

## SUBSIDIZED TRANSPORTATION POLICY

### **Council / Governance Issue**

As directed Administration has reviewed and prepared program policies for the Town's Community Access Program (CAP) to formalize purpose, guidelines and eligibility criteria in support of this program.

### **Recommendation**

That a recommendation be forwarded to Council to approve the Subsidized Transportation Policy EL-F-2.2 as presented.

### **Background and Considerations**

The Town of Okotoks offers two (2) subsidized transportation programs to ensure residents can remain active participants in the community, thus contributing to enhanced social well-being.

The Volunteer Driver Program (VDP) is a reliable, safe, and free transportation option for qualifying Okotoks residents who require assistance with transportation to medical appointments located outside of Okotoks. This transportation service is carried out by a group of volunteer drivers who are reimbursed by the Town for mileage.

The Community Access Program (CAP) provides subsidized, accessible transportation both in town and to approved locations out of town for qualifying residents. CAP fees are set based on a two-year contract with the service provider and currently requires a 50/50 payment split between the resident and the Town of Okotoks. This transportation service is carried out by a contracted taxi service. The current taxi service provider lacks the capability to provide wheelchair accessible rides, necessitating the arrangement of additional providers to accommodate such needs. These trips are not charged at a fixed rate; instead, payment is determined by the rates and fees set by the service provider.

These programs aim to promote and contribute to social inclusion, belonging, quality of life, equity, and social cohesion. More information about history, current eligibility, and intended outcomes are outlined in Figure 1 below.

## Current state - Okotoks Subsidized Transit Programs -The WHAT

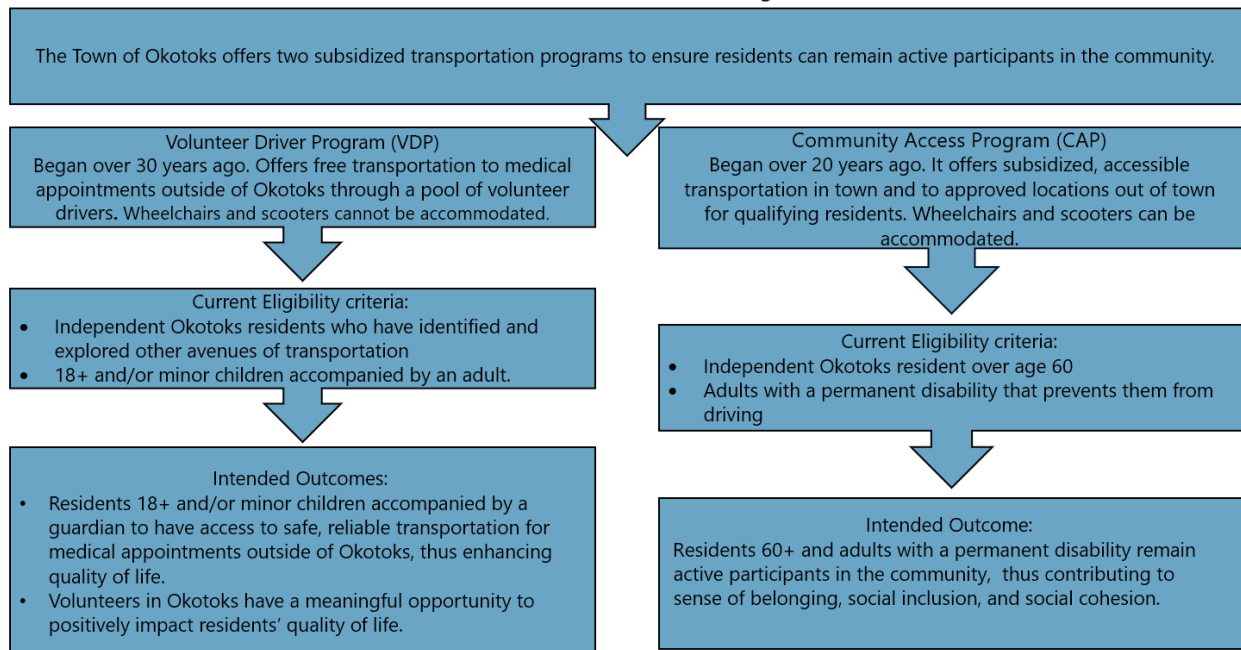


Figure 1- Subsidized Transit Program Overview showing the two separate tax supported transit program's background, history, purpose, current eligibility, and intended outcomes.

### Current Impact: Volunteer Driver Program

In 2023, the VDP had 117 clients who required a combined total of 545 trips. There has been a significant increase in demand for this program over the last few years. In 2023, volunteer drivers logged over 36,000 km compared to 28,000 km in 2022 and 24,000 in 2021. As shown below, this program has had a 24% increase in the number of clients served, a 37% increase in the number of trips, and a 52% increase in operation costs from 2022 to 2023. An aging population and enhanced program awareness are contributing factors to this increase; however, staff are seeing an increase in drive requests for residents to see family doctors and get routine lab tests in Calgary. The VDP has maintained a 94-98% success rate in filling trip requests by community members. Prior to 2019, volunteer drivers were not compensated for mileage.

## VDP Data Chart - The SO WHAT

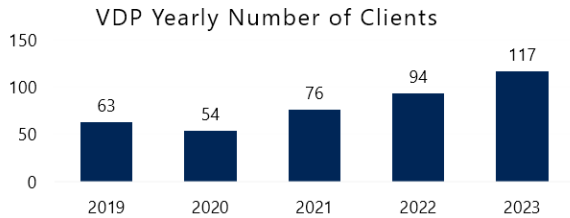


Figure 2 Historical number of clients served by VDP. Note: Usage only decreased slightly during the pandemic and continues to grow year over year.

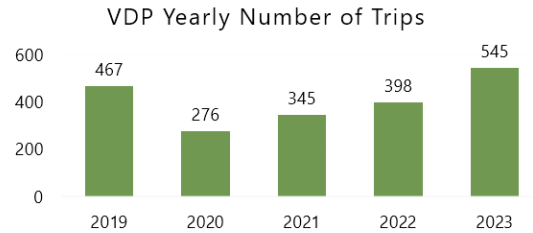


Figure 3 Historical number of VDP trips. Note: Following the pandemic, VDP has shown consistent growth and surpassed pre pandemic levels.

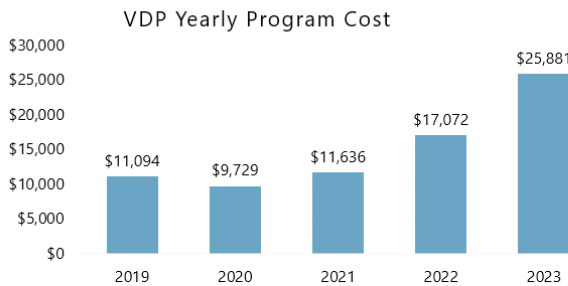


Figure 4 Historical VDP cost. Note: There is a substantial increase in the number of kilometers driven in 2023 compared to 2022 (36,000 km in 2023, 28,000 km in 2022). Volunteers are compensated for mileage.

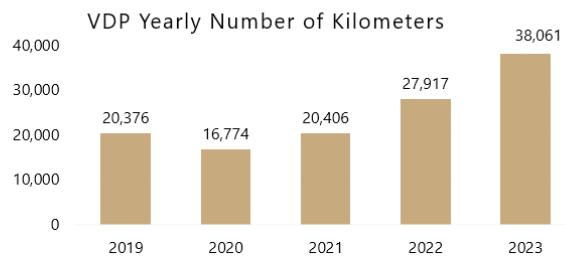


Figure 5 Historical number of kilometers driven in the VDP. Note: Distance driven continues to grow year over year.

Figures 2-5 – VDP Data Charts, representing historical usership and program cost (2019-2023).

### Current Impact: Community Access Program

In 2023, CAP had 812 registered users. Of these, 327 used the taxi service and 34 accessed wheelchair accessible trips. CAP continues an upward trend of usage with 8,570 yearly trips in 2023 compared to 7,694 trips in 2022 (11% increase). Despite the overall program usage (combining taxi and wheelchair trips) not exceeding pre-pandemic levels, the cost of administering this program has exceeded the pre-pandemic level by 14%. The rise in cost for the program primarily comes from a 209% rise in demand for wheelchair accessible trips. Based on the data available, the total expenditure on wheelchair trips in 2023 was \$37,747.86, covering a total of 507 trips. A significant portion of this expenditure, totaling \$28,832.64, was for 377 in-town wheelchair trips. On average, the cost of a wheelchair trip within town typically costs \$144.92 with a range of \$89.75-\$255.88.

According to the data in the most recent user survey (2019), the CAP is achieving its outcome with 85.6% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that having a Community Access Card enables them to remain active participants in the community. In the same 2019 survey, 53% of users indicated they cannot afford taxi rates without the CAP subsidy, 37.3% reported they would not be able to afford to go out as often without the CAP, and 63.9% indicated it is important for them to be able to call for a subsidized taxi when unable to drive. These responses, coupled with numerous policies and strategies (listed under the Relevant Policies and Strategies heading) signify the Town's commitment to supporting residents and reflects the need for subsidized transportation.

CAP Data Chart -The SO WHAT

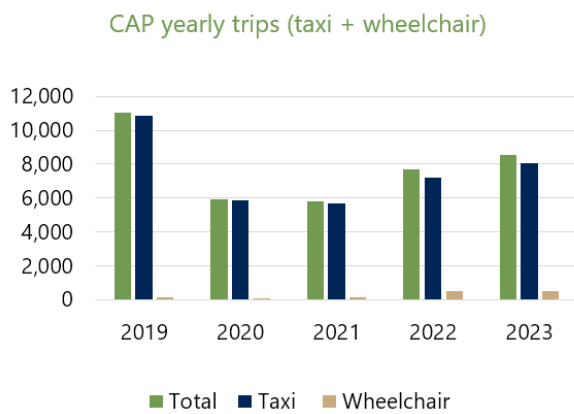


Figure 6 Historical CAP trips broken down by total taxi trips compared to total wheelchair trips.

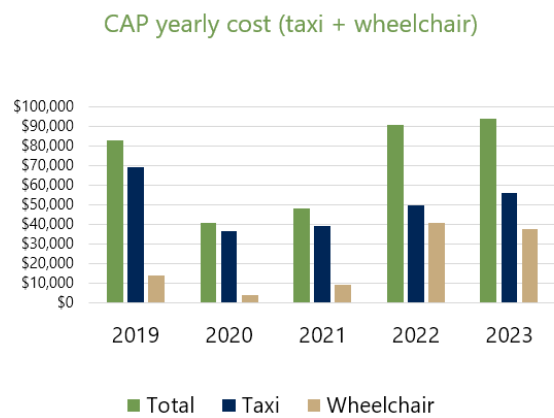


Figure 7 Historical CAP cost broken down by total taxi cost compared to total wheelchair cost. Note: Current taxi provider cannot accommodate wheelchair accessible trips.

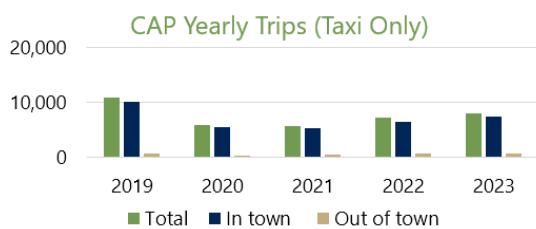


Figure 8 Historical CAP Taxi trips broken down by in town trips compared to out-of-town trips.

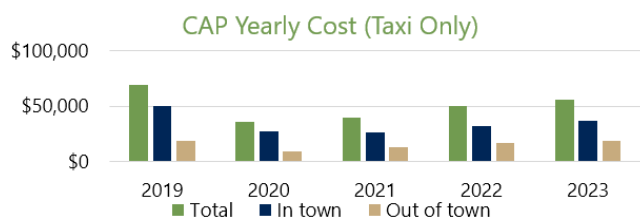


Figure 9 Historical CAP taxi cost broken down by total in town taxi cost compared to total out of town taxi cost.

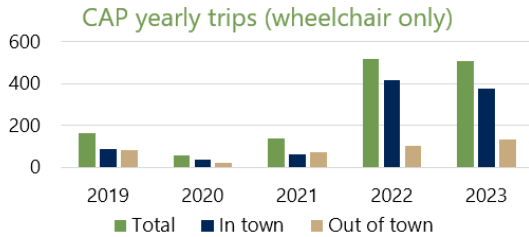


Figure 10 Historical CAP wheelchair accessible trips. A significant portion of the trips are in town. Note: The current taxi provider does not have wheelchair accessible vehicles.

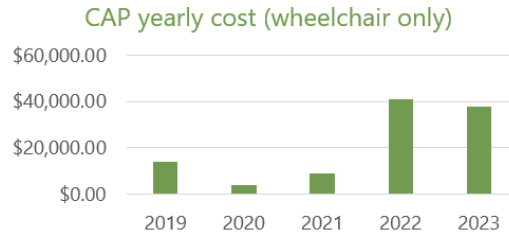


Figure 11 Historical CAP wheelchair accessible trips. Both in town and out of town trips are included together. The historical data was not available to break down the total cost of in town vs out of town.

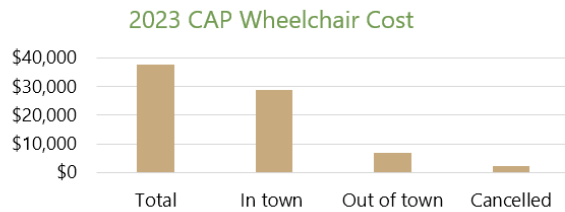


Figure 12 2023 wheelchair costs broken down by in town trip cost in comparison to out of town trip cost. Note: The average range for a return in town wheelchair accessible trip is between \$ 140-167.

Figures 6-12 – CAP Data Charts, representing historical usership and program cost (2019-2023).

*NOTE: Historical data is presented with an estimated minimum accuracy of 95%. In conducting this review, gaps in data collection and consistencies were noted, however it did not impact the ability to make informed, data driven decisions. Data collection practices and processes are being implemented starting in 2024 to improve accuracy in reporting.*

Current Challenges

1. The absence of a program policy and current broad eligibility criteria makes it difficult for administration to make consistent and unbiased decisions. The application and renewal process are administratively intensive, which could be streamlined to an online system.
2. Okotoks Transit is not currently able to absorb CAP demand. There is some potential overlap in terms of ridership and in town destinations served between the local component of CAP and Okotoks Transit service. Okotoks Transit has been very successful and high usage has resulted in increased ride failure requests and user frustration. Two new transit vehicles will be added to help offset demand, however at this time there is no capacity in the program to be able to meet the additional demand of the CAP users. In a future review, Okotoks on Demand Transit may be a potential option to absorb in town regular and wheelchair accessible CAP trips; with the consideration that the primary transportation objective of the CAP is to provide the right option, at the right time, for the right person. A potential risk of this approach is that if all local regular and wheelchair accessible CAP trips were provided by

Okotoks On-Demand Transit, the service provider may not have enough financial benefit for only providing out of town service, thus making it difficult to secure a provider. The net contract operating cost (outsourced costs less revenue) for a single Okotoks Transit trip in 2021 was higher than the current subsidized cost to the Town for an in-town CAP trip. A new RFP will almost certainly result in increased per trip costs, but it is unlikely to increase to more than the current Okotoks Transit cost differential.

3. The current taxi service provider does not have wheelchair accessible vehicles in their fleet. This is a gap in providing needed transportation for CAP clients. As such, High River Handi-Bus is being scheduled by administration to fill the gap in this service. As outlined earlier in this report, in town wheelchair costs are significantly higher when provided by service outside of Okotoks, however as of the present time, there is not a known local service provider who has been identified to fill this need.
4. The cost of operating VDP increased by 52% from 2022 to 2023. This increase is due to the combination of two factors: the number of kilometers driven has gone up, and the number of yearly trips has increased by 37%. If this growth rate continues, the program may not be sustainable in the long term.
5. Currently CAP provides subsidized transportation to adults (18+) who have a permanent disability that prevents them from driving or for residents who are over the age of 60. When considering equity, there are residents under the age of 18 living with disabilities who have barriers to transportation.
6. The Town of Okotoks has grown since inception of these two programs. With this growth, eligibility guidelines and operation will need to adapt for these programs to continue to be sustainable.

#### Recommendations:

Develop a Subsidized Transportation Policy that aligns Council's Strategic Priority of Enhanced Culture & Community Health and the Town's Corporate Business Plan.

To enhance efficiency of these programs and to reduce barriers to access, Administration recommends the following:

1. Approve a policy to formalize the Subsidized Transportation Programs that outlines the intent, eligibility, and administration of CAP and VDP (Attachment A).
  - a. Rationale – Currently, there is no policy for this program which makes consistent administration of the program difficult.  
Rationale – By removing the 18+ eligibility requirement, all residents with a permanent disability that prevents them from driving would qualify. This change allows for better alignment with program intent, the Municipal Development Plan

and policies that support accessibility and inclusion. This would result in a service level change.

2. Remove the current 18+ eligibility requirement for persons with a disability.
  - a. Rationale – By removing the 18+ eligibility requirement, all residents with a permanent disability that prevents them from driving would qualify. This change allows for better alignment with program intent, the Municipal Development Plan and policies that support accessibility and inclusion. This would result in a service level change.
3. Subsidize CAP cost up to 50% for eligible one-way trips in Okotoks and to pre-approved locations outside of Okotoks.
  - a. Rationale – Improved sustainability of the CAP program due to rising costs. As tax supported costs increase, so will the user portion.
  - b. Rationale - Users have the option to access Okotoks Transit at lower cost (\$3.50)
4. Ensure CAP Request for Proposals clearly requires a clause that the service provider must have one wheelchair accessible vehicle available.
  - a. Rationale: In town and out of town wheelchair trips are currently outsourced outside of Okotoks. This is quite costly, especially for in-town trips, and is not sustainable. By requesting the local provider have one vehicle in their fleet that is wheelchair accessible we are enhancing local service and creating equitable transportation opportunities for all residents.
5. Complete a user survey for both CAP and VDP in 2025 to understand user data and assist with the next program review. This should be repeated six months prior to each consecutive program review.
  - a. Rationale: To understand the users, effectiveness of the program and if outcomes are being met. This allows for data informed decision making and impact considerations prior to implementing any potential future changes.
6. Conduct subsidized transportation reviews (CAP and VDP) every two years to ensure the program meets the needs of residents, that it continues to be sustainable and to determine if/when it is feasible for the local portion of these services to be absorbed by Okotoks Transit.
  - a. Rationale: This allows us to regularly monitor the effectiveness of the program and if it is meeting the needs of our community. It will also allow us to evaluate when Okotoks Transit has the capacity to absorb in town CAP trips.
  - b. Rationale: This review will also allow us to review the impact of service level changes recommended above.

Relevant Policies and Strategies:

Council Policy PS-A-2.4 Integrated and Accessible Transportation

- Deliver Community Access program as the subsidized taxi services for eligible residents is identified as a service level within this policy.

2022-2025 Town of Okotoks Strategic Plan

- Enhanced Culture & Community Health – Provide timely access to relevant programs and services that support health and well-being.

Municipal Development Plan

- Part A: Section 7. Principles: Okotoks is a healthy, safe, inclusive community....” we use an equity-lens in all aspects of development.” (Page 20)
- Part B: Goal 8: Travel + Transport....” We can ensure that our community supports all modes of transportation so all residents can easily access community amenities and events and not be socially isolated.” (Page 42)
- Policy 3.2.4.a) Ensure accessibility for all ages and abilities on local and regional transit systems as they are developed, (Note: this is interpreted to extend to all Town transportation programs)

Age Friendly Okotoks Report & Action Plan

This plan includes recommendations for an age-friendly community that promotes inclusion and support for older adults to maintain their independence and engage meaningfully in community life.

- Goal VIII – Transportation – Strategy 2: Regularly review service levels of programs that offer transport for older adults to ensure accessibility and affordability of services, that considers the needs of low-income individuals (Also referenced in 2023-2026 Corporate Business Plan)

Environmental Master Plan

- Energy, Emissions, & Air Quality: Strategy #7 - Improve access to public transit options, both within Okotoks and between neighbouring municipalities.

Climate Action Plan

- Transportation and Land Use: Objective #1 - Increase access to safe, equitable and sustainable multi-modal transportation options.

**Current Policy or Bylaw Analysis**

Fees, Rates, and Charges Bylaw 09-24

- CAP program eligibility for age of a senior is aligned with the definition in this bylaw.



## **Municipal Comparisons**

A review of subsidized transportation programs in Cochrane, Strathmore, Airdrie, City of Calgary and Bonnyville was completed. Each program is uniquely implemented yet share the common goals of supporting the transportation needs of vulnerable residents, improving access to medical appointments in larger centres, or fostering active community participation. These programs have distinct qualification criteria, reimbursement processes, and subsidy schedules. Typically, income thresholds are used as eligibility criteria, along with the resident being either a senior or a person with a disability. Some communities utilize a single access point for several municipal subsidized programs, such as the Cochrane Connect Card. The larger municipalities were considered to gain insights into how subsidized transportation programs are incorporated into the broader transportation plans of their respective municipalities. With this in mind, both Access Airdrie and Calgary Fair Entry were reviewed to ensure that growth was considered in the Okotoks policy development.

## **CAO Comments**

Committee direction is requested.

## **Attachment(s)**

1. EL F 2.3 Subsidized Transportation Program Policy
2. Current 2024 CAP program application
3. Current 2024 VDP program application

Prepared by:  
Magan Braun,  
Community Wellness Specialist  
May 5, 2024