19, 2026
	Calgary Economic Development	Feb 19, 2026
	Calgary Downtown Association	Feb 19, 2026
	Calgary Downtown Association – business owners	Mar 5, 2026
	Calgary Municipal Land Corporation	Feb 19, 2026
	Bow Valley College	Feb 17, 2026
	University of Calgary	Mar 4, 2026
	TELUS Convention Centre	Mar 2, 2026
	Building Owners and Managers Association of Calgary	Feb 20, 2026
	Real Estate Sector Advisory Committee	Feb 20, 2026
Community organizations	Vibrant Communities Calgary	Jan 26, 2026
	The Alex	Jan 26, 2026
	Alpha House	Mar 6, 2026
	Calgary Drop-In Centre	Mar 6, 2026
	Salvation Army	Mar 6, 2026
	The Mustard Seed	Mar 6, 2026
	Inn From the Cold	Mar 6, 2026
	Calgary Distress Centre-SORCe	Mar 6, 2026
	Wood's Homes	Mar 6, 2026
	CUPS	Mar 6, 2026
	Calgary Homeless Foundation	Mar 6, 2026
	Calgary Navigation Centre	Mar 6, 2026
City of Calgary internal teams	Emergency Management & Community Safety	Multiple meetings
	Calgary Police Service	Jan 20, 2026
	Transit peace officers	Dec 16, 2026
	Transit Operations Centre	Dec 11, 2026
	Transit Revenue Streams	Feb 4, 2026
	Transit Analytics	Multiple meetings
	Transit operators	Mar 10, 2026
	Community Strategies	Multiple meetings
	Homelessness and Downtown Initiatives	Feb 20, 2026
	Downtown Strategy	Feb 20, 2026
	Operational Services – Service Excellence	Jan 1, 2026
	Calgary Parking	Feb 27, 2026

Appendix C: Detailed survey results

Customer intercept survey

The customer intercept survey was conducted at all CTrain platforms within the Free Fare Zone between November 15 and 30, 2025. The survey captured weekday and weekend travel across all times of day, resulting in approximately 6,000 responses.

Rider frequency	Survey respondents
Frequent	83%
Occasional	14%
Rare/never	3%

Free Fare Zone trip location	Survey respondents
Start and end in the zone	28%
Start or end outside the zone	72%

Trip purpose	Survey respondents
Work	56%
School	11%
Social/recreation	11%
Shopping	9%
Medical/personal	5%
To/from downtown	2%
Other	6%

Mode of arrival to downtown	Survey respondents
Live/stay downtown	43%
Train	42%
Bus	7%
Drive and park	7%
Other	1%

Impact of Free Fare Zone removal on rider behaviour	Survey respondents
Would pay a fare	23%
Would find an alternative	34%
Have a monthly/other pass	44%

Trip purpose	Weekdays	Weekends	Morning rush (6:00-9:00am)	Evening rush (3:30-6:30pm)	Mid-day and off peak
% that are commuting to work	62%	45%	71%	66%	43%
% trips that are school related	11%	13%	8%	11%	13%
% trips that are social or recreational	10%	14%	8%	7%	15%
% trips that are for shopping	7%	13%	2%	9%	15%

Characteristics of riders	Weekdays	Weekends	Morning rush (6:00-9:00am)	Evening rush (3:30-6:30pm)	Mid-day and off peak
% that live or are staying downtown	30%	68%	59%	27%	38%
% that are non-downtown residents	70%	32%	41%	73%	62%
% who already hold a transit pass	46%	38%	25%	51%	38%
% who would pay a fare if required	24%	21%	11%	31%	22%
% who would find an alternative if the zone were no longer free	30%	40%	64%	18%	30%

Public opinion survey

A public opinion survey was conducted from 2026 February 15 to March 8 to assess sentiment toward the Free Fare Zone. The open survey collected 10,800 responses and was promoted through multiple channels, including Calgary Transit's website, a news release and social media.

Do you regularly take transit?	Survey respondents
Frequent (several times a week)	55%
Occasional (couple times a week or a month)	24%
Infrequent (a few times a year)	19%
Non-user	3%

Do you live within walking distance of the Free Fare Zone?	Survey respondents	General population (2019)
Yes	26%	1%
No	74%	99%

Is free CTrain service in the Free Fare Zone useful to you?	Frequent riders	Occasional riders	Infrequent riders	Non-users
Very useful	63%	68%	47%	21%
Somewhat useful	15%	16%	27%	14%
Not very useful	8%	7%	11%	10%
Not useful at all	14%	9%	15%	54%

Reported Free Fare Zone concerns about:	Frequent riders	Occasional riders	Infrequent riders	Non-users
Safety concerns with the zone being free	28%	22%	33%	44%
Not benefitting all Calgarians	18%	16%	20%	30%
Not supporting those with the highest financial need	10%	9%	10%	16%
Taking funding from other priorities	10%	9%	14%	26%
Causing overcrowding on trains during peak times	12%	7%	10%	12%
No concerns	49%	55%	48%	30%

What should happen to the Free Fare Zone?	Frequent riders	Occasional riders	Infrequent riders	Non-users
Keep it the same	31%	36%	39%	29%
Expand it	45%	44%	29%	18%
Make it paid at current cost	13%	10%	17%	33%
Make it paid at lower cost	8%	7%	12%	18%
Other	3%	3%	4%	3%

Do you think funding from property taxes should be allocated to keep the Free Fare Zone in place?	Frequent riders	Occasional riders	Infrequent riders	Non-users
Yes	63%	64%	47%	28%
No	37%	36%	53%	72%

Downtown business owner survey

A survey was distributed via the Calgary Downtown Association to downtown business owners between 2026 March 26 and April 7, collecting 29 responses.

Number of employees	Survey respondents
1-5 employees	17%
6-15 employees	37%
16-50 employees	13%
51-99 employees	10%
100-499 employees	23%

Type of business	Survey respondents
Food and beverage	7%
Retail	14%
Other	79%

Business front entrance located directly on 7 th Avenue	Survey respondents
Yes	33%
No	67%

Free Fare Zone impact on my business	Survey respondents
Positive impact	80%
Neutral impact	12%
Negative impact	8%

How the Free Fare Zone supports my business	Survey respondents
Easier access for employees	28%
Increased foot traffic	22%
More visitors during events	22%
Improved customer experience	22%
Does not support my business	3%
Inhibits my business	1%
Other	1%

Impact of removing the Free Fare Zone on my business	Survey respondents
Significantly positive	11%
Somewhat positive	4%
Somewhat negative	50%
Significantly negative	35%

Appendix D: Strategic alignment

Across City strategies, plans, and bylaws, the Free Fare Zone generally supports affordability, downtown vibrancy, climate action and social inclusion. Removing it generally supports safety, financial sustainability, ability-to-pay fare policy and fare enforcement clarity. Most strategic documents do not mention the Free Fare Zone directly – policy outcomes if the Free Fare Zone were removed depend on changes to user behaviour and how any new revenue is reinvested in service elsewhere.

Strategic alignment analysis:

Theme and documents	Keep Free Fare Zone	Remove Free Fare Zone
Financial sustainability RouteAhead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foregone revenue from transit customers who ride within downtown for free. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports long-term financial sustainability through new fare revenue. No impact on non-fare revenue.
Safety, fare enforcement Transit Bylaw, Transit Public Safety Strategy, RouteAhead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limits lawful placement and enforcement tools that can be used to manage disruptive behaviour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthens enforcement authority and safety management. Creates an opportunity to reinvest in additional peace officers.
Equity and accessibility Social Wellbeing Policy, Enough for All, Housing Strategy, RouteAhead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduces transportation costs for some low-income downtown riders. Raises concerns about consistency, as Free Fare Zone benefits are limited to downtown. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aligns with RouteAhead’s direction toward ability-to-pay fare models rather than geography-based discounts. Increases cost barriers for some low-income downtown riders. Creates an opportunity to reinvest in transit service for Calgarians experiencing vulnerabilities.
Climate and downtown revitalization Greater Downtown Plan, Calgary Transportation Plan, Climate Strategy, Downtown Parking Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourages short-trip transit use downtown rather than driving. Supports downtown vibrancy, connectivity and economic activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential slight increase to car trips downtown. Encourages walking in the downtown core, which supports vibrancy. Should increase overall transit use in the long term by addressing safety concerns.