

2016 COMMUNITY EXCELLENCE AWARDS APPLICATION BEST PRACTICES, Excellence in Action

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Name of Local Government

Fraser Valley Regional District

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The Mayor/Chair is aware that I am submitting this application on behalf of my local government.

Yes

Project/Program Title:

Fraser Valley Express Implementation Plan

Project Summary Paragraph

Please provide a summary of your project/program in 150 words or less.

The Fraser Valley Express (FVX) is a recently implemented sub-regional rapid bus service, providing a connection between communities in the Fraser Valley, to the TransLink transit network and the rest of the Lower Mainland. The FVX, as it transitioned from a high level strategic vision into reality, illustrates how a series of planning processes can, over time, build the political support necessary to implement an entirely new and innovative service.

The FVX supports a growing demand from the public to improve transit connections, providing access to hospitals, nearby labour markets, and tourist destinations. It also represents an important step toward reducing GHG's and improving air quality in our region. Since the FVX launched on April 6, 2015, ridership and fare product sales have increased consistently. The Fraser Valley Express is now an integral component of the FVRD's evolving transit network and a successful model of collaborative planning throughout the Province.

Project Analysis

1. SERVICES

How has the implementation of this program/project improved services in your community?

Since 1950 and the shuttering of the interurban line, there has been no public transit connection between Abbotsford and Chilliwack and limited connections between Abbotsford and Metro Vancouver. Residents have had to rely on private

bus companies and more recently, taxis. The costs associated with private transportation options have often been prohibitive, especially for seniors or those with a lower income, limiting access to nearby regional health centres or labour markets.

With the FVX, residents and visitors alike can access 17 round trips on weekdays and 4 round trips on Saturdays. The routing and schedule has been designed to integrate with the other four separate transit systems in the region (Agassiz-Harrison, Chilliwack, Abbotsford-Mission and TransLink) and leverages new and existing infrastructure along the corridor, including three Park and Rides facilities (together with another Park and Ride at TransLink's Carvolth Exchange in Langley). Through the connection with TransLink, residents of the Fraser Valley can now access Vancouver International Airport, BC Ferries at Horseshoe Bay, University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University and other popular destinations in the Lower Mainland. Moreover, visitors to the region can now access Cultus Lake, Harrison Hot Springs, or events like the Abbotsford Airshow, without a personal vehicle.

2. EFFECTIVENESS

How is the program/project more efficient and/or effective than it was before?

In addition to the daily monitoring of ridership and fare product use, an extensive post-implementation engagement exercise was completed to garner passenger and operator feedback following six months of service. A total of 481 onboard and online surveys were completed, which was supplemented by detailed discussions with operators and those involved in the administration of the service. Respondents and operators provided feedback on fares, schedules, routing and frequency and identified ways in which the service could be improved. These suggestions have since been incorporated into BC Transit's ongoing strategic planning, where it will help inform FVX decision-making in the future.

Overall, feedback was extremely positive with 80% of respondents indicating that the FVX routing met their needs and multiple comments expressing gratitude for the introduction of this regional service. With regards to what steps could be taken to improve the service, the most common response was a desire for Sunday and holiday service. Depending on the provision of provincial funding, and the results of BC Transit's internal prioritization process, service on the FVX will soon expand to include service on Sundays and holidays, comparable with the same level of service currently offered on Saturdays. While discussed in greater detail in the Accountability section, the prioritization of additional Sunday and holiday service

underlines the ongoing importance of public input and the role it continues to play decision-making.

3. ECONOMIC IMPACT

How has the program/project saved the community money and/or resources or encouraged economic development?

Providing travel options to the Fraser Valley has been a challenge the past few years as the region has struggled to find ways of encouraging travel to and within our region without a personal or rented vehicle. The scheduling, cost and amount of planning involved to use public transit or other modes of transportation that don't require someone to drive has discouraged potential visitors to the Fraser Valley.

Throughout the development and implementation of the FVX, the FVRD and steering committee worked closely with the Fraser Valley Group (a marketing partnership between Tourism Chilliwack, Tourism Abbotsford and Tourism Langley) to identify opportunities, initially and in the future, to build awareness of the service and to strengthen the region's tourism industry and marketability. The FVX is now a key component of the Fraser Valley Group's promotional materials and ongoing marketing initiatives.

Within the region, the FVX has provided access to nearby labour centres in Langley, Abbotsford, and Chilliwack as well as others further west in the Lower Mainland. In addition to the limited number of stops, the schedule was designed to support workplace commuting, with a greater frequency of trips occurring in the early morning and afternoon. During BC Transit's post-implementation engagement, respondents who identified as commuters were overwhelmingly satisfied with the route's frequency and schedule design, frequently mentioning that the service had significantly improved their ability to find or maintain employment.

4. ACCOUNTABILITY

How has this program/project improved accountability to citizens of your local government?

During public engagement for BC Transit's Chilliwack and Central Fraser Valley Transit Future Plans – at which over 450 people attended eight open houses, and more than 750 survey responses were recorded – the public identified a regional connection between Fraser Valley communities as its top priority. Based on this strong public support for regional connections, the City of Chilliwack, City of Abbotsford and the FVRD began developing a regional transit service.

The stakeholder and committee feedback received months earlier had direct influence on the design of the new transit service, such as the decision to include a stop at Highstreet Shopping Centre when it was not originally included in the route layout. The input received also influenced decisions on the routing, schedule design, fare structure and bus stop infrastructure.

Public input continues to have a significant impact on strategic decision making. The results of BC Transit's post-implementation engagement have directed ongoing discussions about potential expansion, schedule changes, additional stops and the possibility of new on-board amenities.

In a larger context, the FVX is an example of how local government, in a very short time frame, can collaborate with neighbouring jurisdictions to advocate for, develop and implement coordinated projects and or policies in response to areas of distinct need as identified by their communities, and to do so with an urgency that reflects the community's attitude and unique needs.

5. RESULTS

How has this program/project resulted in excellence in action in your community?

Since launch, the FVX has been monitored in three ways: farebox information, fare product sales and passenger/operator surveys. To monitor ridership, BC Transit collects farebox information daily on all of its buses. This includes daily ridership numbers and which fare products customers are using (single-use tickets, cash or monthly passes). This data is then organized and shared with municipal partners each month.

In the first year of the service, reported revenue shows that ridership and revenue have steadily increased month after month. After one year of service, reported monthly revenue was 30% higher than the assumed monthly revenue outlined in BC Transit's Annual Operating Agreement (AOA). As an additional incentive, any revenue which exceeds the AOA projection directly decreases the municipal cost share – meaning that the more successful the FVX operates, the less it costs the local taxpayer.

To date, there have been more than 75,000 trips taken on the FVX, with slightly less than 10,000 this past April alone (compared with 3,350 in April 2015). These figures comfortably surpass BC Transit's projections, which were based on average ridership in each of the connected BC Transit networks, as well as the only other comparable service in the province, the Cowichan Valley Commuter (CVC). While

not providing the same level of service, ridership on the CVC took almost twice as long as the FVX to reach BC Transit's projections.

6. TEAMWORK

Tell us about the teamwork involved in making this program/project possible.

Once statutory consent was received, BC Transit assumed responsibility for managing the planning process, which included organizing public engagement, preparing steering committee agendas and facilitating all of the internal BC Transit activities required to initiate a brand new service in one year.

Among the first steps of the implementation phase was to clearly identify roles and responsibilities between the various partners. To do this, and oversee the implementation process as a whole, a steering committee was established. Chaired by the FVRD, the committee consisted of representation from Chilliwack and Abbotsford Engineering departments, FVRD planning staff, the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV), the UFV Student Society (UFV-SUS) and BC Transit. Given the project's ambitious timeline, the project required a high degree of collaboration and coordination. In total, the steering committee met 10 times, providing direction and leadership throughout the development and implementation of the service.

In addition to the Steering Committee, there were other key stakeholders that played a decisive role in the development and implementation of the FVX service. This included TransLink and the transit operator First Canada, both providing valuable technical and operational input. They also assisted in initial public engagement and communication initiatives prior to service launch, including directional signage at Carvolth Exchange and TransLink updating their documents and advertising initiatives to include information on the FVX.

7. INNOVATION

What makes this program/project innovative and creative?

While there are examples of regional "commuter" services elsewhere in the province (services which provide morning and afternoon service only), the FVX is BC Transit's first full day two-way regional transit service connecting multiple separate transit networks (Agassiz-Harrison, Chilliwack, Abbotsford-Mission and TransLink). The FVX has shown that despite BC Transit's preferred funding and governance model (based on stand-alone independently operating community networks), regional connections are possible, rewarding and support BC Transit's

goals of reducing barriers to ridership and improving the everyday transit experience.

From a planning perspective, the FVX has shown that a regional approach to transit can also improve the performance of separate community transit networks, helping them become more efficient by increasing connectivity and supporting ridership growth by working to remove barriers between different transit services. The success of the FVX, and transit planning from a regional perspective, has since led to BC Transit and its municipal partners in the Fraser Valley to explore new and innovative ways to deliver transit services in the region.

With regards to non-transit planning and project management beyond the Fraser Valley, the FVX has shown that even smaller organizations with limited resources can leverage collaboration between organizations, and between different departments within these organizations, to develop innovative solutions to challenges that may have previously been beyond their capacity.

8. SUSTAINABILITY

What measures have you put in place to ensure the continued operation of this initiative?(e.g. staff time, resources, financial)

Since the FVX was not part of any existing transit system, BC Transit and the FVRD were required to develop a new set of fare products, as well as establish an entirely new vendor network to distribute these products. To make it more convenient for potential riders, staff identified potential vendors in each community based on proximity to FVX stops, existing transit exchanges and/or Park n' Ride facilities.

Currently, fare products are available in each partner community, as well as in Mission and in Langley near Carvolth Exchange. Since launch, the FVRD has established several additional vendors in under served areas and will continue to strategically pursue vendors elsewhere in the region where required. To complement this traditional vendor network, the FVRD also developed and launched an online retail store to sell FVX fare products. As mentioned in the Results section, fare product sales continuing to grow month after month. Working collaboratively with our Finance Department, we have since expanded the store to include other BC Transit fare products.

The FVRD has allocated ongoing staff time on a flexible basis to respond quickly to rider complaints or questions, urgent administration issues and to support the newly established vendor network. Allocated staff time also includes supporting BC Transit marketing and promotional initiatives. This commitment to customer

service and supporting our partners has contributed to the FVX's ongoing success by allowing our operators to focus on the day to day operation of the service.

9. BEST PRACTICES

How do the processes behind the program/project, and the subsequent results, serve as an example of best practices?

The Fraser Valley Express Implementation Plan, a joint submission by the Fraser Valley Regional and BC Transit, recently won a 2016 Silver Award for Excellence in Planning Practice from the Planning Institute of British Columbia (PIBC). According to the PIBC Awards Committee, the FVX Implementation Plan “stood out as a great example for the planning profession”. The lessons learned during the development and implementation of the FVX have since become the foundation for other collaborative transit planning initiatives here in Fraser Valley, including a possible similar sub-regional transit connection between Hope, Agassiz and Chilliwack.

Beyond transit planning, the implementation of the FVX can be used as a model of successful intra-organizational coordination and collaboration. Throughout the process, staff from various municipal departments (Planning, Engineering, Community Services, Finance, etc.) worked together to advance the project, providing technical expertise and contributing significantly to the service's immediate success. Without this degree of collaboration, the scope of work and projected timeline would have made the development and implementation of the service extremely challenging, if not impossible.

10. TRANSFERABILITY

How is this program/project transferable to other local governments?

Prior to the success of the FVX, BC Transit and its partners throughout the province were hesitant to pursue the development of sub-regional connections between distinct community networks. There were concerns regarding governance and decision-making, the development of new funding models, and the challenge of allocated staff time and ongoing administration. The success of the FVX has shown BC Transit and municipal governments throughout the province that these challenges can be addressed through thoughtful decision-making, innovation and collaboration. In a larger context, regional issues are characterized by an entirely new set of challenges typically unfamiliar to local government; the FVX proves that these challenges, while daunting, are minor in comparison with the value of successfully responding to community needs in an expedient and comprehensive manner.

For BC Transit, the FVX has established a new precedent for successful regional collaboration and perhaps more importantly, revealed a new way of looking at their own business and the way they provide services. Since April of last year and the launch of the FVX, BC Transit has been exploring an exciting range of new potential regional connections elsewhere in the province, including several more here in the Fraser Valley. Through the success of the FVX, we learned that initially the only necessary components are public support and an appetite from local government to work collaboratively to develop innovative solutions.

11. KNOWLEDGE SHARING

What helpful advice would you share with other communities looking to embark on a similar project?

Within the region, the FVRD has only been involved in the provision of transit since 2013, when Regional Programs assumed control of the Agassiz-Harrison service, a route which provides a connection between Harrison Hot Springs, Agassiz and the District of Kent and the City of Chilliwack. The transit learning curve was steep, shortly after assuming control of the service, capacity issues required that the FVRD consider additional bus procurement. It was an expensive introduction to fleet management, service levels and the challenges that accompany a growing ridership.

We have been active in sharing the lessons learned during that experience, and what we've learned since, with our municipal partners and others elsewhere in the province. Staff from the FVRD have attended numerous transit workshops within the region and beyond, including participation in BC Transit's annual workshop with transit planners and operators from throughout the province. With the FVX now regarded as a model of progressive regional transit planning, the FVRD will continue to share that knowledge and provide guidance whenever needed.

This commitment now extends beyond transit planning to include our experiences with developing an online store, expanding that storefront to include other products or services beyond BC Transit items, and the challenges associated with coordinating online sales with Finance Departments and their existing accounting practices.

12. TELL US MORE

Please share any other information you think may support your submission.

As a signatory of the Climate Action Charter, the FVRD is committed to improving air quality and reducing GHG emissions in the region. The introduction of regional

transit is a reflection of that commitment. In the FVRD, on-road vehicles account for 45% of nitrogen oxides and 37% of greenhouse gas emissions. In an air shed as sensitive as the Fraser Valley's, a large single source of pollution represents a significant opportunity to improve air quality in the region.

With transit currently representing only one percent of the total mode share in the Fraser Valley, an initiative like the FVX which increases the range of transportation choices for residents who travel between Fraser Valley communities and beyond to the Lower Mainland is a vitally important tool for reducing GHG emissions and improving air quality. If the FVX's current ridership figures remain consistent, a conservative expectation, the total number of regional connections by transit in the region will increase by 80,000 to 90,000 in 2016 alone. If we can continue to build on the success of the FVX, it will encourage additional sub-regional connections, contributing further to reducing GHG emissions and improving air quality in the region for years to come.