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Item No. 21.7
Halifax Regional Council
February 11, 2025

TO: Mayor Fillmore and Members of Halifax Regional Council
FROM: Cathie O'Toole, Chief Administrative Officer
DATE: January 16, 2025
SUBJECT: Update on the Moving Forward Together Plan

INFORMATION REPORT

ORIGIN

December 10, 2024 Halifax Regional Council motion (10.2):

MOVED by Councillor Cuttell, seconded by Councillor Morse

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

Request an information report on updating *The Moving Forward Together Plan*. The report should include information on a timeline for completion and any other information that can be communicated to the public about Halifax Transit's plans for updating Halifax Regional Municipality's Transit Strategy.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The transit service adjustments completed in 2024/25 will represent the last year of service changes under the existing multi-year plan (*The Moving Forward Together Plan*). As such, a new transit service plan is needed to establish short term transit route or service level changes that respond to current demand, as well as anticipate future needs.

The ability to respond to our rapid regional growth and evolving mobility needs requires a more flexible planning approach moving forward; transit planning and engagement will shift from an isolated period of activity to an ongoing process.

For the upcoming year, the primary focus will be on a three-year service plan. The intent is to bring this *Core Service Plan* forward for approval within six months, and also to seek Regional Council approval for any 2025/26 transit service changes at that time.

BACKGROUND

In accordance with *Regional Municipal Strategic Planning* policy, transit service plans are prepared at regular intervals. This strategic planning activity involves public and stakeholder input and guides investment and decision making for delivering transit service that responds to the evolving needs of the municipality. The resultant multi-year strategic plan is operationalized through an annual service plan which identifies the implementation planned for the upcoming year.

In 2016, the *Moving Forward Together Plan (MFTP)* was adopted by the Regional Council. This service plan was the culmination of extensive preparation and community engagement. The MFTP was not a service plan with incremental changes but was instead a comprehensive plan to restructure the transit route network, based on improving, enhancing and extending service. This scale of network redesign is not frequently undertaken, and it would be typical for there to be decades in between network redesigns. A series of values-based principles, developed from community engagement, provided the foundations for the network redesign, as follows:

1. Increase the proportion of resources allocated towards high ridership services.
2. Build a simplified transfer-based system.
3. Invest in service quality and reliability.
4. Give transit increased priority in the transportation network.

Implementation of the MFTP began in 2016 and included widespread changes to transit routes and service levels. These service adjustments resulted in significant ridership increases between 2016 and 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Transit usage which declined during the pandemic has since rebounded, and new trip patterns have emerged across all transportation modes. Halifax Transit is now facing increased challenges related to overloads, schedule adherence, and service reliability.

Originally intended to be completed in five years, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent resource constraints impacted implementation timelines for the MFTP. The service adjustments completed in 2024/25 will represent the last year of service changes under this plan. As such, a new multi-year transit service plan is needed to inform future service adjustments.

DISCUSSION

Transit planning is done within the context of broader strategic plans. Specifically, both the Regional Plan and Integrated Mobility Plan help to shape transit in the region and integrate the transportation network with land use patterns with the aim of improving mobility and building more sustainable, healthy, and affordable communities. The Rapid Transit Strategy is also a strategic plan that aligns rapid transit services with land use policy and growth projections. Implementation of the fast and reliable services proposed in that plan, specifically Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and new ferry services are critical to supporting population growth and providing sustainable transportation options, and ideally will form the backbone of the transit system in the future. Transit service plans, such as the *MFTP*, work within the parameters of these broader strategic plans to optimize the route network, service levels, and address operational pressures.



One minor route change in February 2025 will represent the last service change to be implemented as part of the *MFTP*. One additional route was proposed in Middle Sackville (Margeson Drive) but is yet to be completed and will be carried forward to the next service plan, as it is contingent on the required infrastructure being in place. Where the *MFTP* proposed changes to infrastructure as well, there is also an outstanding recommendation to construct the Wrights Cove Terminal; this project is ongoing and targeted for completion in 2025/26.

Revised Approach to Transit Service Planning – Building a Strategic Roadmap

Halifax Transit proposes to evolve the way that service planning processes are executed to be more flexible for our rapidly growing region. While previous service plans, including those in 2002, 2008, and the *MFTP*, were developed to be implemented over five years, modifications were often required within those planning periods. In addition, developing a comprehensive plan to address all the elements of service provision takes a significant amount of time. The ability to respond to our rapid regional growth and evolving mobility needs requires a more flexible planning approach.

A revised planning process, wherein ongoing planning activities take place, and a series of deliverables are completed and approved, together forming a *Strategic Roadmap*, is proposed in lieu of one larger comprehensive plan. This means a short-term deliverable of a three-year service plan can be completed efficiently, with a reduced scope, and then be followed by new service plans every two years. Other planning activities can take place concurrently, addressing various elements of transit planning, at different scales. This includes reviewing infrastructure (ie, bus stop spacing, accessibility standards, terminals), options to introduce on-demand/ microtransit, the impacts on the network of introducing bus rapid transit, and longer-

term expansion plans. As an example, there is pressure to expand the transit service area to include outside of the Urban Transit Service Boundary. Where this is part of a larger strategic planning process, including land use planning and infrastructure growth planning, it would not be included in the short-term service plan. This planning work would still be a priority, the timeline of which would occur in alignment with required analysis and development of a strategic infrastructure plan, and any changes to transit service as a result would ultimately become a part of Halifax Transit’s Strategic Roadmap.

With the process of developing key deliverables continually, transit planning and engagement will shift from an isolated period of activity to an ongoing process. This shift offers increased responsiveness and transparency within the planning process. The workplan and deliverables for each year would be confirmed through the annual business planning process, to allow flexibility to address immediate needs and to align with external factors/processes. For the upcoming year, the primary focus will be the *Core Service Plan*.

The following list of plans, strategies and analysis shows a potential workplan for the following three years, meant to demonstrate the breadth of possible deliverables and need for ongoing strategic planning. The scope and workplan for each year will be defined annually for the upcoming year.

Topic	Type	Description
Core Service Plan (2025-2027)	Service Plan	Outlines route changes and service level adjustments.
Service Reliability	Analysis	A project will be initiated to analyze service reliability data and identify challenges, barriers, and potential opportunities for improvement.
Ferry Service	Operational Review	Conduct a review of the operational structure/model, policies and procedures to optimize services for efficiency and growth.
Safety	Implementation Plan	This plan will outline a Transit Safety Program, including defining goals, resources, and objectives of the program.
Technology	Roadmap	This plan will review and consider transit technologies for the potential to expand functionality and services.
Access-A-Bus	Operational Review	Review of administrative best practices to optimize service and prepare for growth.
On-Demand (Microtransit)	Service Plan	Identify the role of on-demand transit services in the region and develop a proposal for implementation.
Bus Rapid Transit Integration	Service Plan	Outlines route changes required to align the existing network with the proposed Bus Rapid Transit network.
Transit Infrastructure	Standards Development /Implementation Plan	A review of existing bus stops and terminals to consider expansion, upgrades, and renewal, incorporating accessibility and sustainability.
Transit Priority Measures	Implementation Plan	Following from the service reliability analysis, a plan to optimize conditions in the road network to improve reliability.
Customer Experience	Standards Development	Review of elements of customer experience, with recommendations to reduce barriers and enhance customer experience.
Core Service Plan (2028-2029)	Service Plan	Outlines route changes and service level adjustments.

Core Service Plan 2025-2027

The focus of this multi-year plan will be to establish short term transit route or service level changes that respond to current demand, as well as anticipate future needs. The *Core Service Plan* will build upon the foundations of the *MFTP* and will continue to rely on the principles and guidelines established in that plan to inform transit planning with the aim to improve and enhance the transit network.

Development of the *Core Service Plan* will include: evaluating network performance and adherence to service standards; analyzing travel patterns across all modes, including transit ridership; reviewing requests for service; considering new development, changes to the transportation network, and growth within the transit service area, and public consultation on the draft plan. The recommendations of the *Core Service Plan* are expected to address gaps in service, potentially including network modifications, changes to service spans, and frequency. The three-year time horizon for this *Core Service Plan* means that it will only respond to development that will be complete by 2027, and modifications to accommodate changes outside that period, for example, any route changes to service the new Mill Cove Ferry Terminal, would be addressed in a subsequent plan.

The initial review and analysis required for this plan is nearing completion. In advance of public consultation, preliminary meetings will be offered to Councillors to discuss the scope of the plan and local transit concerns. Public engagement is anticipated to begin in March 2025, and will be a multi-pronged approach, including widely distributed surveys, supporting materials via the *Shape your City* portal, and focused consultation in key areas where routing changes are anticipated. The *Core Service Plan* is expected to be completed for council review within the next 6 months.

Fiscal 2025/26 Transit Service Changes

Service changes for the fiscal year are typically presented in an *Annual Service Plan (ASP)* that accompanies the *Halifax Transit Budget and Business Plan*. Where the *Core Service Plan* is under development, an *Annual Service Plan* will not be available prior to the beginning of the 2025/26 fiscal year. When the *Core Service Plan* is brought forward for approval, the intent is to concurrently seek Regional Council approval for any 2025/26 transit service changes at that time. However, as a carry forward from the 2024/25 *Annual Service Plan*, the reinstatement of nine peak trips is planned for May 2025, where this previously approved reinstatement of trips has been phased in throughout 2024/25 based on resource constraints.

The transit service changes proposed annually are typically based on the available budgeted resource increases, specifically, the purchase of new buses and associated operating costs. In some cases, resources can be reallocated from low performing routes to areas of need, but opportunities for this are limited. Service increases over the life of the *Core Service Plan* are expected to be challenging due to current constraints on bus supply and technology. New zero emission buses require longer lead times than historic diesel bus purchases. They also require supporting infrastructure, which will limit the amount Halifax Transit can purchase in the short term as charging capacity at the Ragged Lake Transit Centre is limited, and the Burnside Transit Centre Eco-Rebuild is required prior to accepting zero emission buses at that facility. To mitigate this, and to address short term service quality challenges, through the annual budget process Halifax Transit will be proposing postponing the retirement of a small number of diesel buses that were slated to be replaced by electric buses in 2025. The intent would be to utilize these vehicles and associated operating costs (including higher than typical maintenance costs), to address high priority schedule adherence, overload, and frequency challenges on existing routes/trips.

There is also increased pressure on the current articulated bus fleet due to ridership growth and overloads, but these vehicles are reaching the end of their useful life. Continuing to operate these vehicles beyond their intended lifespan will result in decreased service reliability and increased maintenance costs. At this time, there are no zero emission articulated buses available in the North American market that meet the range and reliability requirements of Halifax Transit, and the only option to respond to increases in demand for these buses is to procure diesel articulated buses.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There were no financial implications identified associated with this information report.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

No community engagement was undertaken specific to this report.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Section 69 of the *Halifax Regional Municipality Charter* provides that:

- 69 (1) The Municipality may provide a public transportation service by
- (a) the purchase of vehicles or vessels and operation of the service;
 - (b) providing financial assistance to a person who will undertake to provide the service; or
 - (c) a combination of these methods.

Policy T-5 of the 2014 *Regional Municipal Planning Strategy* provides that:

- T-5 Transit Service Plans shall be prepared at regular intervals for consideration by HRM. These plans will be developed in consultation with the public and other stakeholders and, upon adoption by HRM, shall provide guidance for investment in transit services.

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