



# FASTFACTS



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## A TICKET TO RIDE

In 2002, the City of Brandon, in cooperation with the Province of Manitoba, implemented a policy that allows social assistance recipients to use public transit at no charge during off-peak hours. This policy is the result of the City of Brandon's 1994 *Forum on Poverty and Impoverishment* and the subsequent task force that was established to move forward the recommendations from the Forum.

### City of Brandon Bus-Pass Initiative

In 1999, Manitoba still had a two-tier social assistance system. The province was responsible for single parents, individuals with disabilities and the unemployable; Brandon, like other municipalities, was responsible for "employable" claimants. (The conversion to a one-tier system administered by the province took effect June 1, 2004.).

Prior to 2002, those employed or participating in training programs received bus passes covered by the city to get to work and attend programs. Individuals could also get passes for doctor, dentist and other appointments. Social assistance recipients not employed or in training, and spouses and children, were denied passes.

The case for providing bus passes to *all* city social assistance recipients was based on two main considerations. First, basic transportation is a

necessity for adults and children to participate in community life. For people who are destitute, bus passes are essential. Adults need them to look for jobs, get groceries, attend meetings, visit friends/relatives in personal care homes, hospitals, etc., and children need them to attend school and go places with their parents and friends.

Second, the incremental cost of putting another person on the bus was low; probably zero in off-peak periods when buses had excess capacity.

The arguments against the initiative were that the provision of bus passes would: (i) undermine the incentive to seek work; (ii) discriminate against the working poor; and (iii) reduce transit revenues because social assistance recipients who did use the bus would now get free tickets.

Eventually agreement was reached to implement a bus pass program for a six-month trial period. The resolution approved by Council stipulated that monthly bus passes would be issued upon request "to any individual and their de facto dependents that are financially dependent and living in the same residence." To finance and track the cost of the program, a reserve fund was created for Social Services, and the money in the fund used to reimburse Transit Services. The money cost to the City was in effect zero, because the money paid to Transit by Social Services reduced the payment to offset the transit deficit by an equivalent amount.



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Evaluation of the program was done through surveys of bus-pass recipients and a Bus Pass Evaluation Focus Group session. The outcome of the evaluation process confirmed that individuals – both adults and children – used the service for many purposes and that access to bus passes improved their lives.

The City program was entrenched in the budget for the year 2001.

The next step in the development of the program in Brandon was a request to have the Department of Child and Family Services and Housing purchase bus passes for all *provincial* social assistance recipients in the city. Monthly passes were offered to the province at a price of \$1.50 per month– the estimated cost of wear and tear on upholstery, flooring, etc

The province agreed and effective May 1, 2002 the City of Brandon implemented a multi-part pricing structure that included, in addition to prices for regular adult, child and student users of the transit system, a new structure of fares for social assistance recipients and other transit riders using the transit system in off-peak periods: provincial payment for city social assistance recipients qualifying for a bus pass for jobs and training, \$50.00 per month; payment for bus passes for all other social assistance recipients – both city and province – \$1.50 per month; and off-peak bus passes available to all regular users of the transit system, \$35.00 per month.

Both social assistance recipients and the workers in various organizations and agencies that work with and provide services for individuals and families of limited means received the program with much enthusiasm.

The average number of off-peak passes is about 540 a month (6480) a year. The feedback from bus pass recipients obtained through surveys and the focus group session, along with anecdotal evidence from employees of non-profit and government agencies, suggests that the bus pass program has provided important benefits. Mobility is absolutely essential to allow people to participate fully in soci-

ety. The ability to travel around the city cheaply and safely helps to overcome social exclusion and creates a sense of acceptance by, and belonging to, the mainstream society. This outcome in turn improves the health of individuals and promotes greater involvement in community activities.

When the idea of establishing a bus-pass program was first advanced in Brandon, some Councillors and some individuals in the administration greeted it with considerable skepticism. Once the program was up and running and the benefits of the program became evident, the skepticism dissipated. Now, the program has the support of just about everyone at City Hall, and the support of provincial government workers.

Brandon's initiative for bus passes for social assistance recipients, and off-peak period passes for regular transit users, demonstrates how governments can make modest changes that enhance the lives of people in difficult economic circumstances, and also promote more efficient use of our transit systems. It is important that provincial and city governments work together to find alternative pricing and transfer arrangements that produce these desirable social outcomes.

- Errol Black

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