



Subject: Transit Enhancement Opportunity

To: Council

From: Corporate Services Department

Report Number: 2021-15

Meeting Date: January 11, 2021

Recommendation:

That Corporate Services Department Report 2021-15 be received;

That the City of Port Colborne request the Region of Niagara to submit a service order to Via Mobility LLC to amend its master terms agreement for the deployment of a turnkey, on-demand transit service to include the service area of Port Colborne and the integration and alignment of the Port Colborne service into the Niagara Regional Transit (NRT) OnDemand mobile application; and

That subject to approval by the Niagara Region's Public Works Committee and Council:

- Port Colborne Transit be integrated into the NRT OnDemand program (including related Provincial Gas Tax Funding) as outlined in this report;
 - The City of Port Colborne provide funding to the Niagara Region as outlined in this report;
 - The City of Port Colborne extend its appreciation to the City of Welland for their long-standing service as the City of Port Colborne Transit provider and for that contract to stop when the OnDemand service begins;
 - The City of Port Colborne extend its warmest thank you to the Port Colborne Transit Advisory Committee for their previous service and for that committee to be dissolved;
 - The Chief Administrative Officer and Director of Corporate Services / Treasurer be authorized to sign and execute the necessary documents to complete the approved recommendations in this report.
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Purpose:

This report proposes service level enhancements to the current Port Colborne Transit program. It proposes moving from a fixed-route model to an on-demand model that

provides transit services to the whole City of Port Colborne (the “City”), increases the days of operation by one day per week, and the hours of service per day from 11 hours to 15 hours.

Background:

The City of Welland has been the long-standing service provider of a fixed route transit system in the City. The current route is identified in Appendix A. In 2019, the current service had approximately 35 individual riders per day (note 2019 numbers were used as COVID-19 impacted 2020 comparatives). At the time of writing this report the City is operating month to month with the City of Welland as the previous contract has expired.

On November 25, 2019 the Niagara Region presented a proposal for Niagara Region Transit (“NRT”) OnDemand to City Council. As an outcome of that meeting, staff were directed to review transit options.

The NRT OnDemand system has since been launched in the Town of Grimsby, Town of Lincoln, Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, Town of Pelham, Township of Wainfleet, and the Township of West Lincoln.

Recent discussions with the Niagara Region identified they are currently in contract discussions with their service provider (VIA Mobility LLP) and, should the City wish to join, the City could do so in the June 2021 timeframe.

As Council is aware, Niagara Region and the local area municipalities have been engaged in a multi-year transit governance study to determine the feasibility and desirability of consolidating transit services under a single entity. A transition that, if approved, could happen between 2022 and 2023. Staff understand the Niagara Region will present the plan to the Councils of local area municipalities in the first half of 2021.

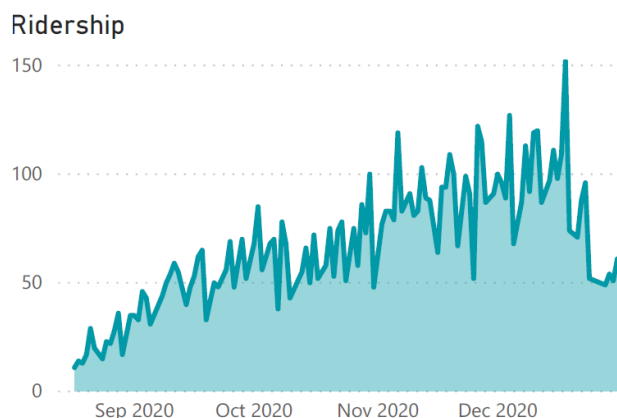
Salient to any amalgamation planning City Staff understand the service being offered at the time of consolidation will be the service that is continued with no new service additions being considered by the new transit entity for a number of years thereafter as it focuses on transitioning the operation of the service and seeks to undergo a network evaluation and design process.

Discussion:

In presenting this report City Staff identify that the City of Welland has been and continues to be a tremendous partner in providing transit to the City.

The NRT OnDemand system is currently in full operation in a number of municipalities in the Niagara Region as identified above. The website for the service is as follows: www.niagararegion.ca/transit/on-demand/default.aspx.

The following chart highlights the growth in usage of the current NRT OnDemand system in the other municipalities identified above. Staff highlight this growth has occurred despite the COVID-19 pandemic.



Key comparisons of the current and proposed NRT OnDemand options are provided in chart form below:

	Current	NRT OnDemand
Area Served	Appendix A – Limited / Fixed	Appendix B – All of Port Colborne (including Fort Erie Crystal Beach Area)
Number of Days	Monday - Friday (5 days)	Monday – Saturday (6 days)
Number of Hours	7am to 6pm (11 hours)	7am 10pm (15 hours)
Route adjustments^	Lead time required	Dynamic
Data	Limited	Significant
Boarding location	Bus stop or flag stop on route	Estimated average walk 55 - 80 m from location submitting pick-up request from (Wheelchair accessible trips will be door-to-door)
Pick-up time	Per pre-published schedule	Estimated 8 minutes or less from request pick-up time (assuming daily volume doubles from 2019 levels)
How to get a ride	Go to bus stop or flag a bus at pre-determined time	Use app or call phone number
Ride Sharing	Yes	Yes

^ The dynamic/full City coverage provided by the OnDemand system is something that ensures no matter how or where the City grows going forward the Transit system can accommodate.

The proposal from the Niagara Region is to manage the entire program, including Provincial Gas Tax reporting. Through their service provider, they proposed the use of

two vehicles for the City. As the City would be part of the larger network, should demand spike at certain times vehicles from other locations could be redirected to support those higher demand times.

Pricing of the current and OnDemand option are similar from the rider's perspective. The following table of fares enables trips that begin and end with the City of Port Colborne:

	Current (lasted updated 2018)			NRT OnDemand		
	Cash Fare	10-ride Card	Monthly Pass	Cash Fare	10-ride Card	Monthly Pass
Adults	\$3.00	\$25.00	\$85.00	\$3.00	\$27.00	\$85.00
Seniors (65+)	\$3.00	\$21.00	\$65.00	\$3.00	\$22.50	\$65.00
Elementary and High School	\$3.00	\$21.00	\$75.00	\$3.00	\$22.50	\$65.00
Children	\$1.50 (12 and under riding alone) Free (12 and under riding with paying adult)			5 and under free (Note: As of February 1 st , 2021 the child age for Regional service will change to 12 and under)		

Niagara Region also offer fares that permit intermunicipal travel using the existing fixed route network of Niagara Region Transit, such as Route 25 (Port Colborne Link). The fare table below permits riders to travel anywhere in Niagara.

	OnDemand		
	Cash Fare	10-ride Card	Monthly Pass
Adults	\$6.00	\$45.00	\$160.00
Seniors (65+)	\$5.00	\$40.00	\$130.00
Elementary and High School	\$5.00	\$40.00	\$130.00
Children	5 and under free (Note: As of February 1 st , 2021 the child age for Regional service will change to 12 and under)		

Financial Implications:

The financial implications of the current service level and the estimated financial impact of the new OnDemand service level are identified in the chart below:

	2021 – Current	2021 – OnDemand*	2022 – OnDemand*^
Current Net Levy Impact of Transit~	\$135,700	\$135,700	\$135,700
Increase cost for increase level of service with OnDemand	N/A	\$252,400	\$375,000
	\$135,700	\$388,140	\$510,700
City of Port Colborne	N/A	\$126,200	\$187,500
Niagara Region	N/A	\$126,200	\$187,500
	N/A	\$252,400	\$375,000

~ The gross cost before Provincial Gas Tax revenue and user fees is \$303,700. The net cost in the budget was \$165,700. The net cost above of \$135,700 reflects the projected revenue of approximately \$30,000 in a non-COVID period.

* The figures above assume no change in usage from the 2019 level and that Niagara Region through its Public Works Committee and Council, approve matching funding as part of their intermunicipal transit mandate since a connection to Fort Erie Transit would be established (anticipated in the Crystal Beach area). Through discussions with Niagara Region, staff understand the Niagara Region already has these funds budgeted and are financially involved with the NRT OnDemand programs in other local area municipalities. As noted the recommendation to this report is contingent on funding approval from the Niagara Region.

^ These figures are in present value dollars and may be subject to increases close to inflation. These will be dependent on negotiations between the Niagara Region and their service level provider.

These increased costs are not anticipated to have a permanent impact on the City's portion of the tax levy if the local area municipalities transit systems are consolidated into one transit entity.

For this reason, staff propose the following funding option:

- For 2021 the estimated funding requirement of \$126,200 be funded from the transit reserve that currently has a balance of \$150,000. Staff identified this

potential reserve usage in Report 2020-144, Reserve and Reserve Fund Policy dated October 13, 2020.

- For 2022, the remainder of the transit reserve would be used, and any additional funding would be internally funded from the stabilization reserve. These funds would be replenished/repaid by maintaining the current net transit levy budget up to \$135,700 in subsequent years after uploading the transit system to a regional transit entity. After the balance funded from the stabilization reserve is repaid, the net transit levy amount would be removed from the City's budget.

The risk to this funding model is the uploading process takes longer, does not happen or the City is asked to fund the regional transit entity on a go forward basis (which, at the time of writing this report, staff understand to not be the case). If the transition takes one year longer into 2023 staff propose the same funding strategy in 2022 be used (internally fund from reserves). If the transition takes longer than 2023 and/or does not gain approval staff will review other funding options and/or options to adjust service levels. The levy impact of \$187,500 (2022 estimated cost) is approximately 0.9%.

For greater clarity, staff identify the funding model identified above is based on estimates and are subject to change. If Council approves this report, Council is approving a 50/50 cost share of the increased cost of the OnDemand service with Niagara Region (which will offset the costs of the connection to Fort Erie Transit) and that the City's portion be paid first from the transit reserve and second from the stabilization reserve, to be repaid by maintaining the levy post consolidation until the stabilization reserve is repaid.

Conclusion:

The City has a unique opportunity at this time to set its level of service with the cooperation of the Niagara Region prior to the anticipated creation of a consolidated regional transit entity.

Appendices:

- a. Current Transit Route
- b. Proposed Service Map (Port Colborne going into Fort Erie Crystal Beach Area)

Respectfully submitted,

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Report Approval:

All reports reviewed and approved by the Department Director and also the City Treasurer when relevant. Final approval is by the Chief Administrative Officer.