

If this information is required in an accessible format, please contact 1-800-372-1102 ext. 3702



The Regional Municipality of Durham Report

To: Durham Region Transit Executive Committee
From: General Manager, Durham Region Transit
Report: #2023-DRT-18
Date: September 6, 2023

Subject:

Specialized transit update

Recommendation:

That the Transit Executive Committee recommends

That this report be received for information.

Report:

1. Purpose

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide the Transit Executive Committee (TEC) an overview of the current delivery of Specialized transit and a summary of the feedback received during recent customer engagement sessions.

2. Background

2.1 Specialized transit, operating since DRT was formed in 2006, is a demand responsive service available to eligible customers in accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

2.2 The AODA transportation standard, part of Ontario Regulation 191/11, Integrated Accessibility Standards (IAS), is intended to remove barriers to persons with disabilities to ensure equity for all customers in accessing and using public transit. Eligibility requirements specified in the transportation standard are based on the abilities of a person, not the person's disabilities. A person may qualify for Specialized transit services when the person is unable to access and use conventional transit services.

Equity is the foundation of the AODA and the delivery of public transit services. One person should not be advantaged over another person when using public transit. For example, two residents travelling from the same address to the same destination are expected to be provided equitable access to public transit. Specialized transit services complement conventional transit services for people who are unable to use the conventional services for all or part of the intended trip.

- 2.3 On September 28, 2020, DRT launched the Phase 1 recovery service plan as part of DRT's ridership recovery framework. The service plan included On Demand, a demand responsive service, operating in low ridership zones within urban areas and rural areas across the Region. DRT On Demand was supported by the launch of a new technology platform, one of the TEC approved recommendations arising from the rural transit review in June 2020.
- 2.4 In October 2021, TEC approved the transition to a single demand response service, amalgamating Specialized transit and On Demand services.
- 2.5 On June 1, 2022, the new contractor began delivery of On Demand, including Specialized transit services. All vehicles are now DRT-branded and easily identified by customers and residents, and operators are uniformed and trained to provide a consistent DRT customer experience. To maximize efficiencies and the effectiveness of the service, On Demand and Specialized transit customers may travel on the same vehicle. This process improves the efficiency of service and provides additional capacity to deliver more customer trips.
- 2.6 In August 2022, two significant service model changes were initiated. First, as part of the renewal of the Collective Agreement between Unifor Local 222 and DRT, demand response service delivery would be fully contracted out. Separately, DRT transitioned all demand response service, Specialized transit and On Demand, to a single software platform.

3. Previous Reports and Decisions

- 3.1 TEC approved recommendations of Report #2020-DRT-12 DRT Rural Review, which included:
 - a. a new On Demand technology platform to support the scheduling and dispatching of both Specialized transit and On Demand trips;
 - b. combining the delivery of On Demand and Specialized transit based on their complementary delivery model; and
 - c. DRT branded vehicles and uniformed operators/drivers for On Demand.

- 3.2 TEC approved recommendations of Report #2021-DRT-25 Demand Responsive Services, which included:
- a. integrating Specialized and On Demand services into a single On Demand service;
 - b. improving the integration of all DRT services towards a “one DRT” customer experience; and
 - c. implementing an automated dispatching software and related app for the seamless integration of On Demand and Specialized transit trip bookings that can meet both customer and business/operational requirements.
- 3.3 Report# 2022-DRT-13 Update to Demand Response Services, provided a status update for the transition to a single demand response service, including the new system platform and contracted service delivery.
- 3.4 Council approved of DRT’s 2023 Budget and Business Plans (Report #2023-F-9) which included significant increases to revenue service hours, including investments in overall On Demand service delivery to meet demand.

4. Discussion

Specialized transit customer engagement sessions

- 4.1 In response to requests from customers and to resume dedicated engagement with Specialized transit customers, sessions were held in-person on Monday, May 15, 2023, at the Abilities Centre in Whitby, and virtually on Thursday, May 18, 2023.
- 4.2 The engagement sessions were coordinated to:
- a. update customers on Specialized transit;
 - b. listen to customer experiences with Specialized transit during the previous six months; and
 - c. identify customer priorities.
- 4.3 Approximately 2,350 invitations were mailed to all active customers registered with Specialized transit, inviting them to participate in the sessions and/or submit feedback to DRT. Approximately 50 people (2 per cent) attended either the in-person drop-in, the virtual session, or submitted comments through email.
- 4.4 DRT contracted with a consultant specializing in collaborative planning, facilitation, and bringing people together to engage in meaningful conversations.

The consultant assisted to coordinate and plan the engagements and facilitated conversations and interactions with participants. DRT staff were present to respond to questions, but mainly provided logistical support during the engagements.

4.5 Participants shared their views of what has worked well, their recommended areas for improvement, and their priorities for the future. Several themes emerged during the consultations and are summarized below, including the applicable DRT response or actions planned or already in place.

4.5.1 Theme: Service Availability

Concern: Limited availability of specialized trips, including last minute trip requests.

DRT Response or Action:

- DRT continues to deploy additional On Demand budgeted revenue hours, including planned annual increases as part of the 2023-2032 service plan.
- Any new conventional service routes, such as those planned to be implemented September 5, 2023, enable DRT to redeploy On Demand resources to meet emerging demand pressures. DRT also reviews ridership and travel demand on a regular basis to match capacity with demand where possible to increase service availability.
- Consistent with the trend across the DRT network, Specialized transit trips by active customer has recovered to pre-COVID levels. On average, active customers completed 14.6 trips in April 2023 compared to 14.3 trips in April 2019.

4.5.2 Theme: Service Reliability

Concern: Last minute trip cancellations

DRT Response or Action:

- During Spring 2023 DRT experienced service availability and reliability challenges within internal operations. Revisions to operational planning mitigated unplanned trip cancellations during Summer 2023 and this positive trend is expected to continue into Fall 2023.

- Unplanned incidents on the road network, including vehicle breakdowns and other events impacting traffic that are beyond the control of DRT, will continue to occur and require DRT to cancel or shift trips. These operational challenges generally impact all DRT operations.

4.5.3 Theme: Equipment/Infrastructure

- a. Concern: Some vehicles have ramps that are hard to use

DRT Response or Action:

- All vehicles used by DRT comply with the accessibility requirements as outlined by the Ontario Highway Traffic Act, R.R.O. 1990, Reg. 629: Accessible Vehicles. The act prescribes requirements for accessible passenger vehicles and buses in Ontario, including ramp inclines.

- b. Concern: Contracted vehicles do not have cameras

DRT Response or Action:

- DRT is currently installing the on-board surveillance system across the On Demand fleet, with work to be completed by January 2024.

4.5.4 Theme: Service to adult day programs

- a. Concern: Trip cancellations or delays impact Day Program providers, customers and families. Day Program operators have incurred overtime charges, and customers/families have been charged by Day Programs for cancelling day program reservations.

DRT Response or Action:

- On Demand, including Specialized transit, is a shared-ride public transit service, available to all eligible customers. To maximize capacity and deliver service for as many customers as possible within existing resources, all DRT trips may be shared with multiple customers. As a shared ride service, some variability in pick up and drop off times is expected as customer trip requests are scheduled in real-time and can be incorporated on a vehicle with an ongoing trip. DRT observe a drop off or pick up window of 20 minutes to

accommodate variability in traffic or other operational delays. Transit schedules, including pick up and drop off times, are not guaranteed.

- Public transit service can be impacted by various factors, and DRT implement appropriate operational actions to mitigate service disruptions and impacts to customers. DRT truly regret inconveniences to customers and the community when scheduled or planned services are impacted.

b. Concern: Request for dedicated travel to/from day programs

DRT Response or Action:

- As a public transit provider, DRT is prohibited to prioritize access to services based on trip purpose, customer abilities, or destination.
- The AODA, through article 72 of the Integrated Accessibility Standard, specifies that a service provider is prohibited to implement a policy or operational practice that limits the availability of specialized transportation services to persons with disabilities. The intent of this requirement is to prevent service providers from limiting the availability of services to people with a disability and removes unreasonable and unfair barriers that people with disabilities would not face if they were able to use conventional transportation services.
- Reserving capacity or access to On Demand to prioritize service to/from day programs would be inconsistent with the Integrated Accessibility Standard.
- A dedicated transportation services for day program participants would be consistent with a charter-type transportation service, and not a public transit service. A dedicated and separate transportation service for travel to/from day programs would require significant investment to ensure existing On Demand services and resources remain available to meet current and future travel demands of residents.

4.5.5 Theme: Eligibility process

a. Concern: Confusing regarding the eligibility form and need for a support person

DRT Response or Action:

- A recent review of the Specialized transit Processes and Policies, including eligibility documents was completed by an accessibility consultant with extensive experience in public transit and services for persons with disabilities. A summary of the review and recommendations is planned for the October 2023 TEC meeting.

4.5.6 Theme: Trip booking/operation

- a. Concern: Timing of connections with TTC Wheel Trans when travelling between Durham and Toronto

DRT Response or Action

- DRT is a member of the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) Specialized transit Working Group, and works closely with peer transit agencies to ensure consistency, such as processes to facilitate transfers of shared customers between transit agencies.
- For travel connecting with TTC Wheel-Trans, DRT coordinate with Wheel-Trans to schedule the best available trip for customers. However, both agencies manage their own operations, such as timing, policy for pickup windows and On Time Performance, and each are subject to traffic conditions within their respective jurisdictions. These factors may result in situations where a customer can expect to wait longer at a designated transfer location than originally planned.

- b. Concern: Customer trips longer than originally planned

DRT Response or Action

- Specialized transit is a shared-ride service. DRT's booking technology enables last-minute real-time bookings which increases flexibility in travel for all customers. In doing so, additional customers may be picked up mid-way through a trip, resulting in a slight increase to travel time. Starting in September 2023, the new On Demand system will ensure customer trips do not extend beyond the established pick-up windows for the trip. However unplanned events outside of DRT's control, such as increased congestion due to major road closure, may impact travel time.

- c. Concern: Operators unaware of special needs of customers

DRT Response or Action:

- On Demand drivers are trained professionals and expected to follow established policies and procedures such as securing mobility devices on the vehicle, providing assistance between the vehicle and the accessible door of a building, and being sensitive to the general needs of persons with visible or invisible disabilities. On Demand trips are assigned in real-time to in-service vehicles in consideration of various factors, and customers should expect different vehicle drivers on a regular basis.

4.5.7 Theme: Communication

a. Concern: Lack of clarity of DRT customer policies

DRT Response or Action :

- A recent review of the Specialized transit Processes and Policies, including eligibility documents was completed by an accessibility consultant with extensive experience in public transit and services for persons with disabilities. A summary of the review and recommendations is planned for the October 2023 TEC meeting.
- b. b) Concern: Customer not informed directly when a trip is cancelled

DRT Response or Action

- DRT is required and committed to communicate with customers when their scheduled trip is significantly impacted. The new DRT On Demand App, planned to be implemented Fall 2023, provides new features for all customers. For Specialized transit customers using the App, a new trip tracking tool through a mobile application will automatically inform customers of a change in their trip. Otherwise, DRT booking agents will continue to telephone customers where preferred to advise of significant trip impacts or adjustments.

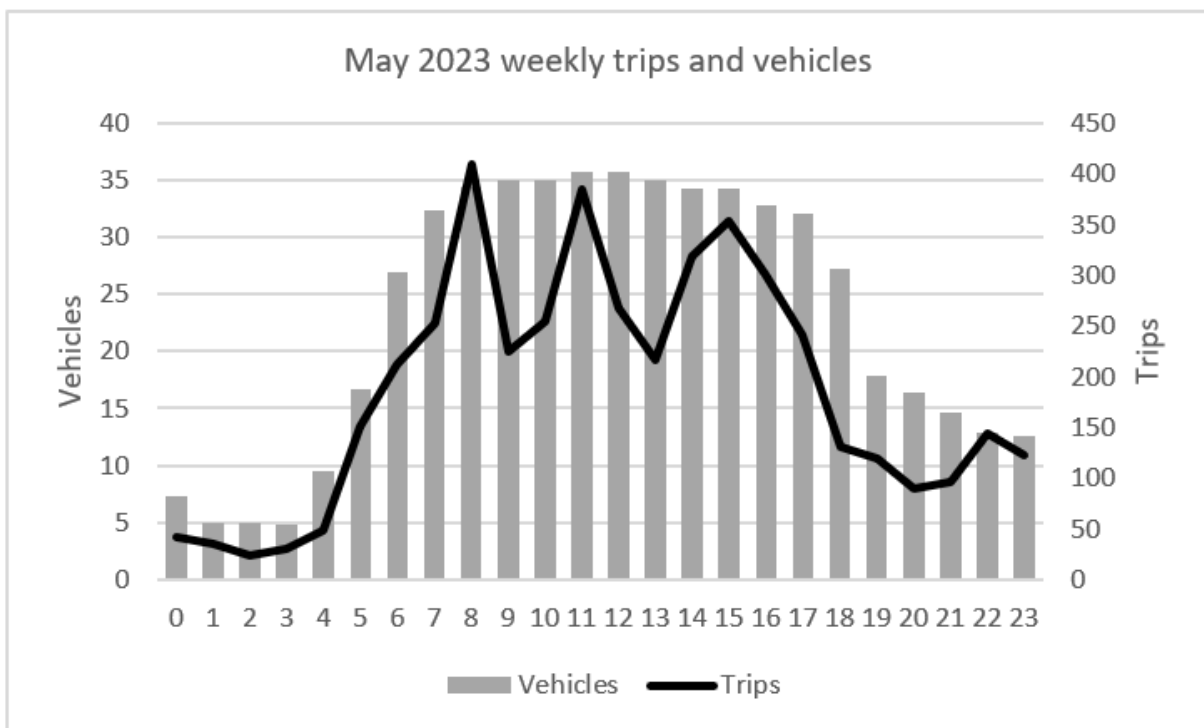
Specialized transit demand and capacity

4.6 On Demand trip demand and capacity

a. On demand trip distribution

DRT matches available capacity to demand throughout the day. Figure 1 demonstrates the number of in-service vehicles and average number of trips delivered over a 24-hour period.

Figure 1: Average number of On Demand vehicles in service and average trips delivered throughout the day, for May 2023.



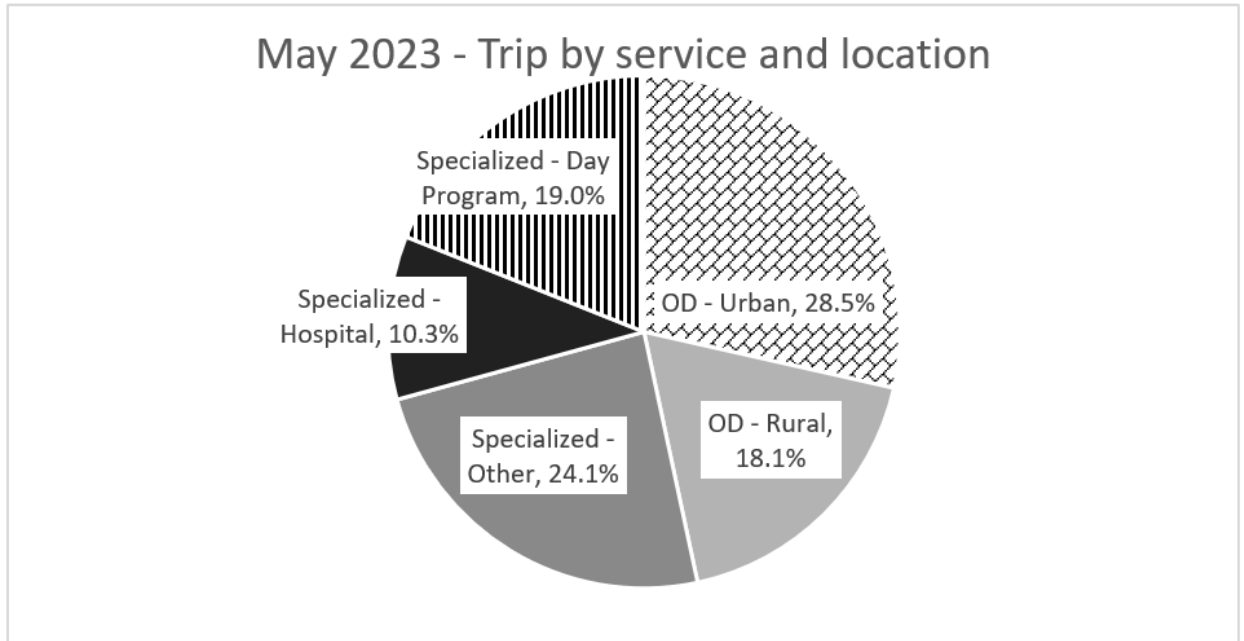
Customer demand is highest during three peak periods: 8 AM, 11 AM, and 3 PM. These peak periods coincide with highest demand for trips to day programs and hospitals. Vehicle deployment is consistent between peak periods due to operational and logistical requirements, resulting in available capacity between the peaks. Further growth pressure for travel during the daily peak would require deployment of additional vehicles. Alternatively, customers may consider travelling outside these peak periods when capacity is available.

b. On demand travel destinations

Specialized transit trips account for 53.4 percent of all On Demand trips. For May 2023, 19 per cent of all On Demand trips were Specialized transit trips to/from day programs, 10.3 per cent were specialized trips to hospitals, and 24.1 per cent were specialized trips to other destinations (Figure 2). Trips

to/from a Day Program represented 36 per cent of all Specialized transit trips, with 19 per cent to/from a hospital.

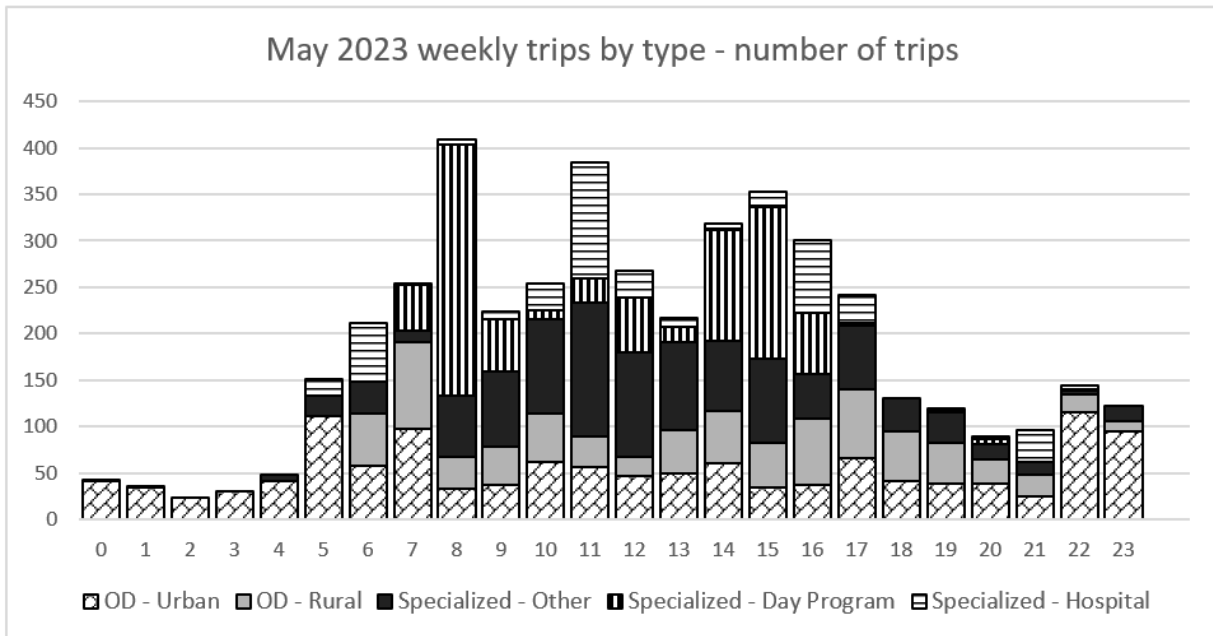
Figure 2: On Demand trips by service type and destinations (May 2023)



Travel within the On Demand Urban areas occur throughout the day, including late night and overnight when On Demand replaces local conventional service routes that are not operating (Figure 3). Demand for On Demand Rural occurs throughout the hours of operation of the service, with the highest demand during morning and afternoon peak periods.

Specialized transit peak periods occur at 8 AM, 11 AM and 3 PM. Specialized transit trips to/from Day Program happen only during morning and afternoon peak periods. Specialized transit trips to/from a Hospital occur throughout the day, with peaks at 6 AM, 11 AM and 4 PM

Figure 3: Daily distribution of On Demand trips by type and location



On Demand weekday travel in the urban and rural areas between 5 AM and 8 PM is expected to decrease in September 2023 when new conventional service is launched. On Demand capacity will remain the same in September 2023, with capacity re-directed to times and areas experiencing highest service demand.

4.7 Specialized transit trip bookings

Specialized transit customers book their trips by contacting a DRT booking agent up to seven days in advance. They can also schedule recurring trips. All On Demand trips are scheduled on a first come, first served basis because public transit in Ontario, including Specialized transit, is to be available to all residents within available capacity, regardless of the purpose of their trip.

The AODA, through article 72 of the Integrated Accessibility Standard, specifies that a service provider is prohibited to implement a policy or operational practice that limits the availability of specialized transportation services to persons with disabilities. The intent of this requirement is to prevent service providers from limiting the availability of services to people with a disability and removes unreasonable and unfair barriers that people with disabilities would not face if they were able to use conventional transportation services.

Consistent with the trend across the DRT network, Specialized transit trips by active customers has recovered to pre-COVID levels. On average, active customers completed 14.6 trips in April 2023 compared to 14.3 trips in April 2019.

5. Relationship to Strategic Plan

5.1 This report aligns with/addresses the following strategic goals and priorities in the Durham Region Strategic Plan:

a. Environmental Sustainability

- Expand sustainable and active transportation

b. Economic Prosperity

- Position Durham Region as the location of choice for business
- Enhance communication and transportation networks to better connect people and move goods more effectively

c. Service Excellence

- Optimize resources and partnerships to deliver exceptional quality services and value

6. Conclusion

6.1 DRT On Demand is a modern public transit service that continues to innovate to meet the evolving travel expectations of the community. Trips on Specialized transit by active customers has recovered to pre-COVID levels.

6.2 During engagement sessions following recent enhancements to On Demand, customers registered with Specialized transit highlighted many positive aspects of the service and network; they also shared their challenges. The engagement sessions provided an opportunity to engage with and listen to customers, and plan and implement actions and enhancements to respond to their concerns and priorities.

6.3 DRT services, including On Demand, comply to the requirements of the AODA and the Integrated Transportation Standard. Specialized transit service ensures equity for all residents to access and use public transit. Prioritizing or reserving capacity for individuals based on their disability, destination, or purpose of travel,

would limit access to public transit for other residents and is contrary to the requirements and spirit of the AODA. There are members of the community whose individual or family travel needs exceed the transportation services provided by public transit and DRT, yet these travel needs are no less important than the travel needs of other people. Solutions may be available, and they would need to be funded and delivered separately from public transit services.

Respectfully submitted,

Original Signed by

Bill Holmes
General Manager, DRT

Recommended for Presentation to Committee

Original Signed by

Elaine C. Baxter-Trahair
Chief Administrative Officer