

Edmonton Transit Advisory Board Report: Transit and Vulnerable Populations

Recommendation

That the June 15, 2021, Edmonton Transit Advisory Board report EXT00535, be received for information.

Report

Introduction

Edmonton Transit Service Advisory Board (ETSAB) members had expressed concern that there may well be Edmontonians who are members of vulnerable communities and who would normally have to depend on transit but were not doing so due to lack knowledge about the service or fear or uncertainty about exploring it. To this end, ETSAB established a subcommittee to examine the matter. The subcommittee was composed of five members from ETSAB along with the Chair of the Accessibility Advisory Committee.

Subcommittee members spent considerable time discussing the definition of vulnerable communities and soon concluded that efforts to establish such a list would never be exhaustive. Instead, ETSAB focused on strategies that would be helpful to some of these people who have challenges using transit and, if suggested interventions proved effective they could then be expanded to include other groups in the future. ETSAB recognizes that many people, for various reasons, feel vulnerable on transit due to the COVID-19 pandemic, feeling unsafe, or as members of the Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) community. These concerns have been addressed in other ETSAB submissions, therefore the focus of this report is to deal with members of communities who may fear using the service due to their lack of knowledge or understanding of it.

Considerations

The subcommittee investigated if it were possible to establish a program that is community based, which could be available on an ongoing basis rather than waiting for a particular time to attend. Additionally, it would be presented by people who have a similar background as the program participant. With this in mind ETSAB decided to contact several groups in an effort to establish their interest in participating in such a program and focused on organisations associated with seniors, newcomers to the city, post-secondary students, visually impaired and indigenous communities. The

COVID-19 pandemic restricted the breadth of the work as communication with some groups proved difficult.

Currently Available Programs in Other Jurisdictions

Regina

There is a program in Regina which is delivered through a third party non-profit agency. At present, it is directed at people with disabilities but hopes to expand it to other groups such as seniors and newcomers. There is also a similar program available in Calgary. The idea is for a disabled person who needs assistance in using transit to be paired with a trainer who has a similar disability but is familiar with the system and has received some direction and coaching from the transit administration. The volunteer trainer makes trips with the participant. This one on one education program continues until the participant is sufficiently confident in using public transit. The education program includes everything from trip planning, getting to and from the bus, using fare products and the mechanics of travelling on the bus. Both participants make these trips free of charge while in the program.

York Region

York Region Transit Authority has started a program called “MyRide” where a bus built using recycled parts is housed in a garage and used to teach people with mobility challenges how to get on and off the bus as well as to familiarise them with how to request a stop, speak with the driver etc. Participants are also provided information about route mapping and fare purchase and use of fare products such as smart cards.

The program manager also gives talks about transit use, usually at local libraries. Word has spread about these talks and interest is constantly increasing. The program manager also takes school classes, starting about grade 8, on a transit bus where all aspects of using transit are explained. The program manager is frequently approached by groups who deal with special education students who may require further instruction.

The manager also meets with people who require one on one instruction similar to that offered by Regina and has expressed an interest in ETSAB’s idea of involving community groups as part of the education of passengers.

In our discussions with Administration, ETSAB was very pleased to hear that the idea of building a bus, similar to the above and for the same purpose, is being considered in future garage expansion. ETSAB fully supports this initiative.

Groups Approached

Visually Impaired

The Canadian National Institute of the Blind (CNIB) Foundation offers a program through a third party. It is a one on one program where all aspects of using the system are taught to the student allowing them progressively to increase their confidence as transit users and continues until the students are sufficiently confident in taking transit on their own. One area of concern that they identified is in using the smartphone app for route planning where the walk to and from the bus stop may direct the client through an area where obstacles such as construction are present.

ETSAB would like to investigate the possibility of the app having an alternative “clearer journey” option, providing a safer journey for the visually or mobility impaired. The Transit app has started this type of process with a “step free” option.

Indigenous Communities

ETSAB spoke with Robbie Kaboni who is the “New in Town Supervisor” for the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society in Edmonton which offers a one on one peer delivered program to help members find their way around the city on transit. The program covers all aspects of transit from trip planning through use of the service including assistance with applying for fare subsidy programs when applicable. It is not a scheduled program, rather it is offered on an ad hoc basis whenever the need arises. Mr. Kaboni said that compensation was not an issue as his organisation is pleased to be there to provide assistance whenever necessary.

Seniors

ETSAB felt that seniors would be an important group to consider given that many who have used private vehicles exclusively over the years arrive at the point where this is no longer an option. At such a time they fear they are losing their independence and many have never considered using public transit. During such a stressful time they may fear trying to become familiar with such an unfamiliar environment.

ETSAB spoke with Rosalie Gelderman, project director for the Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council and asked if she felt that seniors centres would be likely to become involved in encouraging some of its’ members to volunteer to be “coaches” for people who needed to learn to use the transit system. ETSAB proposed that ETS would supply orientation sessions for the coaches so they would be familiar with all aspects of teaching the system from trip planning to fares and fare products as well as using the service. When asked whether she thought that this would be a feasible approach she indicated it would be a good idea and asked if there was any compensation for the trainers (e.g. a bus pass or a certain amount of bus tickets). ETSAB believes there should be some way of ensuring the trainer should not have to pay a fare while accompanying a client and would make recommendations accordingly. She felt sure several of the City’s senior centres would be interested in

participating in such a program and supported the idea that the program could be offered on an ongoing basis rather than clients having to wait for the information to be presented on occasion.

Post-Secondary Students

Many post-secondary students arrive in Edmonton from other parts of the country or from international destinations where urban public transit is not offered and would therefore be unfamiliar with such a service. Most of these students attend institutions where the U-Pass is offered, allowing easy access to transit service. ETSAB feels that orientation services and one on one peer support would be helpful to allow students to feel more comfortable using transit and intended to approach the various student unions to discuss the possibility of participating in such a program but unfortunately, due to the pandemic resulting in fewer students physically present on campuses, this proved not to be possible. Since students all have U-Passes remuneration would probably not be necessary but a certificate of participation may be an attractive option for the student “coaches”.

Newcomers to Edmonton

Edmonton attracts newcomers from all across the country and from countries around the world. Many of these people are not familiar with living in a modern Canadian urban setting and may have difficulty finding their way around. For many, their economic situation prevents private vehicle ownership and therefore must rely on public transit. Often learning to use such an unfamiliar service is a difficult challenge to navigate. We are fortunate in Edmonton to have many volunteer organisations who welcome newcomers and try to assist them in acclimatising to their new surroundings.

Our review of several newcomer organizations in the city revealed no formal programs dealing with introduction or orientation to transit for clients. Largely, information was provided when requested by well-meaning volunteers who themselves were often not fully versed in the service. Some groups assisted clients on an ad hoc basis by helping them plan their trip by using phone apps or computer programs. Some took clients on the LRT. Several groups, when asked, were very open to the idea of a more formal program where volunteers were given comprehensive information about transit so that they would be in a better position to pass on this knowledge to their clients. They agreed that the idea of a one-on-one system would be effective particularly as it would be provided by the client’s peers and, where necessary, in their native language.

Organizations that have indicated an interest in such a program are listed below and could be approached in the event the suggested program is adopted.

- ASSIST Community Services Centre
- Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers:
- Catholic Social Services
- Action for Healthy Communities

Other organizations suggested by some of the above are;

- Pakistan Canada Association
- Nepalese Canadian Society of Edmonton
- Sierra Leone Association of Alberta
- Islamic Family and Social Services Association
- Somali Canadian Women Association

Conclusion

ETSAB believes that a peer delivered program that details the use of public transit would have a positive impact on many members of vulnerable communities. Given that the information would be presented by people of similar background as the client, the student will be more relaxed and receptive to the information. Furthermore, guidance can be presented when the need arises rather than having to wait for a certain time and it can be continued for as long as required by the client, thus being more effective.

Recommendations

1. That ETS Administration set up a training course for community volunteers at which representatives from seniors and newcomers organizations can become fully versed in the use of ETS services so that they can confidently convey that information to their clients who require it.
2. The course should include information on all aspects of using the ETS service including trip planning, getting on and off the bus, conduct while on the bus, fare products and how to acquire them as well as information on fare subsidy programmes.
3. Trainers and students under such a plan should not be charged for use of the service while participating in the programme.
4. Once the programme is established it can be expanded to include other groups of organisations who serve vulnerable populations.