

History of Transit in Huntsville 1988-2017

Prepared for: Town Council
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Purpose:

To provide the background that will support Option #6 of Report OPS-2017-07, presented to Council April 26, 2017, “to maintain existing system and commission a consult to conduct a detailed review of existing transit system and make recommendations to improve or expand system” and further to support Staff Report OPS-2017-28, recommending that “Staff be directed to add a consulting fee of \$60,000 to the 2018 Draft Transit Budget for Budget Committee consideration to complete a full review of the existing transit services and potential options for expansion; and further that: this project be funded through a combined contribution of the transit reserve and Provincial Gas Tax money”.

Recognizing that staff has conducted a survey, reported to Council on the results, held a public forum and has made two recommendations, the task of designing new routes, the need to set new bus stops, reduce waiting times, comparisons of best practices and successes of other municipalities, etc. requires the services of a transit specialist.

Summary of Resources:

My research has cumulated in just over 200 pages of documentation that support my findings. It includes Town minutes, reports, plans and emails spanning back to 1988. It also includes information on the Ontario gas tax program. While I have made reference to AODA, the regulations are separate from the above mentioned documentation, but can be made available.

Clarification of Terms

The following terms must be defined (as per AODA) to provide clarity:

The term “conventional service” is generally referred to as service provided on a designated route with bus stops. This service can be accessed by the general population and people with disabilities who are able to access this service.

Depending on the municipality in question, this service could be using a bus that is wheelchair accessible or not. Our bus is accessible.

The term “specialized service” is generally referred to as an “origin to destination” service, similar to a taxi service that provides door to door service. The difference is, one is direct and the other is a shared ride thus not direct. This service is provided to people with disabilities who are unable to access the conventional service bus or the bus stop. Thus, eligibility requirements were necessary.

This type of service is provided by either an accessible bus (contracted or owned) or a contracted accessible taxi or thru an association such as Collingwood’s Red Cross. One will find that this service goes by many names such as Wheel Trans, Handi Trans, Wheels, Accessible Transportation Services or Mobility Services. This service has been in existence for over at least 40 years.

Ontario’s Enhanced Gas Tax Program

For every litre of gasoline sold, Ontario currently provides two cents to municipalities to help fund local public transit improvements. The program began in 2004.

The share that each municipality receives is determined by a formula of 70 per cent ridership and 30 per cent population.

Municipalities can use gas tax funds toward local public transit priorities, such as making major infrastructure upgrades, buying additional transit vehicles, adding more routes, extending hours of service, implementing fare strategies and improving accessibility. Some examples of how gas tax funds were used last year include the purchase new buses, replace accessible buses with a lift with those with a ramp, improved routes, etc.

The Town of Huntsville used the gas tax money available in 2005 to fund a summer service trial period and to undertake a Transit Needs Assessment Study that would be used in the development of the required 2006-2010 Ridership Growth Plan and the 2006-2015 Asset Management Plan.

The study recommended that the hourly demand be increased gradually using the gas tax reserve fund for 2006 and 2007, to cover the increased cost. Thereafter, service would be expanded when hourly demand increases to the levels required. The service plan can only be accelerated if the municipal contribution increases.

Since 2007, the gas tax received by the Town has been used to offset the cost of transit.

History

Huntsville, the first in the District of Muskoka, debuted its transit service in 1988 and until 2016 was the only service in the area.

The service was initiated by a local cab company owner, subsidized by the Town and ran until 1991. It was a limited conventional service mainly for seniors to access the bank, grocery store, etc. for a flat rate of a dollar. The vehicle was **not** equipped with a lift/ramp.

In 1991, the first transit review prepared by staff, proposed a contract with Campbell Bus Lines to provide one accessible bus for conventional service. It is unclear when the bus started to go off route to provide service for people with a disability who were unable to access the conventional service, but by 2006 conventional service was being compromised and could not maintain the timed schedule.

In 2006, a second transit review, prepared by a consultant, recommended that:

- The accessible conventional bus service be complemented by a parallel door-to-door wheelchair accessible service – also known as para-transit. That was the beginning of our two bus system.
- A 5-year Ridership Growth Plan for service hours, fares, and potential changes to service routes as a result of new development.
- A 10-year Asset Management Plan
- The development of a community transportation accessibility implementation plan that would be focused on better meeting specialized transit needs.
- An increase of the fare to \$2.00

It should be pointed out that both studies considered service outside the urban area and found that ridership did not support it. The District of Muskoka piloted a rural service over the past two years that began with 8 routes and is down to 2 due to low ridership. One might conclude that full, dependable service should service the urban area with a growth management plan in place for further expansion.

Since 2007:

- the conventional service has been adjusted to add a few stops, and
- The specialized service eligibility (at the start this service was implemented to provide service for those who could not access the conventional service) later evolved into a service that anyone could access. It is unclear how and when this evolved as the records do not reflect this change.

It has been suggested that the specialized service had been underutilized and rather than have it sit idle, service was extended to everyone. It may have made financial sense at the time given the flat cost of the contract.

As a result of this change, eligibility was then defined by the supplier as “unconditional”, implying that anyone could access the origin to destination service. Subsequently, the Transportation Standard under IARS (2016), AODA defined unconditional as “A person with a disability that prevents them from using conventional transportation services shall be categorized as having unconditional eligibility.” As far as one can tell we are the only municipality in the province with this open eligibility.

It was agreed that the specialized service would be monitored (as per the Accessibility Plan) so as not to compromise the availability of service for people with disabilities who could not access the conventional service. In our area the specialized service is the only mode of transportation for those riders.

The specialized service has long been provided by many municipalities prior to the Transportation Standard under AODA. In fact, Toronto introduced Wheel Trans in the mid-seventies. Each municipality had set their own eligibility criteria for the specialized service. This made it difficult to access this type of service in other municipalities in the province. Today one can now use their card of eligibility in any municipality in the province who offers a specialized service. .

Several issues are concerning regarding our definition of eligibility.

- The Town only recently changed their transit information, but still does not adequately provide the public with information on how our system operates. If the public were to be made aware that this service was available to everyone, ridership may increase dramatically, compromising service for those who rely on it as their only source of transportation.
- With our ageing population, the number of people with a disability will increase resulting in a greater need for the specialized transit service. Our current system is not sustainable for the people who rely on this service.
- Seniors are using this service to shop, who if eligibility criteria were to be set may not qualify. Able bodied seniors should be encouraged to use the conventional service as do those people with a disability who can access it. Barring that, there is a service called Muskoka Seniors which provides transit service to seniors, as well there is a local bus that will deliver seniors to Huntsville Place Mall every Friday and a taxi company now offers a lower flat fee for seniors in the urban area. Not one of these services provide wheelchair access. “Origin to destination” service was not designed to provide an inexpensive taxi service to the entire community.
- The rural service provided by the District and the Corridor Bus provided in partnership between Hammond Bus Line and the District are not wheelchair

accessible. To date our taxis are not accessible. The specialized service is the only mode of travel for people with a disability who cannot access the conventional service in our urban and rural areas.

- The cost to run our specialized service can be 3 to 4 times the cost per ride than on our conventional service, as a result of a flat contract fee. There are opportunities to explore for less cost, such as a subsidy per rider and a different mode of transportation, if eligibility matched that of AODA. Our current system is not sustainable financially.
- Those who would qualify for specialized service, cannot access specialized service thru out the province. Without a card, one would have to apply well ahead of time to that particular municipality to gain access to their specialized service.
- In the past, the specialized service would go beyond the urban core to pick up a person with a disability, but now will not. The 2006 study recommended that the specialized service should be available outside of the urban core. To my knowledge the Town does not have a policy.
- There is concern that the numbers will drop on the specialized service if eligibility requirements were restricted, but there is also the expectation that the numbers will increase on the conventional service given improvements. By reducing the number of riders needing specialized service the Town could take the opportunity to investigate a less expensive mode of travel.
- There is concern that we are currently not receiving the gas tax rebate on the specialized service because we do not have eligibility requirements thus it doesn't comply with the MTO's definition of specialized. It is unclear how long this has been the case. To rename this service "conventional modified" does not take away the fact that this type of service was designed for people with a disability who cannot access the conventional service. This name change implies that those riders will now count, but if eligibility requirements were set, those riders would count and those not eligible would count as riders on the new improved conventional system.

From 2004 thru to 2017, the AAC had been working with Public Works to improve transit service for people with a disability. While there has been a willingness by staff and Councils since 2011 to proceed with a study to improve service, little headway has been made until now. While our initial goal was to improve access for people with disabilities, it became clear that the system as a whole needed improvement.

In 2014 the previous Council made a motion recommending that \$20,000 be placed in reserve for the purpose of improving transit service and that Staff be directed to bring a request to the new Council /Committee to conduct a draft plan to improve transit.

In January 2015, the AAC made motion to conduct a transit review was subsequently approved by Council in February 2015.

In July 2015, staff on reporting to the AAC noted that the study guidelines would be presented to Committee before going out for RFP. As well, the 2015 updated Accessibility Plan was reviewed and recommended to Council for approval. It identified that a transit study would be done in 2016. Staff was given verbal direction (not recorded) to proceed in house rather than issuing an RFP for a consultant.

As mentioned in my opening, staff prepared a survey, conducted the survey, presented the results to Council and made two recommendations in 2016.

Today's Picture

The current conventional service:

- Has a two hour gap between pick up times.
- Runs off its scheduled stops during rush hour and Saturdays to provide specialized service.
- Many of the bus stops are not accessible and are too far apart.
- The bus utilizes a hydraulic lift to board wheel chair and scooter users
- A small percentage of the current ridership use the service for work.

The current specialized service:

- The bus utilizes a hydraulic lift to board wheel chair and scooter users.
- Provides "origin to destination" service
- The current ridership are predominately people with a disability and seniors with or without a disability.

The Official Plan 2006:

- Supports the provision of public transit service, either existing or future, for all new developments (subdivisions, apartments, retail commercial, institutional, etc.).
- Stipulates that site plans shall incorporate transit design measures such as location of proposed bus stops, connecting public walkways, room for shelters or benches, etc.

The Unity Plan 2010:

Recommends improvement to the town's transit service and an increase in ridership by

- expanding transit hours to accommodate shift workers,
- streamline and redesign routes to provide two way service,
- prepare an up-to-date Transit Needs Assessment Report,
- extend the hours of the Accessible Specialized Service to provide equitable service to people with special needs,
- etc.

Opportunities

- to address the needs of our working constituents,
- keep pace with development aka growth,
- improve access to bus stops,
- design with sustainability in mind,
- develop a plan for the future of transit,
- get the most bang for our buck by realigning cost per rider to maximize the lower cost per rider on conventional service
- to have our urban area fully serviced
- to consider service outside of the urban area
- to consider moving this community service back under Community Services
- to take ownership by developing policies
- to reduce traffic in the downtown area
- to protect specialized service for those that it was intended for
- to build on the transit review by staff
- fund further study in house with the ear marked \$20,000 in reserves and a portion of the Ontario Gas Tax Rebate. This rebate was used to fund the 2006 Transit Study.

Resources

- AAC Minutes 2004-2017
- ACC Plan 2015
- Council, Public Works, General, and Corporate Services Minutes 1988-2017
- Enhanced Gas Tax Program, Province of Ontario
- Muskoka Seniors Organization
- Official Plan 2005
 - Section 10.4.1 Municipal Transit
 - Section 4.2.4.1 Residential Design
 - Section 4.2.6 Transit Supportive Land Use Guidelines
- Strategic Plan 2017
 - Strategic Priority Area Roads and Infrastructure Goal #1

- Town of Huntsville Budgets 2007-2016
 - Transit Study 1991
 - Transit Study 2006
 - Transit Study 2016 survey results
 - Transit Survey Results 2016 Staff Report #TI-2016-21, TI-2017-05
 - Transportation Standard, IARS, AODA 2005
 - Unity Plan 2010
- Goal #4 Transportation

Consultation: Ms. Bev Martin, former town staff
Mr. Bill Sibeon, owner Al's Taxi
Mr. John Finley, retired town staff
Accessibility Advisory Committee
Ms. Denise Corry, CAO

PLANS

Page #	Name	Year		Transit Content
165-167	Official Plan	2006		Residential Design and Transit stops & loops.
168	Official Plan Draft	2017		Intensify urban growth development.
169-171	Unity Plan	2010		Support for the O.P. , Transit Study Recommendations 2006 &a uptodate Huntsville Transit Needs Assessment Report.
172	Strategic Plan	2017		Support for a review of transit & the Unity Plan.
173-174	Accessibility Plan	2012-2017		Support for a review of transit.
175-178	Acc Plan Presentation	2016		Presentation to Council

CORRESPONDENCE

Page #	Sender	Contact	Date	Topic
179	Muskoka Seniors Org	Karen Waters	2017	Mini van service for seniors for a fee but not accessible.
180	Metro Grocery Store Bus	Pam Cust Care	2017	Delivers people to the mall every Friday but not accessible.
181-184	Campbell Busline	John Finley	2007	Confirmation of availability for service outside of urban area for specialized service.

REPORTS

Page #	Reference	Contact		Topic
185-189	TI-2017-5	Brandon Hall	01/03/2017	Transit Study Results
190-193	OPS 2017-07	Steve Hernen	26/04/2017	Transit Study Results – Review #2
194	Transit Budget	Debbie Kirwin	2007-2016	Ridership costs & Prov Gas Tax
195-198	Transit Survey Pie Charts	Brandon Hall	2016	Attached to AAC Minutes