



STAFF REPORT TO COMMITTEE

DATE OF REPORT November 30, 2023
MEETING TYPE & DATE Committee of the Whole of December 13, 2023
FROM: Facilities and Transit Division
Community Services Department
SUBJECT: South Cowichan Local Area Transit Plan (LATP)
FILE: 8510-20

PURPOSE/INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to present the South Cowichan Local Area Transit Plan for endorsement.

RECOMMENDED RESOLUTION

That it be recommended to the Board that the proposed South Cowichan Local Area Transit Plan (2023) be endorsed.

BACKGROUND

Earlier this year, the Board endorsed the Cowichan Valley Transit Future Action Plan (TFAP), which identified a series of service and infrastructure improvements for implementation within one to five years. As part of this plan, redesigning the transit routes South of Duncan was recommended as a top priority.

The study area of the South Cowichan Local Area Transit Plan (LATP) includes: Eagle Heights, Cowichan Bay, Cobble Hill, Arbutus Ridge, Mill Bay and Shawnigan Lake (including the west side). In addition, the LATP team engaged and consulted with staff from Malahat First Nation and Cowichan Tribes in consideration of service options to these respective areas. The review targeted transit Routes: 5 (Eagle Heights), 8 (Mill Bay/Duncan via Telegraph Road), and 9 (Mill Bay/Duncan via Shawnigan Lake).

The objectives of the South Cowichan LATP are to:

- Develop a transit service that is faster and more direct;
- Develop a transit service that is more frequent;
- Develop a transit service that maintains a similar coverage area where possible;
- Determine the appropriate fleet vehicle for the transit service; and
- Determine the approximate timelines and resources required to implement the above.

Once endorsed, the LATP will guide both service and infrastructure planning as well as investments in service improvement through the 'Three – Year Transit Expansion Plan' process.

The LATP is structured to be implemented in phases and is dependent on receiving Provincial funding, which is not confirmed until late February each year when the Provincial budget is presented.

For reference, the CVRD has requested the following service expansion hours for local conventional service to be implemented in September 2024:

Table 1.0 Conventional Service Expansion Request 2024 – 2025

Hours	Proposed Allocation	Fleet
1,750	Proposed Eagle Heights Weekend and Additional Frequency (approximately 1,350 hours); South Cowichan Local Area Transit Plan Improvements (approximately 400 hours)	2 <i>(as per BC Transit's Fleet Management requirements)</i>
400	Proposed New Saturday Service on 7x (Cowichan Lake Express)	
550	Proposed Additional Trip Route 6 (Chemainus/Duncan)	
2,700	Total Request	2

With regards to fleet, it was determined that the next vehicles obtained should be light duty, smaller community buses which will be allocated into the most appropriate routes determined during scheduling.

If service expansion hours are not approved by the Province in spring 2024, then staff recommend maintaining current routing and scheduling (no changes) for the reasons indicated below.

ANALYSIS

The top three challenges identified in the TFAP public engagement with regards to South Cowichan transit service were:

1. Service is not frequent enough;
2. Takes too long; and
3. There is no service where I live/too far to a bus stop.

The LATP presents measures to address these challenges by restructuring the routes to make them more direct, and through investment in service expansion (requiring Provincial funding).

While some areas were considered for possible new routing (South and West Shawnigan Lake; Glenora Road/Indian Road), these are not immediately recommended for the reasons outlined below and to maintain priority and resources for improving service to existing areas.

Route Configuration

Routes 8 and 9 (Mill Bay – Shawnigan Lake – Cowichan Bay – Cowichan Station – Cobble Hill)

The main activity centres (top 5% of bus stop activity) on Routes 8 and 9 are: Duncan (Village Green Mall and Downtown Duncan), Mill Bay Centre, Valleyview Centre, and Mill Bay Ferry. While the existing routes provide good coverage connecting communities in the South Cowichan area, they are not direct and as a result take longer for riders; making the routes less desirable as a preferred mode of travel. To improve this, the LATP prioritizes efficiency between the main activity centres, yet continues to provide coverage between communities through reconfigured routing.

Routes 8 and 9 will be modified by creating: a more direct Duncan – Mill Bay route; a shorter Duncan – Cobble Hill/Shawnigan Lake route; a shorter Duncan – Cowichan Bay route; and

introducing a South Cowichan connector to maintain coverage connecting the lower density residential areas within South Cowichan to local commercial hubs as well as Valleyview Centre, where transfer opportunities to Duncan will be provided. The South Cowichan connector loop provides service to existing service areas that will no longer be included on the direct routes.

The LATP proposes to discontinue service to Arbutus Ridge as these bus stops report very low levels of activity for a number of years and increase trip time for riders. Currently, Arbutus Ridge is serviced three out of seven trips Monday – Friday, all three on Saturday and both trips on Sunday. The combined impact of discontinuing service to Arbutus Ridge and improving directness on the Mill Bay route reduces the total trip time from Village Green Mall to Mill Bay Centre from 51 minutes to 34.

Service to the south and west sides of Shawnigan Lake was considered in the review and public engagement; however, the majority of respondents (72%) did not favour extending the routing to these areas. It was also determined that expanding the service area would increase the trip time by approximately 25 minutes, which is counter to the objectives of making the routes faster and more direct, and would require significantly more resources. Providing service to the south and west sides of Shawnigan Lake can be reevaluated at a later time if deemed to be a priority for additional resources.

Route 5 (Duncan – Eagle Heights)

Route configurations were considered to make the route shorter by separating route segments on the west side of the Trans-Canada Highway from the east side. Additionally, an option was presented in the public engagement to expand the service area by including Glenora and Indian Roads, which was supported by 59% of respondents. However, this alternate routing would have discontinued service to some bus stops; increased trip time on the Cowichan Bay route; reduced connectivity from the east to the west sides of the Trans-Canada Highway; or increased trip time of the route. Therefore, the LATP proposes that the route remain the same for now, but that expanding the service area to include Glenora and Indian Roads be reconsidered following further consultation with Cowichan Tribes who have expressed interest in expanding transit coverage to currently un-serviced portions of their jurisdiction (Phase 3).

Pending service expansion funding from the Provincial government, Route 5 will benefit from new weekend service and an additional trip on Friday, which improves the service to similar levels as other South Cowichan routes (Phase 1A).

See Attachment A for current and proposed route configurations.

Service Expansion and Phasing

The LATP proposes implementation over multiple phases including an option that would reconfigure the routes providing service using only existing resources (Phase 1B). Utilizing only existing resources would reduce trip times on the direct routes, but only have capacity to introduce a very limited number of trips per day (only two) on the new South Cowichan connector. Additionally, there would be no new gains of weekend service and also a reduced number of trips provided to Eagle Heights and Cowichan Bay. In staff's opinion, the benefits of improving directness of the routes is offset by the potential impacts to frequency.

For these reasons, it is recommended that the existing routing remain in place until expansion resources are available which would ensure that new changes to routes are supported by appropriate resource levels to minimize impact to riders.

Therefore, staff recommend that implementation of this LATP begin with Phase 1A, which aligns with the CVRD's 2024 – 25 service expansion requests to the Province.

If the 2024 – 25 Provincial budget includes approval of the CVRD's requested service expansion hours, then 1,750 new hours would be allocated to South Cowichan; including Eagle Heights, which would provide weekend service to Eagle Heights at similar levels to other South Cowichan routes, maintain existing frequency and provide three trips per day on the South Cowichan connector loop.

The CVRD was required to submit our 2024 – 2027 'Three – Year Transit Expansion Plan' to BC Transit this fall prior to completion of the LATP, and did not account for new service expansion hours proposed for implementation in Phases 2 or 3 of the LATP. As a result, and detailed below, these proposed service expansion hours will be considered in subsequent years' expansion plans.

Phase 2 of the LATP proposes an additional 1,650 service expansion hours and 1 fleet vehicle to improve the service levels in accordance with the CVRD's "*Service Standards and Performance Guidelines*", which recommend a 2-hour frequency of service and a start and end time of 6:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. Monday – Thursday. Generally, more service is provided on Friday evenings and less service on weekends than the Monday – Thursday service levels.

Lastly, Phase 3 proposes new routing to Eagle Heights, Glenora/Indian Roads, and Tzouhalem Road but requires more feedback and consultation with Cowichan Tribes regarding potential service levels and partnership. The estimated hours required to implement this phase are 1,500 plus 1 bus.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Through the 'Three – Year Transit Expansion Plan' for 2024 – 2027, the Board already approved the proposed 1,750 service expansion hours and one fleet vehicle required to implement Phase 1A of the LATP. The additional 950 hours also approved in the 2024 –25 TIPS is for Routes 6 and 7X which are not in South Cowichan. The anticipated costs for the approved hours have been included in the 2024 draft budget.

The service expansion hours and costs proposed for subsequent phases of the LATP (Phases 2 and 3) will be presented for Committee and Board consideration and approval in summer 2024 when the next 'Three – Year Transit Expansion Plan' is reviewed covering years 2025 – 2028.

If the Province does not provide the current service expansion request for 2024 –25, the CVRD will have the option to request these same hours again for 2025 or staff would recommend increasing the hours to enable implementation of Phase 1A and 2 at the same time for a total of 3,400 hours and 2 fleet vehicles.

COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS

Following endorsement, staff will advise BC Transit to proceed on the next steps identified within the LATP. In partnership with BC Transit, staff will collaborate with Malahat First Nation and Cowichan Tribes on their transit service requests.

STRATEGIC/BUSINESS PLAN CONSIDERATIONS

In consideration of the 2020 – 2022 Corporate Strategic Plan, transit plays a role in supporting economic resiliency, security and prosperity for residents of the Cowichan region as an affordable transportation option.

The CVRD's partnership with BC Transit to fund and deliver transit service, aligns with the strategic plan objective of supporting the development and use of alternative transportation opportunities within the region.

Referred to (upon completion):

- Community Services (*Cowichan Community Centre, Cowichan Lake Recreation, South Cowichan Recreation, Arts & Culture, Facilities & Transit*)
- Corporate Services (*Finance, Human Resources, Information Technology, Legislative Services*)
- Operations (*Utilities, Parks & Trails, Recycling & Waste Management*)
- Land Use Services (*Community Planning, Strategic Initiatives, Development Services, Building Inspection & Bylaw Enforcement*)
- Strategic Services (*Communications & Engagement, Economic Development, Emergency Management, Environmental Services*)

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Reviewed for form and content and approved for submission to the Committee:

Resolution:

Financial Considerations:

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Chief Financial Officer

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment A – South Cowichan Local Area Transit Plan

Attachment B – CVRD 'Three – Year Transit Expansion Plan 2024 – 2027