



STAFF REPORT TO COMMITTEE

DATE OF REPORT March 18, 2024
MEETING TYPE & DATE Committee of the Whole of March 27, 2024
FROM: Facilities and Transit Division
Community Services Department
SUBJECT: Status of Transit Shelters in the Core
FILE: 8520-50

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to inform the Committee of ongoing maintenance, security challenges and inappropriate (non-transit) use of the transit shelters in the core area at the following three locations: Village Green Mall (VGM); James Street at Cowichan Secondary School (CSS); and Beverly Street by Vancouver Island University (VIU).

RECOMMENDED RESOLUTION

For direction.

BACKGROUND

Over the past year, and especially since the start of winter 2023, CVRD transit staff have been attending to numerous complaints from transit customers, businesses, and the Cowichan transit operating company (Transdev, on behalf of their drivers and management) regarding misuse of the transit shelters in the core area. The misuse involves loitering, open drug and alcohol use, and increasingly, unhoused individuals using the transit shelters as a place to stay. Attachment A includes photos of some of these unfortunate situations.

There is misuse of shelters throughout the core area, but the worst is taking place at the two transit shelters located at CVRD's main transit exchange, Village Green Mall (VGM) in Duncan, and at the shelter on James Street in front of Cowichan Secondary School (CSS), which is across from the emergency warming centre (EWC) at Cowichan Community Centre (CCC).

The new transit shelter installed in mid-2023 on Beverly Street across from Vancouver Island University (VIU) has also become misused as well, but currently not to the same degree as the above-mentioned locations. The misuse of these shelters has generated concerns regarding safety, cleanliness, and increased maintenance. In the case of VGM, repeated calls for service to VGM security and the RCMP have occurred.

Due to the unsightly condition the shelters are left in from inappropriate use and mostly overnight activity, the transit operating company (Transdev), VGM maintenance and CVRD transit staff have needed to spend a lot more time attending to the location, doing inspections, and spending additional budget funds on extra cleaning and pressure washing with disinfectant.

The sections below identify concerns with the non-transit usage of shelters and potential options.

ANALYSIS

Issues

Current challenges with regards to the misuse/non-transit use of the transit shelters in the core area include:

- Inappropriate or illegal activity, loitering;
- Increased calls and costs for service including maintenance for garbage removal, pressure washing (disinfecting);
- Unsightliness due to graffiti, garbage and general mess left at the shelters;
- Prevented access to the shelters for transit customers who stand beside the shelter avoiding the inappropriate/non-transit activities; and
- Concern for safety and comfort of transit users (riders, drivers, public).

While the challenges occur throughout the core, this is also a particular challenge for regular commuter service customers who remain in their vehicles parked at VGM waiting for the morning commuter buses to arrive before they run to the bus stop to catch the bus that goes to Victoria.

Staff have recently started to power wash with disinfectant at VGM shelter and on James Street shelter which makes an immediate improvement, but the current intensive misuse of the shelters quickly eliminates any improvement, and does not deal with the safety issue.

Regarding the VGM shelters, due to the misuse and concerns noted above, Transdev has been documenting challenges occurring at this site with daily site checks sometimes required twice per day. These site checks reveal a disturbing and unfortunate situation for many people lacking in housing and support services within the region; as well as for the transit customers who are attempting to utilize the transit service in support of their daily activities to work, attend school, etc.

Maintenance and Security

The CVRD Transit division is responsible for maintenance of transit supportive infrastructure including shelters, benches, signage, and stops. Maintenance is completed through arrangements with various municipal staff, casual CVRD staff or contractors who then invoice CVRD for the completed work. The CVRD Transit division does not have a dedicated position, full-time or part-time, for transit maintenance; there is also no dedicated security staff aside from what is provided at VGM for the common areas.

At VGM, maintenance assistance is provided by the property management company (Gulf Pacific) who removes garbage, graffiti and conducts general cleaning as much as possible. However, providing resources required to clean up the space has become a constant battle. VGM also provides some security patrol but the situation has become so bad that they are challenged to deal with the situation and more calls are being made to the RCMP. Gulf Pacific management has advised us that all the exterior benches and planters at VGM have been removed in an effort to reduce areas available for loitering and sheltering.

With respect to the misuse of the bus shelter on James Street at CSS, this location has become increasingly problematic since December 2023, and notably when the EWC at CCC is very busy or is closed as this transit stop is the closest location that unhoused people have access to when leaving the EWC. Unfortunately, this transit shelter is located right in front of the high school, which means it is also within very close proximity to minors.

For the past year, other shelters in the core area, such as Beverly Street by VIU and Cowichan District Hospital (CDH) have seen similar increased misuse of the space, vandalism and more

repairs and cleaning required. CVRD transit staff are doing more inspections at these shelters and regularly arrange for additional maintenance or clean up that is required.

Consultation

CVRD transit staff have been in discussion with various stakeholders in an attempt to determine the best course of action to alleviate the issues associated with misuse/non-transit use of the transit shelters in the core area. However, the broader societal challenges related to misuse of the transit shelters are beyond the capacity of the division.

CVRD Bylaw Enforcement – CVRD Parks Bylaw No. 738, is not relevant for transit as it is only applicable to parks.

City of Duncan (COD) and Municipality of North Cowichan (MNC) – On a complaint-driven basis, these agencies assist with bylaw enforcement to maintain access to sidewalks and transit shelters within their respective areas. They request assistance from RCMP when required.

COD has recently removed a transit bench and garbage can at Trunk Road and Ypres Street, which is a well-used bus stop, but was increasingly problematic for loitering. In 2020, COD also removed a glass transit shelter from Coronation Avenue to address concerns regarding non-transit uses impacting nearby residences.

CVRD Transit staff understand that efforts are being undertaken to potentially update the 'Municipality of North Cowichan and City of Duncan – Safer Community Plan', which was adopted in 2019 and it is anticipated that the CVRD Transit division will be involved with the plan discussions. Also, MNC staff will have a new part-time staff position conducting litter clean up near the York Street and Beverly Street areas during the summer months.

RCMP – Has a policing office located in VGM and regularly attend to the site when called/as needed, amongst their other priorities.

Transdev and BC Transit – Transdev has communicated concerns about the misuse of the transit shelters to both BC Transit and the CVRD Transit division, echoing the challenges outlined above. Additionally, as this is a layover stop and main transit exchange, the drivers take their breaks and try to use facilities at the VGM.

While safety and security on transit and at transit stops are very important to BC Transit, their capacity to provide additional funding/personnel to actively assist communities in planning and managing these issues is very limited. Unfortunately, the situation is not unique to the Cowichan region, and other areas are experiencing similar challenges.

Gulf Pacific (property management of VGM) - We have had a number of meetings with the managers and they understand the situation, but are not able to provide additional resources to improve the loitering or maintenance. To help service their property, they have increased security in 2024. To improve safety and reduce the misuse of the transit shelters, they support removal of the shelters and benches, but anticipate that the unhoused population will likely find another location somewhere on VGM property to take shelter.

Cowichan Tribes - CVRD staff have informed and sought feedback from Cowichan Tribes staff of the situation at the VGM shelter, and misuse of the transit shelters; however, to date staff have not received any specific feedback or action(s) to improve the situation.

In addition to the above, staff liaise with service providers where possible to improve our understanding of these community-based challenges.

Options

Removal of the shelters – Regarding the unsightly conditions and misuse of the transit shelters on James Street and on Beverly Street, these two in particular seem to be a direct result of the close proximity to the EWC at CCC. With the anticipated warmer weather coming in the near future, the EWC at CCC is set to close at the end of March. It is expected that some of the unhoused individuals will likely take up space at these two nearby transit shelters, causing further issues for the transit customers and our ability to keep the shelters maintained and reasonably clean.

To reduce the misuse at VGM and CSS transit stops, improve safety, and reduce the extra maintenance and cleaning required to keep up with the misuse, one option that staff are recommending is to remove the transit shelters and benches at these two locations. Unfortunately, these are well-used transit stops and removal of these amenities will inconvenience riders.

The CVRD is not the only region removing transit amenities. Shelters have been removed in challenging areas in the RDN and also on Pandora Street in Victoria for similar reasons.

The shelters from the VGM and CSS stops can be removed and stored temporarily at the transit facility on Boal Road until:

- a) New locations are identified outside the core area where the shelters can be reinstalled; or
- b) Shelters can possibly be reinstalled in their current locations once challenges within the core area have subsided or become better managed with the establishment of housing and/or day-use facilities for challenged populations.

CVRD, Transdev and BC Transit will continue to monitor the transit shelter on Beverly Street by VIU for one month (until end of April) after the EWC at CCC is closed to determine whether the misuse subsides; and if not, or if it becomes worse, then staff also recommend removing this shelter and bench as well.

Continued Monitoring and Maintenance – The decision to remove the transit shelters can be deferred for some period of time; however, increased inspections, maintenance and cleaning will be required impacting the already limited transit maintenance budget, and we will continue to get complaints from Transdev and transit customers.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The transit maintenance budgets are fairly lean and have not changed significantly for many years. The current budget does not have the capacity to significantly increase maintenance and cleaning at the more challenged bus stops/shelters without impacting maintenance for all the other stop locations. The cost of pressure washing the VGM shelters is approximately \$500 each time.

The cost to dismantle, transport and reinstall the shelters (when appropriate) will be funded within the 2024 transit budgets.

COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS

N/A

STRATEGIC/BUSINESS PLAN CONSIDERATIONS

N/A

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:

☒ Corporate Officer

☒ Chief Financial Officer

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A – Recent Photos of Misuse of Transit Shelters