



Evaluation of the Affordable Bus Pass Program

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This brief provides a summary of the findings from an evaluation of the Affordable Bus Pass Program (ABPP) managed by the Affordable Bus Pass Steering Committee at the City of Guelph. This report shows that the program has achieved all of its stated goals, and that it has made a real difference in the lives of more than 2,000 people living in poverty in Guelph. The program has been more popular than expected, and more complicated to manage. The evaluation report makes recommendations about investing in program management, streamlining the application process, and simplifying ongoing data collection and reporting.

The Affordable Bus Pass Program is a bus subsidy program designed to increase the affordability and accessibility of public transit for people living with low income. It was initiated by the City of Guelph in 2012, in response to feedback from the community. The ABPP is expected to reduce barriers to accessing work, recreation and other amenities so all citizens can truly participate in the community.

The target population of the program is individuals and families living with a low income in Guelph. For the purposes of determining eligibility, Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) is used to define low income, and only those who have incomes below this cut-off are eligible. Many of those who are eligible for the Affordable Bus Pass (ABP) are receiving income from Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).

The pilot is managed by Community and Social Services. Guelph Transit is a key partner.

Evaluation Questions

- To what extent was the program utilized by members of the target population?
- Were the program goals and objectives met?
- How did the program impact transit usage?
- What are the program strengths, challenges, and opportunities?
- What are the recommended areas for change and improvement?
- Were the budget and resources allocated to the program sufficient?

Evaluation Methodology

This evaluation study used qualitative data from focus groups and interviews. It was also informed by quantitative data from application forms submitted by citizens entering the ABPP. For more detailed information about the methodology please consult the full report.

WHO USES THE AFFORDABLE BUS PASS?

As of July 2013, approximately 2,700 discrete individuals had applied for the affordable bus pass as primary applicants, and 2,178 had been approved. Because applicants can include other family members in their application, we estimate that the successful applications covered a total of 2,596 people. From these figures, we can estimate that about 27% of people living below the Low Income Cutoff in Guelph have become users of the Affordable Bus Pass.¹

¹ In 2012, the low income cutoff for Guelph ranged from \$16,573 per year for a single adult to \$35,681 for a family of five.



"Simply stated, affordable transportation is absolutely necessary for families and individuals who already have to be extremely careful where their limited money is spent. Knowing that there is a reliable, accessible and affordable public transit system means there is more money to save or spend elsewhere, and also means that there are more opportunities for improving one's own and family's wellbeing."

– Guelph Wellington Poverty Taskforce

Use of the pass has exceeded initial projections, and is growing over time. The total number of applications has exceeded the original estimate (of 1,800 applications) by 50%. Almost all affordable bus pass users (96%) had used Guelph Transit before entering the program. Of the 910 re-applicants who stated that they were transit users prior to the ABPP, 47% were previous subsidized pass holders, 35% used cash and/or tickets, and 19% used a regular bus pass.

Many different groups of people make use of the Affordable Bus Pass. Middle-aged people, older adults, and single adults seem to use the pass more consistently than younger people. Some people with disabilities or other kinds of mobility limitations appear to buy passes intermittently, depending on their health status, the weather, or changes in life circumstances.

More than 80% of those living with low incomes in the City have not yet purchased passes.

The comments of those who buy passes rarely suggest that the Affordable Bus Pass may be most useful to people who have a consistent, ongoing need for public transit on a daily basis, and less useful to people whose lives are in such transition or crisis that their transit needs are unpredictable.



"It frees up an extra \$30 to do other things – this can help pay for medical expenses. So not only can I get to swimming and physio, I can pay for it now, too."

– Bus Pass user

HOW ACCESSIBLE IS THE AFFORDABLE BUS PASS?

Application process:

All users who participated in focus groups believed the application form was straightforward, but several suggested that it would be helpful if more plain language information about the application process was made widely available. There was some suggestion that the form might be confusing for users who are less comfortable with written communication. Evaluation participants suggested the elimination of annual re-applications for at least some users. Ontario Disability Support Program clients often have unchanging situations from year to year. Ontario Works clients can be very transient which makes it difficult for caseworkers to get clients to renew their applications.

Appeals process:

The ABPP team has considered some appeals from people who were ruled ineligible. However, the challenge of maintaining consistency when a customer receives an exception to the rules has been felt by users and service staff alike. Among staff in the focus group and interviews, clear, black-and-white rules for appeals are wanted so that case-by-case decisions are not up to individual discretion.

Pass Sales:


Locations for sales of passes were deemed sufficient by users who participated in focus groups. However, there is currently no location in the South end of Guelph. Using the first three digits of postal codes provided on applications, it was determined that 16% of applicants to the ABPP are located South of Stone Rd.

HOW IS THE PASS HELPING THE PEOPLE WHO USE IT?

People with low incomes who had not been eligible under the previous program (which only provided subsidized passes to people with disabilities) are purchasing passes and using transit more frequently. Public transportation is consuming less money from their monthly budgets, leaving more for food and shelter. Most importantly, increased access to public transit has improved overall wellbeing. In particular, the pass has enabled people with low incomes to use transit in a more frequent and flexible way. This has led to more of the kinds of “non-essential” trips that create a sense of connection to family, community, and services.

In other words, the ABPP has helped to build the “assets” of people living in poverty in a few ways.

- It has built **financial assets** by reducing the cost of transit.
- It has built **physical assets** by enabling users to get to work, apply for jobs, and access the services they need more consistently.
- It has also built **social assets**, by enabling users to make more trips for a greater variety of reasons and in a more flexible way. Riders are able to bring family members along when they take transit, and they are able to go out to social events and community meetings as well as doctor’s appointments and job interviews.



“It has allowed us to do more with less. If a client is going to an educational course, say at Conestoga College, we will pay for them to get there, no matter what the cost of transit is. Since the cost of the ABP is so reduced, now we are able to offer extra support, like a book-bag, or other educational materials”

– Partner Organization

PRIMARY PROGRAM GOAL	GOAL MET?	INSIGHTS
Enabling more residents living with a low income to purchase monthly transit passes	Yes	ABPP users who participated in the focus groups were in unanimous agreement that the pass was affordable. These opinions echo the overall averages in affordability ratings given on re-application forms. Almost all ABPP re-applicants indicated that they “somewhat agree” or strongly agree” that, “I could not afford to buy a bus pass without this program.”
Making a positive impact on the budget of low-income residents	Yes	The ABPP saves people money that is used to meet basic needs. In the application and re-application forms, almost all re-applicants indicated that, “The price of the affordable pass means I have more money to spend on basic needs.” The average rating was M=3.5, between somewhat agree and strongly agree. The pass program also enables Ontario Works and ODSP to direct discretionary funds to meeting other needs.
Improving perceptions of overall wellbeing	Yes	Program users shared many ways in which the ABPP improved their quality of life, such as enabling hobbies and connections to family and friends. The overall sentiment was that the ABPP provided a sense of freedom to move around, which in turn led to the ability to lead productive lives. A common statement was that they simply would not “get out much” without the ABPP.
Improving sense of contribution to community		

HOW IS PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION WORKING?

The staff team that has run the program to date has been very effective. They have worked together closely and shown dedication to the success of the program. However, they have also identified some challenges.

Workload

The ABPP has no dedicated staff, and running the ABPP has required more staff time than was originally expected. Program uptake has exceeded forecasts, and the process for managing applications and handling appeals has been time consuming.

Data Collection

Currently, data used to manage the ABPP is collected by three very different means: application forms, sales data from all locations that sell affordable passes, and pass swipes on the busses used by transit to track ridership. Each of these databases is managed by a different team and organized in a somewhat different way. Amalgamating the data has created challenges.

CONCLUSION

The City of Guelph created an affordable bus pass program because access to transit is essential for anyone working to overcome poverty.

This evaluation report makes it clear that the pilot phase of Guelph's Affordable Bus Pass Program has been very successful.

It has attracted more users than expected, and it has made transit more accessible for a very diverse cross-section of the community. It has continued to meet the needs of people with disabilities (who had been the primary user of the previous pass program), while growing to serve a number of other groups of people who live with low incomes.

This success is a direct result of the hard work of many people within City government and in the community. Managing the ABPP has taken a great deal of energy and dedication from staff in several different city departments, as well as a willingness to work together towards a common goal and a commitment to documenting the journey carefully. Consequently, much has been learned. Moving forward, this program requires more administrative support than it has received to date. It also needs dedicated management. There are a number of ways in which the administration of the program can be streamlined to reduce the administrative burdens, as identified in these recommendations.



Summary of Recommendations

- Explore extending turn-around times for applications, while maintaining customer focus.
- Consolidate and rationalize the application and sales databases.
- Review and streamline the process for analyzing and reporting program data.
- Create a dedicated program manager position and simplify the program structure.
- Assign additional staff time to the Service Guelph desk on “Bus Pass Days”.
- Explore the possibility of having key partners play a larger role in selling passes.
- Consider an alternate approach to income verification for users who are on ODSP and OW or users whose income is in transition due to recent unemployment, immigration or transition from school to work.
- Provide a plain language summary of the eligibility criteria and the application process.
- Create a formalized, transparent appeals process.

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