

Potential Program for Free Access to Transit Services for Students

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Prepared by:	Danielle Derochie Transit
Recommended by:	General Manager of Community Development

Report Summary

This report provides information on the feasibility and financial implications of providing free transit access to high school students by analyzing similar programs in other municipalities.

Relationship to the Strategic Plan, Health Impact Assessment and Climate Action Plans

This report describes work related to the Transit Action Plan and continued efforts to expand ridership through innovative and responsive system improvements, in alignment with the Asset Management and Service Excellence objective, and goal 1.5 “Demonstrate Innovation and Cost-Effective Service Delivery”.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

Background

During the August 12, 2024, Community and Emergency Services meeting, through resolution CESC2024-25, Staff were directed to consult with the municipality of Kingston and other municipalities with similar free secondary student transit programs. Staff were directed to analyze service models and partnerships with local school boards for delivering free transit services to high school students. This report provides the requested information regarding the experiences of other transit services.

Free Transit for High School Student Programs

Consultations with other municipalities revealed varied outcomes for youth transit ridership programs. Common issues include increased service costs, capacity problems, increased on-board incidents adversely affecting regular transit users; apart from service level costs, programs have reportedly been linked to higher absenteeism rates due to students using transit to leave school during the day.

Kingston Transit, High School Pass Program

Established in 2014, Kingston's High School Pass Program provides free transit to about 10,000 high school students, including homeschooled students. The program aims to offer mobility for activities like co-op placements, jobs, and extracurriculars. Students use smart cards to access transit, with a \$3.00 fee for lost or stolen cards. The program is mainly funded by the City of Kingston, with two (2) out of four (4) school boards collectively contributing a total of \$60,000 annually, since 2014. Despite fare increases, school board contributions have not increased. The program has successfully increased youth ridership, accounting for 5.4% of overall ridership in 2024. Kingston Transit has confirmed that a full cost accounting of the program has not been undertaken.

Kingston also has a Field Trip Program, offering unlimited passes for school field trips during school hours. In 2023-2024, 220 passes were issued, with two school boards contributing \$7,500. The funding model has since changed to a \$40 annual fee per participating school. Schools must coordinate trips with Kingston Transit, limiting trips to 30 students to manage capacity.

London Transit Commission, Secondary School Student Transit Pass Pilot Program

In Spring 2024, London City Council directed a two-year pilot project with the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB) to provide annual transit passes to 450 students at Clarke Road Secondary School, in grades 9 and 10, starting in September of 2024.

LTC staff raised concerns about the high cost (\$900,000), lack of funding beyond the pilot, undefined success measures, and the negative impacts on existing riders related to increased ridership on crowded routes.

The cost for the two-year pilot program is estimated to be approximately \$900,000. This is based on the City of London's reimbursement to the LTC, the cost of monthly student passes for each of the 450 participants and costs associated with the administration of the program. Included in the overall cost for the pilot is a programming cost of \$27,487. This will be required to make the necessary adjustments to fare tables within the LTC's existing smart card software to allow for distinct tracking of ridership associated with the pilot program. The City of London will be responsible for the full cost of the pilot program as there is no subsidy funding being contributed by other levels of government or the TVDSC to support the costs of the program.

TVDSB requested provincial funding, but it has not been approved. The pilot is unlikely to increase ridership enough to secure additional funding allocation from the Provincial Gas Tax Program. Revenue losses may occur if current paying customers cannot rely on transit during peak times.

LTC reviewed routes near Clarke Road Secondary School, finding them already over capacity (150 per cent to 200 per cent) during peak times. The pilot may add pressure on weekends as well. Overcrowding issues cannot be addressed until the following year, based on previous year's data. LTC is focusing on current ridership and capacity issues by increasing routes, frequency and reliability. Concerns about behaviour and fare compliance have also been noted, similar to issues with free transit for children under 12.

Ongoing discussions aim to clarify roles and address issues. A report to the LTC Board is expected in February to decide if the pilot will proceed in September 2025.

Barrie Transit, Barrie Transit and Simcoe County District School Board High School Pilot Program

In Fall 2024, Barrie Transit, in partnership with the Simcoe County District School Board, launched a pilot project providing free transit passes to 80 students in a specified area via the City's Mobile Transit App. The small pilot area was chosen to minimize financial impacts and capacity issues, using existing service capacity. The City of Barrie will cover the full cost, with no subsidies from higher government levels or the Simcoe Country District School Board.

The program aims to foster independence and mobility for jobs and extracurricular activities, and to encourage public transit use, instead of school board transportation. Long-term, it hopes school boards will consider purchasing student transit passes. City and school board staff provided educational materials and travel training sessions in fall 2024.

A staff report to City Council in Spring 2025 will update on the pilot program using data from the Mobile Transit App. A second report will follow, after the 2024-2025 school year.

Guelph Transit, Transit for High School Students Pilot Program

Starting February 1, 2025, Guelph Transit offers free transit to youths aged 13-17 every weekday after 5:00 p.m. and on weekends and holidays until December 31, 2025. This avoids conflicts with school bus service. The program's annual cost is \$134,000, including \$92,000 in revenue loss and \$42,000 in staffing costs. It is funded by the Tax Operating Contingency Reserve, with no subsidies from higher government levels or school boards. Staff will monitor the program and seek sponsorships to offset costs.

Concerns include increased ridership on already crowded buses, potentially requiring additional buses. A recommendation on making the program permanent will be presented before Guelph's 2026 budget process.

GOVA Transit Supporting Youth Ridership

Expanding and encouraging ridership among youth has been shown to foster continued use of public transit and improve rider retention. In addition to the reduced fees for fares and passes for students and youth riding on the conventional transit system, GOVA Transit currently has programs and initiatives in place to support and encourage student ridership on the conventional system.

Discount Passes

GOVA Transit offers discounted 6 Ride and 31 Day Passes for students and youth to increase ridership. Students and youth pay \$15.00 for 6 Ride Cards (29% discount) compared to \$20.00 for adults. Monthly passes for students are \$85.75 (13% discount), and youth \$56.00 (57% discount) compared to the \$100.50 for adults. Students must present a valid student card and proof of enrollment to obtain a Student Transit Photo ID, which is valid for four years. The Youth Transit Photo IDs are available for children aged 5-12. Both IDs can be purchased at the Downtown Transit Hub Kiosk.

Travel Training

In 2024, the City of Greater Sudbury in collaboration with the Sudbury Catholic District School Board's Student Senate, launched a GOVA Awareness Campaign to promote public transportation and educate students on navigating the GOVA Transit System. GOVA Transit ambassadors visited St. Benedict Catholic Secondary School, Marymount Academy and Bishop Alexander Carter Catholic Secondary School with a GOVA Transit conventional bus to provide travel training to students in grades 7 and 8. The training covered routes and schedules, fares, and passes, bike rack usage, accessibility, safety and security and bus etiquette. Each student received a 1 Ride card through the Free Access to Transit Program, with a total of 225 ride cards distributed. The program's costs were covered by a designated Community Event Programs budget, which hosts \$45,424 in 2025. Due to the program's success, more training sessions are planned for Spring 2025 in collaboration with the Sudbury Catholic District School Board's Student Senate.

Free Access to Transit Services Program

The GOVA Free Access to Transit Services Program offers free travel on the conventional system for community and school board groups of up to 35 people. Funded by the Provincial Gas Tax, this program allows schools to use transit for field trips, experiential learning opportunities and school related activities. Information and applications are available on the GOVA Transit's website. Approved applicants receive a letter for free group transportation. In 2024, 2,433 students benefited from this program, with 1,708 receiving

free rides, and 725 getting ride cards at a cost of \$9,732. Operating off-peak times, the program helps students learn to use the transit system in a less crowded, relaxed environment.

GOVA Service and Additional Considerations

Before implementing free transit access for students, several factors must be considered, including service level cost, staff resources, impact on existing routes and ridership, potential reduction in yellow school bus services, and success metrics.

In 2024, GOVA Transit saw a ridership increase to 6.2 million, an 18.6% increase from 2023, leading to 11,000 additional service hours at a net cost of \$722,139. Ridership for 31-day Student Pass was 2,272,191 in 2024; an increase of 19% year over year. Should Council direct staff to implement a free access to transit program for high school students, concerns exist that the overcrowdings and strain on the system will negatively affect paying riders and require more service hours.

Predicting the program's full impact is challenging due to unknown factors such as student participation and travel patterns. Routes 104 (Azilda/Chelmsford), 105 (Valley), and 11 (Donovan) may be most affected by increased student use.

Additionally, fare evasion (inappropriate use of student passes) and negative on-board behaviors could rise. Tracking program success is difficult without distinguishing high school from post-secondary student ridership, necessitating fare structure updates.

Financial Considerations

Implementing a free transit program for high school students involves significant service level costs and administrative responsibilities. Continued discussions with local school boards are needed to determine their potential support. Without reducing yellow school bus services, the municipality risks duplicating transportation costs currently funded by the province.

Most municipalities offering similar programs have increased their budget for transit services or funded a trial from reserve or other one-time funding sources. They receive minimal school board or government contributions.

An enhanced service level would require a budget increase or additional outside funding. A pilot project would allow staff to gather key data related to high school student transit usage to be able to determine the full financial impact of such program. Assuming 15% of eligible high school students made use of a free monthly transit pass, the estimated net cost would be \$1,120,581.

Summary

Should Council wish to further explore a free transit program for high school students, staff will return with a report describing the steps required for a pilot project to determine the viability and impact of a free transit program for high school students.

Resources Cited

Kingston High School Pass Program: <https://www.kingstontransit.ca/fares-and-passes/high-school-passes/>

London Transit Commission Staff Report #6 – Secondary School Student Transit Pass Pilot Program, May 29, 2024: <https://www.londontransit.ca/staff-report-6-secondary-school-student-transit-pass-pilot-program/>

London Transit Commission Staff Report #5 – Secondary School Student Transit Pass Pilot Program, August 28, 2024: <https://www.londontransit.ca/staff-report-5-secondary-school-student-transit-pass-pilot-program/>

London Transit Commission Staff Report #5 – Secondary School Student Transit Pass Pilot Program, January 29, 2025: <https://www.londontransit.ca/staff-report-5-secondary-school-student-transit-pass-pilot-program-2/>

Thames Valley District School Board – Report to Planning and Priorities Committee – Clarke Road Secondary School Transit Pass Pilot Program – TVDSB Role / Responsibilities, January 14, 2025: <https://pub-tvdsb.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=7560>

Barrie Transit and Simcoe County District School Board High School Pilot Program – Motion 24-A-076: <file:///C:/Users/celect/Downloads/Minutes.pdf>

Guelph Council Memo – Response to Mayoral Direction 2024-B2; Transit for High School Students: https://pub-guelph.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=53477&utm_source=guelphtoday.com&utm_campaign=guelphtoday.com%3A%20outbound&utm_medium=referral

GOVA Transit Free Access to Transit Services: <https://www.greatersudbury.ca/live/transit/fares-and-passes/>

GOVA Awareness Campaign: <https://www.sudburycatholicschools.ca/blog/2024/06/14/scdsb-student-senate-promotes-public-transit-with-gova-awareness-campaign/>