July 17, 2020

RE: Post-Secondary Student Access to Calgary Transit in Fall 2020

Members of Calgary City Council:

The University Transit Pass (UPass) is an important program that allows full-time post-secondary students in Calgary to utilize public transit. The UPass program is an agreement between Calgary Transit and post-secondary institutions, specifically, the University of Calgary, Mount Royal University, the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, St. Mary’s University College, and the Alberta University of the Arts.

The UPass program was suspended beginning in May 2020 as a result of COVID-19 and will remain unavailable through December. Institutions, with the knowledge that most students would not be physically returning to campuses in the fall, felt it would be unfair to charge all students the full UPass fee. Our understanding is that Calgary Transit was not willing to provide the UPass through an opt-in model, so while participating schools re-signed the standing UPass agreement this spring the program will not be offered in Fall 2020.

With all classes taking place remotely this spring and summer, and only a small proportion requiring in-person components this fall, we agree in principle that students should not all pay for the UPass; however, we also recognize that not having the UPass has caused concern among post-secondary students who may no longer have an option for affordable, accessible public transportation.

While the UPass would have cost $155 for September-December, adult transit passes are currently $109 per month, or $436 per semester. We feel that this is a prohibitive cost for students at a time when many are feeling the negative financial effects of COVID-19.¹ The low-income transit pass, part of The City’s Fair Entry program, may also not be accessible for students who live with family members or who may not be able to prove their current income through one of the listed means. We recognize that the administrative burden and overall cost of changing this program may be too burdensome for The city at this time. While many students may remain physically distant from their campuses, many still live, work, volunteer, and support their families in the City of Calgary. The UPass allowed students to commute to their institutions for classes, get groceries, go to appointments, and be an active citizen in their communities.

¹ Statistics Canada reports that less than one-quarter (24%) of students were continuing to work as planned over the summer due to COVID-19 (https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200512/dq200512a-eng.htm and https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2020032-eng.htm).
We would like to propose that The City sell monthly passes to students (or, to institutions to re-sell to students) at the same price point as Band B of the low-income transit pass. This cost ($38.15 per month) is close to the equivalent of paying for a UPass ($152.60 vs $155.00). We suggest that students showing valid proof of enrollment for Fall 2020 can purchase monthly passes at this price-point. This would provide both an affordable option for full-time students and revenue for Calgary Transit when there may be no revenue otherwise, should students decide to forego using transit entirely in the absence of any alternative to full-price fares.

As representatives for both the graduate and undergraduate students at the University of Calgary, we are asking city councillors to endorse and support our proposal to sell monthly passes to eligible students at the Band B price-point. Given the recent announcement of federal “safe restart” funding for provinces and municipalities, and at a time when transit ridership is down 92%, we hope a portion of this can go towards supporting this low-cost option that will allow many students to return to using transit in the fall. It is our fear that students will not have an affordable option for public transit, and potentially no means of transportation in The city of any kind. We believe that this will not only negatively affect the thousands of students who rely on transit, but The city as a whole.

We look forward to your support on this important issue.

Signed,

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