



October 18, 2004
File: pow.1

Frances Ladret
Administrator
Powell River Regional District
5776 Marine Avenue
Powell River, BC V8A 2M4

Subject: Powell River Regional Paratransit Review and Outlook

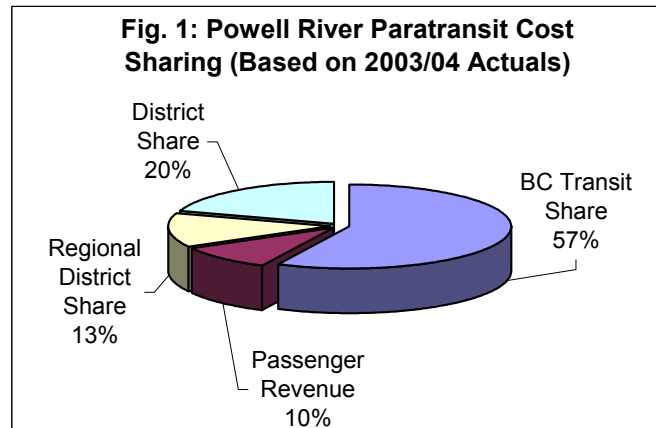
Dear Ms. Ladret:

As requested, the following provides background information on the Powell River Regional Paratransit System and its performance. Current service issues and options for new service to Area "A" (Lund) are also outlined.

1.0 Transit System Background

The Powell River Paratransit System began operation in December 1992. The service is sponsored by the Powell River Regional District and the District of Powell River in partnership with BC Transit. The system is operated by Powell River Taxi (2001).

Funding: BC Transit funds 56.69% of service. The remaining 43.31% of costs is split 40% for the Regional District, 60% for the District. The local share of costs is further reduced by revenue from passenger fares and other sources. In 2003/04, fares covered about 22% of the local share of costs or about 11% of the total. Figure 1 at right illustrates this breakdown of costs.



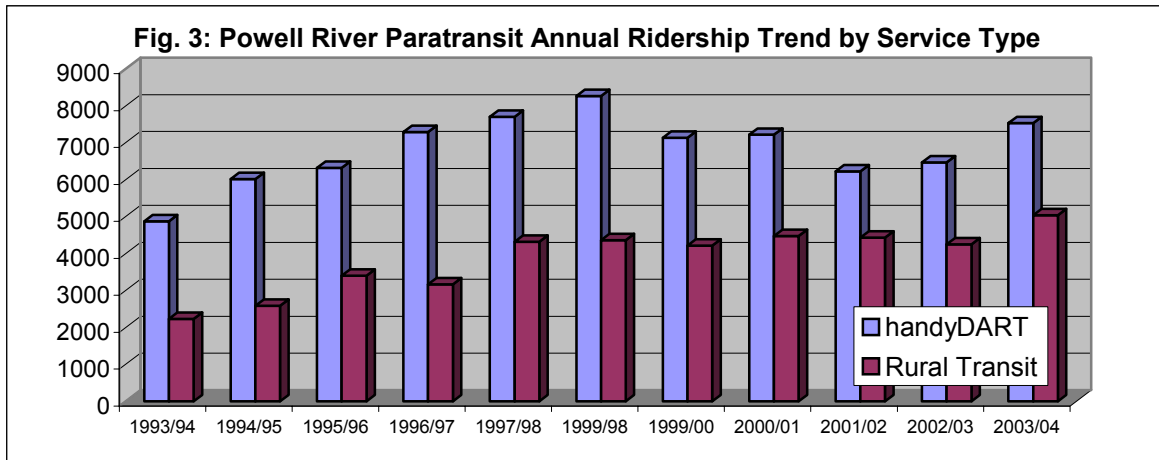
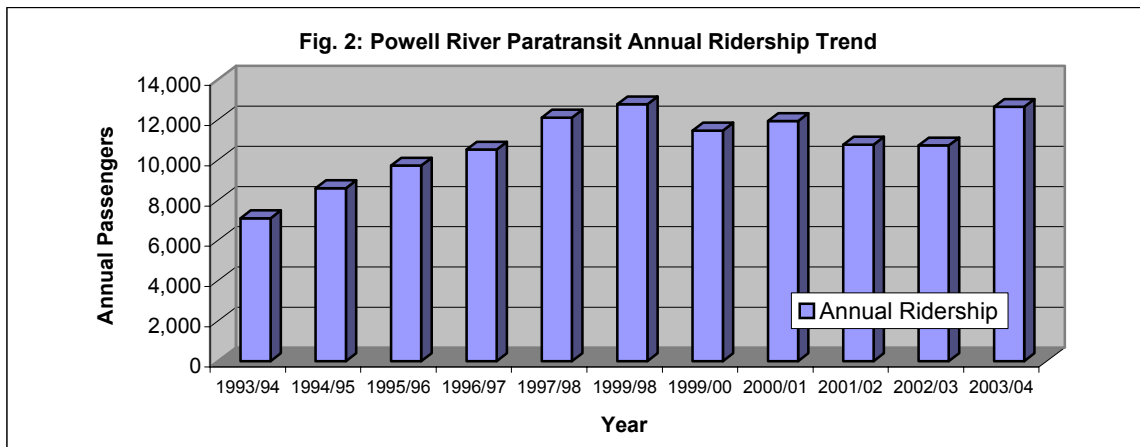
The current service:

- Operates Monday to Friday, excluding statutory holidays.
- Provides door-to-door **handyDART** service within Powell River Municipality from 8:00am to 5:00pm.
- Provides **Rural Transit** within areas of the Regional District as follows:
 - **12 Stillwater** service to Centennial Drive, Black Point, Lang Bay and Roberts Road. (Areas B and C)
 - Operates Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays
 - Three round trips per day
 - Extends to Saltery Bay on Mondays on the first and last trip

- **13 Texada** service to Texada Island (Area D)
 - Operates Thursdays
 - Two round trips per Thursday
- Rural transit picks up passengers at bus stops and flag stop locations along the route. It will also deviate off-route to provide door-to-door service for people with disabilities.
- Has two vehicles in service:
 - A 20 passenger Ford Polar III minibus for the rural transit portion of service which can carry up to two passengers using wheelchairs.
 - A 6 passenger Ford Corbeil for the handyDART portion of service which can carry up to four passengers using wheelchairs.

2.0 Current Transit System Performance

In 2003/04 Powell River Paratransit had one of its highest ridership years ever, as illustrated in the following two graphs. Figure 2 shows the overall ridership trend for the transit system as a whole. Figure 3 looks at the split in ridership between the rural transit service funded by the Regional District and the handyDART service operating within Powell River Municipality.



Annual ridership trend highlights include:

- Initial increases over the first few years of start up.
- A large gain and then drop for handyDART ridership in the period from 1997/98 to 2002/03 but level ridership for Rural Transit over the same period.
- Highest ever ridership for the Rural Transit portion of the system in 2003/04.

Current Ridership: 2004/05 year-to-date information for the transit system indicates that the trend of increasing ridership continues. From April to August 2004 the rural transit service carried 1,929 passengers, up 4% from the same period the previous year. Detailed information from April 2004¹ shows the following general trends for the Rural Transit portion of service:

- The **12 Stillwater** route carries an average 25 passengers per day.
 - About 1 in 5 trips are off-route deviations for people with a disability.
- The **13 Texada** route carries an average 20 passengers per day.
 - There were no off-route deviations recorded separately for the Texada service in April.

Current Revenue: 2004/05 year-to-date revenue for the transit system as a whole is tracking about 3% higher than for the same period last year and is in line with the current year's budget.

Current Budget: The detailed mid-year forecast process is currently underway at BC Transit. I will be able to provide updated information when we meet on the 21st.

- **GST Savings:** The Federal government's 100% rebate on the GST for local governments creates \$2,143 of room within the current Regional District transit budget. The BC Transit Board of Directors has made a decision to allocate the BC Transit share of these savings back to your AOA. The \$1,215 in BC Transit funding will be retained for any service expansion you may wish to implement in 2004/05 or it will be accrued for use in 2005/06 to fund expected increases in fuel costs.

3.0 Current Service Information Items

3.1 Request for Expressions of Interest: A Request for Expressions of Interest (REI) to operate the Powell River Paratransit System has gone out for advertisement.

- Ads will be placed in local media, will be sent to a standing list of operating companies, and will appear on the BC Bid and BC Transit websites.
- Proposal submissions are due December 9, 2004. A committee including staff from the Regional District, the District, and BC Transit will review the proposals and make a recommendation.
- The recommendation will be forwarded to the BC Transit Board for their consideration in January 2005.

3.2 2005/06 Budget: To control costs, the REI asks proponents to work within a set budget for the areas of fixed administrative costs and driver wages and benefits. Among other items, only minor cost increases are expected except in the area of fuel. Accruing 2004/05 GST savings to 2005/06 (as outlined above in section 2.0) would offset expected fuel increases.

3.3 New Vehicle: The current Ford III Polar bus will be replaced with a new one in February. This change is part of the provincial-wide fleet replacement program and costs have already

¹April 2004 is used because its monthly total amount is closest to the average for the system.

been included in the 2004/05 AOA budget. The new bus offers more space for wheelchairs, more seating flexibility, and improved passenger comfort features. It is expected that any lease fee increases annualized in 2005/06 will be offset by savings from lower maintenance costs.

4.0 Current Service Issues for Regional District Consideration

4.1 Fares: Passenger fares on the system have not changed since it began operation in 1992. Fares are currently \$1.50 for one zone travel (Powell River to Roberts Road), \$2.00 for two zone travel (Powell River to Saltery Bay), and \$3.00 to Texada Island. There are no discounts for students and seniors except on the service to Texada Island where seniors are eligible for a \$2.00 fare to reflect differences in ferry fares for seniors.

Some thoughts on fares:

- A fare increase is probably due in the system. However given the recent increases in ridership and revenue, I would council against raising fares in the immediate future since there is a risk that the system will lose ridership any time fares change.
- Should the Regional District wish to consider a fare change in the longer term, there are a few strategies to make a fare change more palatable and reduce the risk of ridership loss:
 - Implement a fare increase in conjunction with improved service, such as that outlined in section 4.2 or in the Lund service options.
 - Raise cash fares by \$0.25 but implement discounted tickets at the same time. Usually sold in books of 10 at a cost of “10 rides for the price of 9,” tickets help build loyal ridership and provide regular riders with a lower cost alternative to the cash fare increase.
 - Consider implementing student/senior discounted cash fares on all routes at the same time.
 - If coordinating a fare increase with a service improvement is not possible, July is the best time to change fares. (September and January are the worst).
- Further fare coordination with the conventional transit system is recommended. Experience in other BC communities has shown that making transit services in an area as complimentary and coordinated as possible increases passenger ease of use and ridership.
 - To this end, public information materials for Powell River Regional handyDART, Rural Transit, and conventional transit were integrated in March 2003. This integration has received positive feedback from passengers.
 - The next logical step for integration would be to look at complementary fare structures.
 - Right now a passenger who paid to travel from Black Point to Town Centre Mall would need to pay full fare again if they wished to transfer onto the conventional Powell River System. This discourages ridership.
 - **It is recommended that the Regional District and District consider adopting the following practice:**
 - Passengers starting their trip on the paratransit system would pay the higher paratransit fare and would receive a transfer which would then allow them to travel on the conventional system.

- Passengers starting their trip on the conventional system would pay the conventional fare and ask for a transfer. They would then show the transfer and pay the difference in fares when they boarded the paratransit bus.
- This practice is quite common in other communities, including travel between the District of Kent and the City of Chilliwack and between the District of Port Edward and the City of Prince Rupert. It has been found to be revenue neutral since it usually encourages ridership.
- If the Regional District is amenable to the transfer policy outlined above, the next step would be to discuss the proposal with Powell River Municipality. If the outcome of that is positive, a joint report to both local governments would then be made for approval by the Board / Council of each.

4.2 Possible Ridership Opportunity: Powell River Taxi staff have identified a possible ridership opportunity involving service to Saltery Bay.

- Currently, Malaspina Coach Lines provides service to Earls Cove for the 12:10pm sailing to Saltery Bay, arriving at Saltery Bay at 1:00pm. However, there is no connecting bus service on the Saltery Bay side.
- This lack of transportation could be met by shifting the midday trip on the 12 Stillwater route by an hour and making service to Saltery Bay available on request. Therefore, departure from Town Centre Mall would be 12:30pm instead of 11:30am and departure from Saltery Bay would be approximately 1:17pm.
- This change could increase ridership on the service with little disruption to existing passengers. It is expected that this change would not add additional costs.
- **I'm interested in hearing from the Regional District as to whether, in principle, it would support this change.** If supported, the next steps would be to survey existing users of the transit system about the proposed schedule change and to then contact Malaspina Coach Lines to see if there is interest on their part to work more closely with the transit system. A follow up report would then be provided to the Regional District for its consideration.

5.0 Lund Service Options

A Sliammon, Lund, Savary Island Feasibility Study was produced in 2001. It recommended the implementation of 5 trips per day to Sliammon and 2 trips per day to Lund, Monday to Saturday, with the option of reducing the days of service to Lund in the tourist off-season. Due to changes in provincial funding availability, the Study recommendations were not implemented. Since that time, a marginal level of service has been provided to the Area. This service was funded 100% by local governments and consisted of the following:

- September 2002, Sliammon First Nation contracted directly with the District of Powell River to provide three trips per day to Sliammon, Monday to Friday. The service still continues.
- June – September 2004, the District of Powell River provided service to Lund on the basis of two trips per day Monday to Thursday and three trips per day Thursday to Sunday. Officially implemented on a trial basis, this service may not be repeated next year.

As requested, the following looks at possible methods to provide service to Lund and other locations within Area A of the Regional District.

Option 1: Community Bus, Four Days per Week

Description: This option is similar to one that has been successfully implemented in rural areas of the Regional District of Comox-Strathcona. Called "Community Bus," its key benefit is that offers lower cost and better efficiency over traditional scheduled service. Scheduled trips can then be created at a future point when ridership has been established.

- The community bus trips would provide door-to-door pick up and drop off at residents' homes within a specified area. The service would be available to all residents within that area.
- Since all pick ups and drop offs in the Community Bus service area are door-to-door, trips must be booked in advance. To book a trip, passengers would call dispatch at least 24 hours in advance and state the trip window in which they wished to travel.
- A trip window is the approximate time when service is available to that area. When a passenger books a trip, the dispatcher can provide him or her with a closer estimate of the pick time as well as the approximate drop off time at their destination.
- It is suggested that two trip windows be available for service to Lund on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday:
 - **Morning:** Either 7:30am - 8:30am or 10:30am – 11:30am
 - **Afternoon:** 4:00pm – 5:00pm

Benefits:

- A trip only operates if a passenger requests it.
- The bus only needs to travel as far along Hwy. 101 as it needs to.
- If the times above are used, no additional vehicle is required.
- If the times above are used, there may be opportunities to share costs with Sliammon First Nation.

Summary Information for Option 1: Community Bus, Four Days per Week

Estimated Annual Service Hours: 400	Estimated Annual Revenue: \$1,200*
Estimated Annual Ridership: 600	Estimated Total Cost: \$16,800**
Additional Vehicles Required: 0	Cost Less Revenue: \$15,600

* Revenue amounts assume a base fare of \$2.00 for the service.

**As trips would only operate if requested by passengers, this is a maximum amount. Based on experience in the Comox Valley, actual cost would likely be closer to half this amount for this option.

Option 2: Community Bus, Two Days per Week

Description: This option is identical to Option 1 except that service would only be available on two days per week, for instance Tuesdays and Fridays.

- A benefit of this option is that it will likely be more efficient, carrying more passengers per trip.
- A draw back to this option is that it may be less attractive in terms of cost sharing opportunities with other local governments.

Summary Information for Option 2: Community Bus, Two Days per Week

Estimated Annual Service Hours: 200	Estimated Annual Revenue: \$1,200*
Estimated Annual Ridership: 600	Estimated Total Cost: \$9,800**
Additional Vehicles Required: 0	Cost Less Revenue: \$8,600

* Revenue amounts assume a base fare of \$2.00 for the service.

**As trips would only operate if requested by passengers, this is a maximum amount.

More work would need to be undertaken to refine the Lund service options. However, the above should provide a general idea of the costs involved. If the Regional District wishes to pursue service to Lund, I would be happy to work with the community to create a more detailed service plan.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any immediate questions. I look forward to discussing these and other issues with you at our meeting on October 21, 2004.

Sincerely,



Tania Wegwitz
Transit Planner
Municipal System Program

Cc: Mathew Virtue, Powell River Taxi
Peter Murray, BC Transit