

On-Demand Transit Pilot - Commentary and Recommendation

Dear Members of Council and, the Integrated Transportation Advisory Committee

The recent submission from Burlington for Accessible, Sustainable Transit (BFAST) raises important considerations regarding the proposed on-demand transit pilot. Their concerns about transparency, funding, and the long-term integrity of Burlington Transit deserve careful attention.

While the concerns raised by BFAST during the recent COW meeting regarding governance, strategy, transparency, cost, and the long-term integrity of Burlington Transit are both valid and necessary to a responsible public debate, they appear to be grounded in a critical misunderstanding of the proposal as presented.

Having reviewed the Motion Memorandum and listened carefully to the delegation and ensuing discussion, there was no clear acknowledgment that the model under consideration is a curb-to-node system. The intent as I understand it - and should the study support it, is for Burlington - to pilot a complementary, on-demand layer that increases overall transit usage by addressing gaps in the current system, particularly in low-density or off-peak scenarios, rather than replacing conventional fixed routes or specialized services such as Handi-Van. Framed properly, this is not a substitution exercise but a network optimization strategy. In that context, anecdotal claims by a BFAST member suggesting that ARGO vehicles are already operating within Burlington's system are misleading and implausible, and risk further clouding an already complex policy discussion that would benefit from greater clarity rather than conjecture.

A further point of clarification is the important distinction between accessible transit and mobility: accessible transit refers to legislated, specialized services - such as Handi-Van- designed to meet the specific needs of individuals with disabilities who cannot use conventional transit, whereas mobility is the broader concept of how all residents move through the city, encompassing a range of options including fixed-route buses, on-demand services, walking, and shared transportation; conflating the two risks misunderstanding both the purpose of specialized services and the role that complementary systems like curb-to-node transit are intended to play.

However, the central risk before Council is not that we move too quickly- it is that we frame this decision incorrectly.

This is not a choice between preserving traditional transit and introducing something new. It is a question of whether Burlington is prepared to evaluate, in a disciplined and transparent way, how transit systems are evolving across Canada, the United States, and Europe.

1. Integration, Not Replacement

Modern transit systems are layered systems featuring:

- High-capacity fixed routes where demand is strong;
- Flexible, on-demand services where fixed routes underperform; and
- First/last-mile connectors that improve overall system usability

The proposed pilot should be understood as a complement to Burlington Transit, not a substitute.

2. Curb-to-Node Service

Curb-to-node service, allow riders to access nearby virtual stops, balancing convenience with efficiency and while allowing multiple trips to be grouped.

3. Cost Must Be Measured Against Outcomes

Concerns about pilot costs are valid. However, early pilot costs often include startup and calibration and do not reflect long-term performance. The appropriate metric is cost per effective trip delivered, alongside service quality indicators such as wait times and accessibility.

4. Private Sector Participation and Governance

Public-private delivery models are not unique across transit systems. The issue is governance:

- Public control over service design;
- Data ownership and privacy protections;
- Transparent contracts; and
- Defined performance metrics

5. Transparency Is Non-Negotiable

If accepted the pilot should include:

- Public reporting on cost per trip, utilization, and wait times;
- Clear disclosure of contractual terms; and
- Independent evaluation criteria

6. Pilots Are Tools for Evidence

A properly structured pilot is a controlled test with defined objectives and timelines and will enable evidence-based decision-making.

7. Changing Travel Patterns

To increase transit usage/demand for the target demographic, a dispersed, time-specific, and point-to-point approach or in this case curb-to-node approach may be needed and should complement or work alongside traditional transit.

Conclusion

I believe the appropriate course is to proceed with a well-defined, transparent, and accountable pilot, grounded in integration, financial discipline, governance, and public reporting.

Respectfully submitted,

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