



# **Transit Survey Results August 2011**

**Transit Service Review**

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## Part 1 - Background

### *Survey Overview*

The City is engaged in a multi-year process to develop a long-term plan for its transit service. The objective of this survey was to collect input from both users and non-users of Route 197 to inform this process. Specifically the City was looking for information on:

- why people use or don't use the service;
- how the service is used, and;
- ways the service could be improved.

The survey was open from mid-March until early May and was completed online through the City's website. People self-identified to participate and the results will likely indicate a higher level of support for the service than may be present in the community at large.<sup>1</sup> While the survey is not scientifically based, it provides useful data for planning purposes in a cost efficient manner. This survey is designed to complement data collected by Edmonton Transit Service (ETS) on a regular basis, the on-board Transit Rider Origin Survey conducted by City employees in November 2010, and the findings of the 2011 Customer Satisfaction Survey.

Questions were developed by administration in conjunction with ETS. The survey was promoted using a number of methods including signage in bus shelters and places selling bus passes, advertisements in the Spruce Grove and Stony Plain newspapers, through the internet (website, facebook, twitter), and on the reader boards. While it was targeted at all those who use the system and/or are interested in using the system, the promotion methods likely resulted in a higher proportion of users/potential users in Spruce Grove hearing about the survey than those in neighbouring communities.

The initial question split respondents into one of two categories: people who regularly or occasionally use the service (herein referred to as 'users'), and people who have never used the service or previously used it (herein referred to as 'non-users/former users'). Depending on how the participant responded, he/she was directed to a separate grouping of questions; in essence two surveys were conducted.

### **Respondents**

In total, 396 people participated in the survey. Of these 47% identified as users of the system, 39% were non-users, and 13% were former users. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents were female (both survey categories). For users of the system, the most represented age groups in descending order were '35 to 49', '50 to 64', and '25-34'. For non-users/former users they were '35 to 49', '25 to 34', and '50 to 64'. Approximately two-thirds of users have regular access to a personal vehicle while 88% of non-users/former users do. Seventy-five per cent (75%) of respondents live in Spruce Grove, 11% in Parkland County, 7% in Stony Plain, and 7% in Edmonton or 'Other'. This breakdown does not necessarily reflect actual users of the system

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<sup>1</sup>A useful tool for comparison purposes is the City of Spruce Grove 2011 Customer Satisfaction Survey which was a scientific survey of 400 randomly selected residents. The results of this survey identified the commuter transit service as a secondary priority for improvement (primary priorities were summer/winter road maintenance, economic development, FCSS, and Specialized Transit Service). Ten per cent (10%) of participants identified commuter transit service as the most important service the City should improve (winter road maintenance was the highest with 32%). Customer satisfaction with the commuter transit service has declined since 2006 (on a scale of one to five it was rated 3.7 in 2006 and 3.3 in 2011).

however as the on-board rider survey completed in November 2010 identified one-third of riders as non-Spruce Grove residents.

## Part 2 – Survey Results

### *Current Users*

#### ➤ *Support for Transit*

Users of the transit service provided a high level of support for the service. Ninety-six per cent (96%) of respondents either ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with the statement ‘Public transit is an essential municipal service’ while the other 4% ‘strongly disagreed’. Ninety per cent (90%) indicated that public transit is an ‘essential municipal service’ and also that it is not ‘just for those who can afford a car’.

#### ➤ *Use of the System*

When provided with a list of reasons for using the service, the most common responses were ‘Costs less than driving’ (75%), ‘Avoids stress of driving on congested roads’ (72%), and ‘Is better for the environment’ (69.9%). Other common responses with more than 50% support were ‘I can do something else while driving’ and ‘It is the most convenient for me’.

When asked what they typically used the bus as transportation for, ‘work’ was identified by 80%, ‘school’ by 26%, ‘appointments’ by 13% and ‘shopping’ by 11% (check all that apply). The majority of respondents use the service frequently: 70% identified using it on a daily basis while another 10% said they use it four days a week. Almost all respondents use the service both mornings and afternoons (96%). If the service was not available, two-thirds indicated they would use their car, 17% that they would ride with a friend or family, and 8% that they would not make the trip. The service captures both new and long-term riders: 41% began using the service within the past year while 59% have used it for over a year, including 36% who have used the service for over three years.

Respondents primary reach their bus stop in Spruce Grove through walking (63%) or by vehicle (19% drive their car while 15% get dropped off/picked up by someone). For those who do park and ride, the most common location is the Tri Leisure Centre followed by local streets. Very few people actually use the designated park and ride facility at the Agrena. Once in Edmonton, 57% of respondents walk to their final destination while another 12% connect with the ETS system (either bus or LRT). Approximately 30% indicated the bus drops them off at their final destination. Close to 90% considered both their bus stops in Spruce Grove and in Edmonton convenient.

The most popular destination in Edmonton is various major centres in the downtown core (e.g. Government Centre, Canada Place, Commerce Place, City Centre, the YMCA). Approximately one-third of respondents go to one of the post-secondary institutions with the University of Alberta the most popular, followed by Grant MacEwan and NAIT.

#### ➤ *Satisfaction with Existing Service*

Participants were asked how satisfied they were with different elements of the service. Factors looked at were ‘Hours of operation’, ‘Level of comfort’, ‘Where the route goes’, ‘Cost’,

'Shelters/bus stop infrastructure', and 'Overall performance'. The highest levels of satisfaction (i.e. very satisfied or satisfied) were with 'Where the route goes' (73%), 'Overall performance' (71%), and 'Level of comfort' (66%). The highest levels of dissatisfaction (i.e. unsatisfied or very unsatisfied) were with 'Hours of operation' (40%), 'Cost' (31%), and 'Shelters/bus stop infrastructure' (26%). Approximately 15% were unsatisfied with the 'Overall performance' of the service. The range of 'Neither satisfied or unsatisfied' responses was from a low of 9.4% for 'Where the route goes' to a high of 16% for 'Level of comfort'.

➤ *Service Changes and Ideas for Improvement*

When respondents were asked which additional destinations they would like to see offered, the most popular response was West Edmonton Mall (60%) followed by Stony Plain (35%). Approximately 10% were interested in seeing the service go to the Spruce Grove industrial area and Acheson Industrial Park and 8% to Parkland Village. A number of additional destinations not provided on the survey were included in respondents' comments. The most common response was more local service followed by the government transit centre. Of note, 18% of respondents indicated that the service provides enough coverage now.

In terms of expanding hours of operation, responses indicated greater demand exists for service to/from Edmonton. The highest levels of agreement with the statement 'If hours of operation were expanded, I would be likely to use the bus:' were for mid-day service to/from Edmonton (80%) followed by evening service and weekend service to/from Edmonton (both at 71%). Levels of support for expanded hours of operation within Spruce Grove was approximately 40% for mid-day and weekend service and then slightly lower for evening service. Seventy-per cent (70%) disagreed with the statement 'The hours of operation do not need to be expanded' while only 11% agreed.

Respondents also were asked to provide their ideas for improving the service as well as to provide additional comments. Overwhelming the most common theme in responses was the need for greater flexibility and expanded hours, particularly with respect to service to/from Edmonton. Other common themes in the responses were:

- connect with West Edmonton Mall and/or a transfer station in the west end;
- participate in the U-Pass program;
- offer more local service (routes and hours of operation) and connect to Stony Plain;
- address crowding on peak times;
- operate more direct service to major destinations
- offer transferability to the ETS system, and;
- provide more comfortable buses and better infrastructure (i.e. shelters, bus pads).

In addition to these broader themes, a number of specific suggestions were provided to the City. These will be essential to revisit when considering any changes to the route.

### ***Non-Users and Former-Users***

➤ *Support for Transit*

Similar to transit-users, non-users/former users of the service indicated a high level of support for the service. Ninety two per cent (92%) of respondents either 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the statements 'Public transit is an essential municipal service' and 'An effective public transit system is important for the local economy'. When questioned directly, 90% of

respondents also disagreed that public transit is just for those who cannot afford a vehicle. The same proportion of respondents as the user survey group indicated that they 'strongly disagree' with public transit being considered an essential service (4%).

➤ *Reason for Not Riding*

When provided with a list of options for why respondents do not take the bus and asked to check all that apply, the top three responses were clear. The highest level of agreement was with the statement 'Hours of operations are too limited' (78%) followed by 'Service is not frequent enough' (72%) and 'The route does not take me where I need to go' (67%). The next highest grouping of factors were 'I prefer driving' (40%), 'Travel times are too long' (33%), and 'Service is too expensive' (31%).

➤ *Changes to Encourage Riding*

Non-users/former-users indicated they would be more likely to use the service if 'Additional routes options existed' (89% agreement) and if 'Service was more frequent' (80%). Lower prices, the next highest, was cited by 45% of respondents. Of significance, only 8% indicated that nothing would make them use the service.

As with the transit users group results, the destination respondents would most like to see service offered to is West Edmonton Mall (77%) followed by Stony Plain (47%), Acheson Industrial Park and Spruce Grove Industrial Area (both reported 21%), and Parkland Village (13%). A higher proportion of non-users/former users proposed other destinations than users. This list was quite extensive with the most common responses being more local service, a major transit terminal, and south Edmonton.

Non-users/former-users also indicated that they would be more likely to use transit if additional times were available to/from Edmonton than within Spruce Grove. Seventy per cent (70%) identified weekends to/from Edmonton, followed by 68% for mid-day, and 66% for weekends. The proportion of those responding they would be more likely to use expanded service within Spruce Grove was slightly higher than for users: 50% for mid-day, followed by 47% for weekends, and 44% for evenings.

When respondents were asked the open ended question "What factors would be most likely to encourage you to try using transit or consider using it again?" as well as provided with the opportunity to make additional comments, responses reinforced themes already identified. The most common themes overwhelmingly related to the limited hours of operation and route coverage. Weaker themes were the service is too slow and too expensive and that the tri-municipal nature of the service should be recognized. Also, identified by a number of respondents was a concern about the City's non-participation in the U-Pass program.

## **Part 3 - Moving Forward**

### ***Reinforcing and Expanding the Rider Base***

Despite the survey targeting two different groups, users and non-users/former-users, the input received was similar. As is logical, the current service structure works better for users than non-users/former-users. Results indicated however that a high level of support exists for transit service amongst both groups. Also significant is that a high proportion of respondents have

access to personal vehicles, including current users of the system who are choosing to ride the bus. Declines in service quality or increases in cost or travel time could tip the balance for these users towards personal vehicles. At this same time, over three-quarters of non-users/former-users indicated that they would consider using the service if it better met their needs. Combined these factors demonstrate that the outcomes of the City's transit review should seek to reinforce its rider base while building on the potential that exists to expand this base.

### ***Emerging Priorities***

Emerging priorities from the results focus on introducing more flexibility into the transit system. This includes looking at expanded hours of operation and routes. Nuances in the open-ended question results suggest that this flexibility does not necessarily need to be 'everywhere all the time' but that targeted expansions will meet the needs of most users and potential users. While results suggest higher demand exists for a strong regional service with connections mid-day, weekends, and evenings to/from Edmonton, a core group of respondents is interested in seeing improved local service. Destinations identified most frequently as priorities for future service were West Edmonton Mall and to a lesser extent Stony Plain. Having formerly operated an unsuccessful pilot service to West Edmonton Mall, any reintroduction of this destination would require careful planning to ensure it meets the needs of users. In addition, options for U-Pass participation in a way that does not result in cost increases for other riders should also be considered.

### ***Next Steps***

The input received through this survey will be incorporated into the on-going transit review process. This process began in early 2011 and is expected to finish in 2013. Other steps include preparing a business case for the service, working with other Capital Region municipalities, responding to potential legislative changes at the provincial level, and exploring funding opportunities. The results of the Transportation Master Plan due in 2012 will be incorporated into the review process also.

Spruce Grove's transit service is supported by a small population. Improvements to this service need to be carefully planned and budgeted for to ensure the system remains financially viable. Survey input helps the City understand what is working with the service, what issues exist, and what potential changes our riders consider the most important. The City is committed to transit service however evolving this service will take time, significant resources, and a collaborative relationship with other municipalities in the Capital Region.