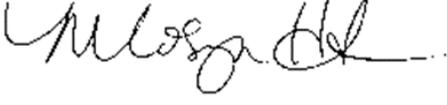




INFORMATION REPORT

TO:	Chair and Members Public Works Committee
COMMITTEE DATE:	October 15, 2024
SUBJECT/REPORT NO:	Hamilton Street Railway (HSR) Fare Policies (PW23024(b)) (City Wide)
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	City Wide
PREPARED BY:	Nancy Purser (905) 546-2424 Ext. 1876
SUBMITTED BY:	Maureen Cosyn Heath Director, Transit Public Works Department
SIGNATURE:	

COUNCIL DIRECTION

The Fare Assist Pilot Program was unanimously approved by Council on July 14, 2023, per Report PW23024(a). At the December 13, 2023 Council meeting, staff were directed to report back to the Public Works Committee in September 2024 on the findings during a six-month grace period that was instituted for those currently utilizing the Hamilton Street Railway (HSR) Temporary Transit Fare Special program, which ended on June 30, 2024.

This report provides information on actions taken by HSR to provide customer support through the transition process and activities undertaken to inform, educate and support transit riders and feedback received from those who enrolled in the program during this timeframe.

INFORMATION

Council approved a two-year pilot of the HSR Fare Assist program, for the period of January 1, 2024 to June 30, 2026 through Report PW23024(a). During the two-year pilot, the following programs were suspended: the Affordable Transit Pass program and the Temporary Transit Fare Special program effective December 31st, 2023.

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At the December 13, 2023 Council meeting the Temporary Transit Fare Special program was provided an additional 6-month grace period, which ended on June 30, 2024.

The Affordable Transit Pass provided a 50% discount off the Adult Monthly Pass for employed recipients ages 18-64 on either Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support programs, and Low Income individuals. The Temporary Transit Fare Special Program, valid on HSR only, gave people with a Canadian National Institute for the Blind (“CNIB”) card or using a personal mobility device (scooter, walker or wheelchair) a voluntary pay option, meaning they could elect to pay full fare, partial fare or no fare.

Neither of the above programs extend to additional household members. The Temporary Transit Fare program only applies to trips taken on the HSR, with no discount provided on accessible transportation services.

Fare Assist was designed to contribute to fare affordability, freedom to travel by transit and increase ridership through making fares more affordable. It is a means-tested approach which could be consistently applied to all applicants.

Fare Assist offers several benefits over current programs including:

- Applies equally to trips taken on both the HSR and accessible transportation services.
- Applies to qualified applicants based on income and is no longer tied to a limited list of specific disabilities.
- “Pay as you go” format enables eligible participants to load funds as needed on their PRESTO card and pay a reduced fare per trip and eliminates the need to have sufficient cash to buy a monthly pass.
- Applies to all members of the household, including a spouse/partner and children ages 13 to 17.
- Offers greater flexibility to the customer, putting them in control of how much to load on their card at a time.
- HSR loyalty program automatically applies (customers receive free fare faster once they exceed the weekly ride cap for the week travelling Monday to Sunday for both HSR and accessible transportation services trips).

In response to early feedback received through delegations, Council approved the additional six-month grace period to those using the HSR Temporary Transit Fare Special program. This provided additional time for education, outreach, and program on-boarding. The grace period also addressed concerns raised that the application was not made available online until late December 2023 and that people may not be aware

of the changes coming. Staff undertook multiple activities during the grace period to support the community through the change including:

- Advertising (interior bus ads, Bus News, social media boosts, take-ones at outreach events).
- Digital Media (website, social media)
- Outreach events (focus in the downtown area, and all wards covered) which provided over 10,000 interactions.
- Pamphlets at 23 community organizations and businesses (tax clinics, community organizations, resource centres, city connections).
- Direct mail to 4,600 Accessible Transportation Services customers.
- Emails to 13,792 Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program clients who had an email on file.

Significant support for program implementation was provided through Transit's Support Services, Customer Experience and Innovation, Accessible Transportation Services, Operations and Fleet Maintenance departments. A comprehensive list of outreach activities is shown in Appendix "A" attached to Report PW23024(b).

Early feedback also raised concerns with the change to front door boarding. Therefore, front door entry training was made available to persons using mobility devices at various bus terminals or by request. Training was provided to 25 individuals. On the ground feedback determined most personal mobility devices users were already aware of how to board at the front door. Transit continues to make this service available at various events or in person upon request.

Applications for Fare Assist have been accepted and processed since January 1, 2024. To the end of June 2024, 4,256 customers had been approved, of these, 694 are children 12 and under who are household members of fare assist customers and ride for free. Of those who were issued the discount, 62% had activated it on their PRESTO card.

As of August 9, 2024, with the end of the grace period, the number of applications received increased by 628 to a total of 4,967 and redemptions increased to 70%. The increase in redemptions suggests that Temporary Transit Special Fare program users had applied, however, chose not to access the Fare Assist program until the grace period ended.

The average time to process an application and issue an approval email or letter is three business days. The demographics of the applicants, including income category, age, and ward are shown in Appendix "B" attached to Report PW23024(b). The proposed program estimated that there would be approximately 9,000 participants as shown in Appendix "A" attached to Report PW23024(a); we have reached 55% of this

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estimate, with applications continuing to be received daily. Outreach will continue throughout the remainder of the pilot program, with continued emphasis on reaching more low-income households.

Feedback about this program is important to its success and to inform potential future program changes. There are two mechanisms being used to gather customer insights: a satisfaction survey and customer feedback collected through the call centre emails or in person at the ticket office.

1. Program Satisfaction Survey Results

An ongoing survey has been created for the Fare Assist Program. The survey seeks to understand the ease of use for the application process and the ease of access to the discount on PRESTO as well as the overall satisfaction with the Fare Assist Program, the details are included in Appendix “D” attached to Report PW23024(b).

2,400 surveys have been issued to households approved for Fare Assist. As of August 9, a total of 534 surveys (22%) have been completed. Of the 534 surveys received to date:

- 69% (366 respondents) applied as a single person household.
- 21% (112 respondents) applied as family of applicants.
- 47% (253 respondents) identified as a person with a disability.
- 25% (133 respondents) previously used the Affordable Transit Pass program.
- 15% (78 respondents) previously used the Temporary Transit Fare Special program.

Application Process:

- 87% (465 respondents) found the application process “relatively easy”, suggesting that the steps are clear and accessible for a large portion of the population.
- 88% (468 respondents) found the PRESTO registration process “easy”, indicating that for most customers, the steps to register their PRESTO cards were clear and accessible.
- 87% (465 respondents) were satisfied with the length of time it took to apply for and start using Fare Assist, suggesting that for most customers, the process is timely and efficient.

Satisfaction with the Program:

- 87% (444 respondents) expressed satisfaction with the Fare Assist program, indicating that it is positively impacting many customers' ability to access public transit.

- 86% (438 respondents) of respondents appreciate the 30% discount, finding it beneficial in reducing their overall transit costs.
- 90% (460 respondents) would recommend this program to friends and family.
- 8.8% (45 respondents) previously accessed either the Affordable Transit Pass or the Temporary Transit Special Fare program and have responded that they are “somewhat dissatisfied” or “extremely dissatisfied” with the program as the previous discount was better.

Impact on Transit Usage:

The survey asked respondents if it allowed them to travel more frequently because of the price reduction. Responses show that 192 customers now travel daily, versus 162 before the program, an increase of 18%. Similarly, customers who travel 3 to 4 days a week increased to 173 from 144, a 20% improvement.

Prior to the Fare Assist Pilot Program, 31 survey respondents reported they travel by transit only one day a month, while only 9 survey respondents reported one day a month travel with the program in place, a 240% improvement.

These results are encouraging and suggest that this program is directly increasing transit usage.

Appendix “C” attached to Report PW23024(b) displays the monthly ridership for the first 7 months of the Fare Assist program.

Persons with Disabilities:

The Fare Assist Pilot Program received early feedback regarding the potential impact on some persons with disabilities who take the HSR using a scooter, walker or wheelchair, or are Canadian National Institute for the Blind (“CNIB”) cardholders. To collect feedback, the survey requested respondents to self-identify as a person with a disability and/or if they had used either of the suspended programs historically.

Of the 534 total surveys, 47% (253 respondents) identified as a person with a disability. Of these 253 surveys returned to date:

- 85% (215 respondents) found it was easy to apply for the program.
- 85% (216 respondents) found it easy to register their PRESTO card.
- 85% (214 respondents) are “somewhat satisfied” or “extremely satisfied” with how quickly they were able to apply and start receiving the discount.

The survey also asked this group of respondents about their use of any suspended programs. Of these 253 respondents, 21% or 54 respondents said they previously utilized the Affordable Transit Pass and 19% or 48 respondents said they previously

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utilized the Temporary Transit Fare Special Program. 60% or 151 respondents did not report using one of the suspended programs. When asked the question “The 30% discount on single-ride PRESTO fares has made a positive impact on you and/or your family's monthly spending”, of the 242 responses:

- 200 (83%) somewhat agreed or agreed
- 17 (7%) neither agree nor disagree
- 25 (10%) somewhat disagree or disagree

Overall, this group reported an 85% satisfaction level with the Fare Assist program.

Of the 239 respondents who responded to the question regarding how often they ride, 49 respondents are riding daily versus 43 respondents prior to the program, a 13% increase. Respondents who travel 3 to 4 days a week reported a 20% increase from 74 to 89. The survey shows that 31 respondents are travelling infrequently, versus 59 respondents previously, a 53% improvement in customers' ability to access transit. Similar to overall survey results, these results suggest this segment is enjoying more frequent transit usage.

245 respondents answered the question, “Do you ride with HSR or DARTS vehicles?”

- 25 respondents utilize both the HSR and Accessible Transportation Services and now receive the 30% discount when travelling both on HSR and ATS.
- 14 respondents use Accessible Transportation Services only and now receive a 30% discount that did not exist before Fare Assist.
- 206 use HSR only.

Survey questions will evolve over the course of the pilot to gain a better understanding of how families travel, as well as other information that may be deemed relevant to the overall analysis of the program. The data shows that there may be only one family member who has set up the discount on their card, therefore, understanding how the remainder of the family travels will provide additional insights for the program analysis.

A separate survey will be sent to our social agencies to learn from their perspective if this program has helped their clients and whether it has created a greater demand for their services.

2. Customer Feedback

Customer feedback is received through the HSR Customer Contact team via phone or email. 83% of the contacts (119 out of 144) received were general inquiries about how the process worked or help to enrol or activate. We used this feedback to strengthen the

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information available for our customers and to simplify our processes. A list of improvements can be found in Appendix “E” attached to Report PW23024(b).

Problems with processing applications occurred during the early stages of the cyber incident as customers could not apply for the program between February 25 – April 9, 2024. This issue generated a number of customer inquiries. During the outage, paper versions of the applications were accepted and were processed as soon as the application was restored.

We heard from customers who are not happy with the changes made to previous programs, specifically those who may have chosen not to pay a fare in the past. A total of 9 (6%) complaints were recorded regarding the removal of the Affordable Transit Pass and Temporary Transit Special Fare Program. Appendix “F” to Report PW23024(b) provides details of HSR Customer Contacts.

Staff at the HSR ticket office began tracking requests for help with the Fare Assist process in mid-April. Those early requests were mostly related to PRESTO card set up and activating their discount. At the end of the additional 6-month grace period, many customers presented themselves in person at the Ticket Office for assistance in setting up their PRESTO card. Of 142 interactions, 72 or 51%, occurred once the grace period ended.

Overall, the results of the first 6 months of the Fare Assist Pilot Program are very promising and provide a strong foundation on which to continue addressing transit affordability for Hamiltonians.

The results of the 6-month grace period show that:

- 90% of survey respondents would recommend Fare Assist to friends and family.
- 87% of respondents find the Fare Assist Program easy to access.
- 83% of respondents are satisfied with the Fare Assist Program overall.

Data gathering will continue for the duration of the pilot, with additional metrics being added to monitor income levels for low-income applicants, as well as gaining insights through focus groups from program participants and the Accessible Transportation Services customer panel consisting of 275 participants and the HSR customer panel with 1,572 participants.

This Information Report fulfils the December 13, 2023 Council motion. Per Report PW23024(a), staff will continue to update the Public Works Committee on the status of the Fare Assist Program no later than March of 2025.

APPENDICES AND SCHEDULES ATTACHED

Appendix "A" to Report PW23024(b) – Education and Outreach
Appendix "B" to Report PW23024(b) – Fare Assist Demographics
Appendix "C" to Report PW23024(b) – Fare Assist Ridership
Appendix "D" to Report PW23024(b) – Fare Assist Survey Results
Appendix "E" to Report PW23024(b) – Fare Assist Continuous Improvement
Appendix "F" to Report PW23024(b) – Fare Assist Customer Feedback