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The Regional Municipality of Durham Report

To: Durham Region Transit Executive Committee
From: General Manager, Durham Region Transit
Report: #2025-DRT-16
Date: October 8, 2025

Subject:

Specialized Transit Eligibility Update

Recommendation:

That this report be received for information.

Report:

1. Purpose

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update on eligibility and the application process for Specialized transit

2. Background

2.1 In 2014, DRT implemented several measures to comply with the newly released requirements of the Integrated Accessibility Standards of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), to improve efficiencies, and to ensure the sustainability of Specialized transit

- a. Implementation of an updated application process to assess the abilities of applicants to meet the new AODA eligibility criteria requirements.
- b. Implementation of the integrated service model, sometimes referred to as the Family of Service model, following the retirement of the last non-accessible DRT bus in August 2014. The integrated service model is consistent with the requirements of the AODA, improves access to conventional transit for customers registered with Specialized transit, and enables transit agencies to leverage the accessible conventional network to provide equitable access for persons with disabilities.

2.2 In 2017, TEC approved a report that provided direction regarding support persons, consistent with the AODA and peer transit agencies in Ontario. When customers are unable to travel independently, they are required to provide and travel with a support person. The duties and responsibilities of DRT conventional and On Demand operators are the same, except On Demand operators will assist customers registered with Specialized transit between the vehicle and the first door at the origin/destination

- a. All DRT customers are expected to be able to use the transit system and address their own personal or medical needs. To travel safely with On Demand Specialized transit, a customer must be able to independently:
 - Attend to any personal or medical needs;
 - Be mobile (with or without a mobility device);
 - Provide valid fare, including depositing cash fare or using the appropriate transit pass product;
 - Be left unattended in a vehicle when the driver leaves to escort other customers, without the risk of existing vehicle;
 - Unlock and lock the door at the origin or destination (i.e. customer's home);
 - Communicate to the vehicle's operator verbally or with an augmentative device, in writing or with an alternative method of communication (such as when he/she is about to be dropped off at the wrong location, address of the origin or destination, emergency contact phone number);
 - Get help if dropped off at the wrong location;
 - Be ready up to 15 minutes before the scheduled pick-up time; and
 - As a shared ride service, travel for up to 1.5 hours on a vehicle with other customers without risk to self or others.
- b. Customers categorized as having temporary or conditional eligibility for Specialized transit, including customers who require a mandatory support person (MSP) to travel, may be denied specialized service when conventional service is accessible and the customer has the ability to use it.
- c. DRT implemented a "Service Agreement" process for eligible customers attending day programs or work placements, similar to what was in place at the time for Mobility Plus in York Region. The Service Agreement waives support person requirements under specific conditions for customers who are able to safely board and travel on a vehicle alone, but require support at pick-off and drop-off locations due to customer safety

2.3 Since the implementation of the Integrated Accessibility Standards, and specifically as the delivery of Specialized transit has evolved over the past ten years, many customers continue to share feedback that DRT services for customers registered with Specialized transit are noncompliant to Provincial requirements. During regular engagement sessions with residents, DRT staff share details regarding the modern deliver of public transit, including Specialized transit. Many of the recurring issues, a few of which are summarized below, were discussed at a 2023 engagement session with customers and their families.

- Concern: Last minute trip cancellations

DRT Response or Action: Unplanned incidents on the road network, including vehicle breakdowns and other events impacting traffic that are beyond the control of DRT, require DRT to cancel or shift trips. This impacts both scheduled and On Demand services.

- Concern: Trip cancellations or delays impact Day Program operators. 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 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 pick-up window of 20 minutes to accommodate some 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.

- 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. Reserving capacity or access to On Demand to prioritize

service to/from day programs, or other purposes such as medical treatment or appointments, is inconsistent with the AODA. A dedicated transportation services for day program participants would be consistent with a charter-type transportation service, and not a public transit service.

3. Previous Reports and Decisions

- 3.1 #2014-DRT-15: Durham Region Transit (DRT) Specialized transit Policy and Interpretation of Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) Standards. The information report summarized the application of the various sections of the AODA relevant to the management and deliver of Specialized transit.
- 3.2 #2017-DRT-03: Specialized transit: Review of Existing Customers' Eligibility and Requirement for Support Persons When Travelling with Durham Region Transit. TEC approved the report recommendations that resulted in a clear way forward for the delivery of Specialized transit;
- a. Customers are required to travel with a support person when unable to travel independently;
 - b. Waive the requirement for a support person for customers eligible for Specialized transit and attending day program and work placements conditional on applicable contingency customer service plans;
 - c. Complete an eligibility review for all active customers registered before January 2015 when DRT implemented AODA prescribed eligibility for Specialized Transit; and
 - d. DRT continue to coordinate with transit agencies across the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) to ensure consistency in managing and delivering Specialized transit.
- 3.3 #2023-DRT-18: Specialized transit update. The information report provided TEC with an overview of the current delivery of Specialized transit and a summary of the feedback received during recent customer engagement sessions.

4. Discussion

- 4.1 At the time of implementing the Service Agreement in 2017, applicants were enabled to by-pass the Specialized transit eligibility criteria process, resulting in some applicants receiving preferential access to DRT services to attend day programs only. As part of a recent process review, it was identified that some customers with Service Agreements do not qualify for Specialized transit based on established eligibility criteria.

- 4.2 To ensure equity within the eligibility process, DRT recently discontinued the “Service Agreement” only practice, and all applicants for Specialized transit must now complete the full application for Specialized transit. Applicants must first be eligible for Specialized transit, and then they are assessed for eligibility for a Service Agreement. The current application process continues to include a section for a Service Agreement for eligible customers. This change does not require applicants to make additional appointments with their health care provider. At the time of completing the application for Specialized transit, the health care provider is expected to provide the information needed for the Service Agreement on the same application.
- 4.3 Since revising the Service Agreement process, DRT has received requests to appeal Service Agreement decisions. The eligibility appeal process is specific to the eligibility decisions made by DRT, and not the application of the Service Agreement to attend day programs.
- 4.4 Before making the most recent revisions to the application process, staff engaged with neighboring transit agencies to ensure best practices and to ensure consistent customer experiences, as customer regularly travel and transfer between transit agencies
- a. DRT’s revised process is most closely aligned with the Toronto Transit Comision (TTC) and Wheel Transit. Wheel Trans implemented a Do Not Leave Unattended (DNLU) Policy, which applies to customers who can board and ride Wheel Trans independently and safely, but due to safety reasons cannot be left unattended at a destination. This policy requires a designated attendant at a facility to be present upon arrival at the destination, and the operator will only hand off the customer to an approved attendant. For other occasional trips using Wheel Trans, the customer requires a mandatory support person. DRT’s Service Agreement policy is consistent with the DNLU policy of Wheel Trans.
 - b. Mobility on Request, a service of York Region Transit, continues to provide a “day program only” eligibility category; however, this model has created significant capacity challenges for the transit service. With this model, customers can by-pass the specialized transit eligibility process. Currently, over 50 per cent of their Specialized transit usage is attributed to day program travel, and the agency has experienced increasing difficulties accommodating other customers, particularly during peak drop-off and pick-up periods of the various day programs.

- 4.5 As part of a regular process review, the DRT Eligibility team has identified limited awareness and understanding among customers and community partners regarding the eligibility requirement for Specialized transit and the Service Agreement. As mentioned before, many people still refer to and expect the service formerly provided by Oshawa Handi-Trans. The lack of awareness is attributed, in part, to limited public facing information that effectively communicate eligibility requirements and Service Agreements.

5. Relationship to Strategic Plan

- 5.1 This report aligns with/addresses the following Strategic Direction(s) and Pathway(s) in Durham Region's 2025-2035 Strategic Plan:

a. Strong Relationships

- S5. Ensure accountable and transparent decision-making to serve community needs, while responsibly managing available resources.

This report aligns with/addresses the following Foundation(s) in Durham Region's 2025-2035 Strategic Plan:

- a. Processes: Continuously improving processes to ensure we are responsive to community needs.

6. Next Steps

- 6.1 The Eligibility Team is moving forward to complete the following activities by end of March 2026.

- a. **Application:** Revise the Specialized transit application form to more clearly reflect current policies regarding eligibility.
- b. **Policy:** Implement and include on DRT's website, clearly documented policies and eligibility processes, including Service Agreements.

- 6.2 For additional information, contact: Deborah Daniel, Program Manager, Engagement & Change, Durham Region Transit, 905-668-771

Respectfully submitted,

Original signed by

Bill Holmes
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Recommended for Presentation to Committee

Original signed by

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