

To All Commissioners

Re: COVID 19 Service and Ridership Impacts

Recommendation

The report be NOTED and FILED.

Background

The pandemic declaration in March of 2020 and associated lockdown measures that followed resulted in a significant decline in transit ridership across the country. In response to the decline in demand and decreased availability of employee resources relating to COVID-19, transit systems reduced service levels to better match ridership being experienced.

Over the period, a number of service level changes and reductions have taken place on both the conventional and specialized services. Currently the conventional service is operating on a modified Saturday level which is approximately 30% less service than what would normally be in place at this time of year, operating as follows:

- Saturday level of service on weekdays with the exception of Routes 28, 30, 36 and 37 which continue to operate at weekday level service in order to serve the industrial areas of the city
- Sunday level of service on Saturdays
- Christmas Day level of service on Sundays and statutory holidays
- Noting that Express Routes (90, 91, 92 and 94), short turn supplementary Routes (102, 104 and 106) and community bus routes are not currently operating

The chart below provides an overview of the ridership levels on the conventional service since mid-March as a percentage of what would normally be expected at this time noting the numbers are based on actual boardings as counted by the automatic passenger counters on buses.

Conventional Transit Ridership as a Percent of Normal

Ridership	March	April	May	June to date
Weekday	25%	22%	35%	44%
Saturday	36%	33%	46%	59%
Sunday	35%	30%	54%	67%

While not clearly delineated in the chart, significant bumps in ridership were experienced following the loosening of Provincial restrictions which took effect on both May 16, 2020 and June 12, 2020. These increases support the fact that Londoners continue to rely on transit to both get to and from work as well as for general access to the community. When assessing these ridership numbers, it is important to consider that, given ongoing expectations with respect to physical distancing, riders are expecting less-crowded buses than what they would normally experience. This expectation was the rationale for leaving service levels at 70% of normal when ridership was hovering around 25% of normal. As the chart indicates, the ridership levels are now reaching a point where the expectation of additional room on buses is going to be difficult to deliver, which, as indicated in Staff Report #3, dated June 24, 2020, is why riders are being strongly encouraged to wear masks or face coverings when using transit. Beginning the week of June 22, 2020 external messaging on buses will remind riders that masks are strongly encouraged while riding transit, and on-board posters will be updated to include similar messaging. Corporate social media accounts will continue to re-inforce this messaging as well.

While total ridership is gathered on a daily basis, further detailed analysis is also undertaken in an effort to identify routes that are experiencing higher ridership and crowding on buses. This information is shared regularly with Dispatch in an effort to ensure that the additional tripper buses being assigned daily are going where they will provide the greatest relief. The approach of inserting tripper buses on routes that are experiencing high ridership assists with crowding; however, given these buses are not scheduled, riders do not see them on the schedule. This approach can result in riders cramming on the scheduled bus because they are unaware there has been an additional bus added to the route that may be less full. Given riders are boarding at the back door, it is difficult for the Operator to advise customers of the option to wait for the bus that is following. In cases where continued concerns are being experienced on a particular route, and where resources are available, administration has added additional buses to the schedule in an effort to ensure riders are more aware of when buses are scheduled. In April, Routes 1, 6 and 34 were adjusted slightly in an effort to ensure access to hospital employees with shifts ending close to the last scheduled bus on those routes.

The loosened restrictions that took effect on June 12, 2020 resulted in significant traffic to the malls, and very high ridership on Routes 13 and 17 throughout most of the day. In an effort to provide riders along these corridors with more options, effective June 29, 2020 Route 90 will resume operating on a Saturday level of service weekdays and a Sunday level of service on Saturday, and Route 91 will resume operating

on regular weekday and Saturday schedules. It is anticipated this adjustment will provide additional options for riders accessing the malls and those utilizing the Oxford corridor and reduce the crowding currently being experienced on Routes 13 and 17. A PSA and social media communications will be issued during the week of June 22, 2020 advising riders of the upcoming changes.

As the chart above indicates, ridership on Sundays has grown back to 70% of what would normally be expected, with the service being provided on Sundays being a Christmas day level (approximately 80% of a normal Sunday level service). While administration would like to increase the level of service being provided on Sundays, resource availability does not permit it at this time. Ridership patterns and resource availability will continue to be analyzed and further adjustments will be made as they become possible, noting prior to reactivating a route, or making a frequency improvement, adequate resource levels need to be in place in order to ensure the buses go out as scheduled.

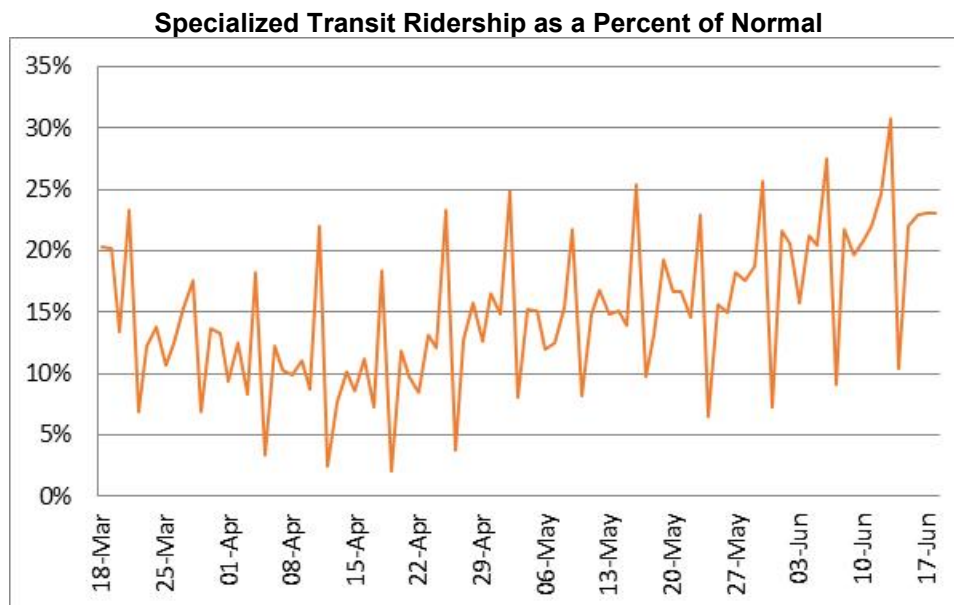
Given the timeframes required for sign-ups and resulting work preparation, a similar process is being undertaken for the service that will take effect in September. The return of students to the city impacts transit ridership significantly, making up approximately 50% of all conventional ridership. At time of report writing, it is anticipated that both Fanshawe and Western are expecting a return of a portion (between 45% and 70%) of their students to campus for at least some classes. What is not known is the number of students that will return to the city to complete their studies online, noting many may have already made living arrangements. While these students may not be attending campus for classes, they will still rely on transit to get around the city.

At the end of June, the Operator group will select work from three different sign-ups:

- regular September service levels (based on 2019 service noting 2020 service improvements have been deferred)
- 10% reduction in service levels – all routes serving the post-secondary schools would be at regular September levels, and remaining routes would operate on a Saturday level of service
- 30% reduction in service levels - modified Saturday service (similar to what is currently in place)

The service level that is ultimately put in place will need to be determined by August 21 in order to take effect in early September. This decision will be primarily based on resource availability, noting current non-attendance trends indicate that returning to a regular level of service in September is highly unlikely. In an effort to address resource issues, 12 additional Operators are being hired, all scheduled to be fully trained and ready for service in September. This approach places the Commission in a position that allows service levels to be altered quickly in response to the changing environment.

On the specialized service, ridership has also begun to rise with the opening of the economy, however not to the same extent that has occurred on the conventional service. The graph below provides the ridership on the specialized service since mid-March shown as a percentage of what would normally be expected during this time period.



Again, while not clearly depicted in the graph, ridership began to climb on May 16, 2020 and again on June 12, 2020 as the restrictions were eased across the Province. Modifying service levels on specialized is not as complicated noting the service is provided via contract, and as such, the ridership levels are being monitored and service levels can be increased as demand increases.

City of London COVID-19 Response Impacts

In response to the second stage of re-opening the economy, as well as requests from restaurant owners along Richmond, the City of London will be closing the southbound curb lane on Richmond between Mill and Kent to allow for expanded patios and sidewalks. Administration has shared the potential impacts to transit services along this corridor, noting an understanding for the need to assist local businesses as they attempt to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

Closing the curb lane on Richmond results in a single travel lane in the southbound direction between Mill and Kent. In order to provide service to the southbound stop located at Richmond and Central, a break in the lane closure will be permitted to allow for buses to access the curb to provide accessible boarding and alighting for passengers. The concern is that with only a single travel lane available it will be difficult for buses to re-enter into traffic after serving the stop, potentially resulting in schedule adherence concerns. Additionally, as more businesses continue to re-open, traffic volumes are starting to increase which will increase traffic in this area resulting in slower travel times and schedule adherence impacts.

As set out in Staff Report #5 - 2020 Road Construction Update, dated June 24, 2020 Richmond between King and York is currently under construction resulting in routes being detoured and starting on July 3, 2020 the intersection at King and Richmond will be closed with more routes detoured off regular routing. Coupled with Richmond only having a single southbound lane further north of the construction could compound the schedule adherence issues already being experienced on these routes.

Should significant schedule adherence issues be realized as a result of the lane closure, administration will be assessing options to mitigate the impacts, which may include closing the stop at Richmond and Central and/or detouring off Richmond in this area. Updates will be provided to the Commission as required regarding any impacts and/or routing changes.

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