



North Shore News Column.

Older & Wiser

By Tom Carney

Taxi program phase-out requires second look

By Tom Carney, Special to North Shore News May 27, 2012

ONE of the more enjoyable parts of my job is scheduling speakers for a monthly meeting for agencies that provide services to seniors.

I've just booked a presentation by TransLink and I'm sure we'll have a discussion about their recent decision to phase out the popular Taxi Saver program. The news came as a surprise to the users of the Taxi Saver program and, I suspect, to Martin Crilly, the TransLink commissioner, who earlier this month recommended that transit make more use of the Taxi Saver service.

To be fair, even with the elimination of the Taxi Saver program taxi rides will still be part of the TransLink system but only as a supplemental rather than a stand alone offering. The Taxi Saver program allows eligible seniors and people with disabilities to purchase taxi vouchers at a 50 per cent discount with TransLink paying the rest. TransLink suggests the change will provide more service for clients of HandyDART and result in greater operational efficiencies.

Really? It costs at least twice as much to transport a patron to their destination by HandyDART than by a taxi. Factor in that the user pays 50 per cent of the cost of the taxi ride and the cost to TransLink drops by half again.

It's true that the HandyDART service has become more expansive and the conventional buses are now more accessible but neither fleet is fully accessible for persons with mobility challenges.

TransLink cites fraud in the system - coupons could be handed out to friends and relatives - but that is easily addressed through better administrative measures.

Here's the real problem faced by seniors and the disabled by the elimination of the Taxi Saver program. First, some seniors are too frail to use the HandyDART system. Second, the HandyDART bus will get you to where you need to go but not when you want to get there. Typically you need to book three to five days in advance to get a ride to your destination. And, unlike the Taxi Saver program, even then there is no assurance that a ride can be secured.

With the Taxi Saver program the client can get a ride almost immediately to where they want or need to go. It's really the only option the client has for same-day service. The chair of the access transit user advisory committee suggests the changes will make it easier to book spontaneous trips but that's not what TransLink's own numbers tell us.

Last year there were 18,100 cases in which a trip request could not be filled because a vehicle was not available at the time to serve the client. In the first year alone, TransLink estimates that by reallocating funds for Taxi Saver into supplemental taxi service the cost savings would allow TransLink to fill an additional 19,900 HandyDART requests. That will help catch up to the current demand but it doesn't leave much room to reduce the wait time for service.

And, there is no commitment that I can find to put all of the savings from the elimination of the Taxi Saver program into the HandyDART service. Savings, according to Crilly, are possible for TransLink in bus system logistics, maintenance and administration and that's where TransLink should be looking for efficiencies.

If the objective is to save money, how does it make sense to cancel the most economical and cost-effective part of the HandyDART system?

TransLink has more advisory committees than a centipede has legs. Let's hope they go back and take a second look at this one.

Tom Carney is the executive director of the Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. Ideas for future columns are welcome. Contact him at 604-985-3852 or send an email to lions_view@telus.net.