

Recommendation Report Summary

SUBJECT: Fare-Free Transit for youth – Summer 2025 Pilot

TO: Committee of the Whole

FROM: Community Services
Transit

Report Number: CSS-03-25

Wards Affected: All

Date to Committee: February 10, 2025

Date to Council: February 18, 2025

Recommendation

Authorize the Director of Transit to implement Fare-Free Transit for youth in July and August 2025 as a pilot project; and

Authorize the Chief Financial Officer to draw on the Ontario Provincial Gas Tax to fund the revenue loss of approximately \$70,000, into the 2025 operating budget.

Executive Summary

Purpose of report:

- To report back on the feasibility of implementing a pilot project for fare-free transit for youth in the summer of 2025 as per Staff Direction **SD-19-24**.

Key findings:

- Fare-free transit for youth pilot for July and August 2025 is feasible with proper planning, fare card testing, and a communication plan.
- Improve access to public transit and incentivize youth riders to use transit during the summer months.
- Validate findings from the Burlington Study to Explore Fare-Free Transit on ridership performance when free fares are offered.
- As per section 8.1 and 8.2 of the City's [By-law Number 70-2024](#), a By-law to establish and impose certain 2025 rates and fees for services, that the youth fee be waived to \$0 for the months of July and August 2025.

Implications (financial, legal, human resources, communications, engagement, climate):

- Fare-free transit for Youth (13 to 19) for a pilot project in July and August 2025 would have a financial impact of approximately \$70,000 of lost revenue.
- Total combined revenue loss may negatively impact the City's obligations as part of the PRESTO Operating agreement, and impacts to GO co-fare contribution.
- Peak youth ridership in the summer months typically occur from 2pm to 4pm during the week which aligns with the afternoon peak of fare paying riders.
- Burlington Transit has limited ability to add additional buses on routes to alleviate overcrowding.
- Overcrowding on buses may require additional supervisory resources to respond to incidents.
- Customer experience may be impacted due to overcrowding on buses. This will be monitored through the Customer Relationship Management (CRM).
- Promoting transit and supporting programs for Youth transit riders are ways to develop positive attitudes towards using transit which support the City's Climate Action Plan.

Recommendation Report

Background

On December 2, 2024, the Burlington Study to Explore Fare-free transit was presented to Committee of Whole. Alongside the study was staff report [TR-02-24](#), which outlined transit fare strategies to promote transit use among Youth riders.

Fare-free transit for youth in the summer (July and August) was presented as an option. This program would be offered as a pilot project that would allow youth riders to use Burlington Transit for free from July 1 to August 31, 2025. Council then directed transit staff to report back on the feasibility of implementing a pilot project for fare-free transit for youth in the summer of 2025 (July and August).

In 2023, Council approved the Free Transit for Youth, evenings and weekend program, which allowed youth riders, aged 13 to 19, to access free transit in Burlington. This time frame was recommended to ensure that weekday ridership capacity would not be impacted. Youth ridership increased by approximately 50% during the free period. This program supported the ridership growth during off-peak periods, specifically in the evenings and on weekends.

Analysis

Youth transit riders are categorized as riders from the age of 13 to 19. In Burlington, youth transit riders access reduced fares of \$1.90 when they use their PRESTO cards. In 2024, Burlington Transit reached a ridership milestone of approximately 3.2 million completed trips. Youth riders made up approximately 13% of this number. However, during the hours of 2pm and 4pm, youth riders make up around 37% of customer boardings. Throughout the summer months, ridership trends demonstrate that youth riders typically travel on Burlington Transit during 2pm and 6pm, which aligns with the afternoon peak periods. The following graph (Figure 1) highlights peak ridership times for Youth in the summer of 2024.

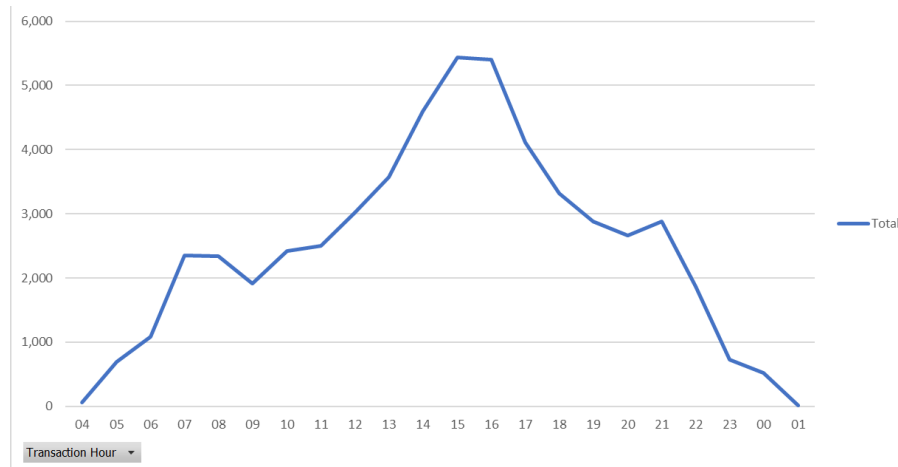


Figure 1: Youth PRESTO Boardings – July/August – Weekdays 2024

It is projected that free fares for youth, during the summer months, will see youth ridership increase by 30 to 50 percent.

In Burlington, all fare-free programs have been best implemented using PRESTO cards to ensure that age-based fares can be managed using technology. This mitigates the need for age validation by transit operators and allows for seamless connections within the GTHA. Using fare card technology to capture ridership data will be used for analysis and development of key performance indicators to highlight the program's impact.

As per section 8.2 of the City's [By-law Number 70-2024](#), transit fees may be waived by the Director of Transit, in consultation with the Chief Financial Officer, as a mechanism to support ridership campaigns and/or City initiatives. This program falls within this scope.

Fare Free Transit for Youth for July and August 2025 (pilot)

A pilot project for fare-free transit for youth in July and August 2025 is feasible and will offer the following benefits:

- Incentivize youth riders to use transit during the summer months.
- Independence for teens and the promotion of the use of transit as a travel option.
- Encouraging the use of transit to get to part time employment and social activities.
- Financial savings for youth and families within Burlington.
- Environmental sustainability and awareness of climate change with the use of public transit.
- Provide data and analytics to determine impacts of fare-free transit on Burlington Transit and validate findings from the Burlington Study to Explore Fare-Free Transit on ridership performance when free fares are offered.

- Incorporate findings into the Transit 5 Year Business Plan (2026-2030) and better estimate financial impacts and resource requirements.

Transit staff will endeavour to work with the local high schools and youth advisory council to ensure outreach to youth riders. The anticipated launch for the promotional campaign will be in mid-May.

Recommendation Details

To understand the impact of fare-free transit for Youth on Burlington Transit, it is recommended to authorize staff to proceed to implement the pilot fare-free transit for youth for the summer of 2025.

The pilot project will provide benefits to the community (noted above). In addition, the pilot project will collect the necessary data and analytics to validate ridership impacts due to fare-free transit. This information will be critical in the development of the next Transit 5-Year Business Plan in terms of ridership projections as well as the number vehicles required to support transit growth. This will also support the City's climate action plan in promoting the use of transit as a viable option for mobility.

Key Dates & Milestones

The significant dates and milestones related to this project include:

- February 20, 2025 – Approval of program.
 - March to May 2025 – PRESTO Configuration and testing.
 - May and June 2025 – Marketing and communication of program.
 - July 1, 2025 – Launch of fare-free youth for Summer 2025.
 - August 31, 2025 – End of fare-free youth program.
 - October 2025 – Memo to council on results of pilot.
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Implications

The fare-free transit for youth, summer 2025 pilot may have the following implications:

Financial:

- It is estimated that the revenue loss impact will be approximately \$70,000 for July and August 2025.
- This is a combination of fares plus the anticipated revenue loss from SPLIT pass sales, UPass and the summer youth pass. Potential revenue loss for adult fares, due to overcrowding, has not been factored into this figure.
- Total combined revenue loss may negatively impact the City's obligations as part of the PRESTO Operating agreement; and impacts to GO co-fare contribution.

- Burlington Transit may experience overcrowding on buses, especially during the afternoon peak periods, which may impact paying riders during that time.

Human Resources:

- Overcrowding on buses may require additional supervisory resources to respond to incidents. Additional staffing costs have not been factored into the cost impact.

Customer Service:

- A decrease in customer experience due to overcrowding.
- Complaints and comments are monitored in the City's CRM system and will be shared with Council in the Q4, 2025.

Climate:

- Promoting transit and supporting programs for Youth transit riders is a way to develop positive attitudes towards using transit. This will support the City's Climate Action Plan by encouraging transit instead of using an automobile.

Strategic Alignment

- ☐ Designing and delivering complete communities
 - ☒ Providing the best services and experiences
 - ☐ Protecting and improving the natural environment and taking action on climate change
 - ☐ Driving organizational performance
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Appendices:

None

Notifications:

None.

Report Approval:

All reports are reviewed and approved by the Head of Corporate Affairs, Commissioner, the Chief Financial Officer, and the Commissioner of Legal Services and Legislative Services/City Solicitor.