

March 3, 2025

Peter Todd
Manager, Legislative Services/Town Clerk
Town of Fort Erie

1 Municipal Centre Drive
Fort Erie, ON
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Dear Peter,

Thank you for your recent letter, advising Chair Siscoe and our Board of the concerns of the Fort Erie Accessibility Advisory Committee regarding microtransit services. We understand the challenges that have been faced by riders through the introduction of a new service provider and contending with the drastic increase in, and still increasing, demand for the service.

Our Board did not provide direction, but opted to receive the letter for information, so I will address the committee's concerns below. If there are any further questions, please have the committee contact our Client & Community Coordinator, Wendy Middleton who will be happy to assist them. Her email is wendy.middleton@niagratransit.ca.

Vehicles and Ride Allocations

Since the system's amalgamation, we have not assigned a set number of rides to any specific municipality. Through the triple-majority process we were mandated to co-mingle the ondemand and specialty services while maintaining the level of service that was funded by each municipality. The co-mingled system is dynamic, meaning it responds in

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real time to demand and optimizes the number of rides and travel times as much as possible across the network.

To maximize availability within municipal borders and minimize excessive intermunicipal trips, we digitally allocate vehicles to specific communities. Recently, we increased the number of vehicles dedicated to Fort Erie from 6 to 7, with an additional 2 more vehicles to be shared between Fort Erie and Port Colborne. Out of the now 9 vehicles dedicated to Fort Erie, 3 are completely accessible for persons in a wheelchair. While this should improve access to specialized trips, it is important to note that demand for specialized service has increased significantly across the system. Prior to amalgamation, Niagara had 2,230 registered users on specialized transit service. In just two years we have added an additional 1,413 riders-a 63% increase. Regardless of the enhancements made under the current system and level of investment, we will still fall short of being able to meet all the needs of our specialized riders.

We would also like to clarify some claims regarding the number of microtransit vehicles previously operating in Fort Erie. The maximum fleet Fort Erie had at any given time delivering ondemand service was 8 vehicles, but they did not operate all day every day. It would range as low as 2-3 at one time to a maximum of 8 at midday but shift changes at that time meant that vehicles were not all serving riders during that period. The former provider did augment the service with 1-2 vehicles throughout peak periods but this was not specified in their contract nor consistently delivered. In addition to those 8 vehicles providing ondemand services in Fort Erie, the FAST specialized service also had 1 dedicated van to specialized trips per shift per day.

The 7 + 2 Niagara Transit vehicles to be dedicated to Fort Erie will be in service for the full day from 7:00AM-11:00PM. We expect that this will bring us much closer to meeting current demand as this is a significant increase in total vehicle availability for the entire service day for both specialized and microtransit users.

Abandoned Ridership and Complaints

Both specialized services delivered by the contracted service model and those delivered in-house within the larger cities have faced significant challenges in meeting demand. In-house services inherited an aging fleet that has required extensive maintenance. The new NTC was not given the capital budget to immediately add to that fleet to deliver more specialized services or ondemand trips within its own complement. As a result, the NTC has had to rely on an external contractor to serve the needs of Niagara's ridership.

No company had ever provided a Niagara-wide co-mingled microtransit service and the ridership of the pilot projects (Niagara Region Transit OnDemand and Fort Erie Transit OnDemand) that it was based on, plus the ridership of specialized services of the Fort Erie Accessible Specialized Transit (FAST) and Niagara Specialized Transit (NST) services, were all collectively artificially deflated due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite these challenges, we remain committed to improving service reliability and minimizing disruptions for riders. Our team continuously monitors trips and proactively reallocates them to ensure prompt service.

Recently, we have taken an active operations management role with Voyago. As a result, we are pleased to report, as mentioned, more vehicles are being dedicated to Fort Erie and more will be arriving to bolster the number dynamically available across Niagara. We are also exploring new strategies to alleviate the burden of ondemand on the system that is being felt by specialized ridership.

We share your passion and commitment to delivering the specialized transit Niagara and our riders deserve. We will continue to work towards a better system to ensure better outcomes for all municipalities. We look forward to sharing our plans for a new approach to specialized and microtransit services, which we believe will significantly improve service delivery. We will update your local Council when we are ready to present these developments.

We would also encourage you to participate during the budget process to help emphasize the importance of transit to our Regional Councillors who make the decision on transit

funding. While we consistently advocate for the needs of our riders, hearing directly from the community has the greatest impact on Council decisions.

Thank you again for your passion and your advocacy for both transit and our specialized service. We look forward to continuing to advocate alongside you and working towards a Niagara that is truly barrier-free and connected through transit.

Sincerely,



Carla Stout, DPA

General Manager
Niagara Transit