

SAUGEEN MOBILITY

and REGIONAL TRANSIT

GENERAL BOARD MEETING MINUTES

Friday, December 3, 2021, 1:30 p.m.

Board Members Present: Councillor Warren Dickert, Town of Hanover Councillor, Board President
Councillor Beth Hamilton, Municipality of West Grey, Board Vice-President
Vice Deputy Mayor Mike Myatt, Town of Saugeen Shores, Board Past President
Councillor Dave Cuyler, Municipality of Kincardine (at 1:50 p.m.)
Deputy Mayor Mark Davis, Municipality of Arran-Elderslie (for Doug Bell)
Councillor Jim Frew, Township of Southgate
Dean Leifso, Municipality of Brockton
Councillor Ed McGugan, Township of Huron-Kinloss

Board Members Absent: Mayor Scott Mackey, Township of Chatsworth

Others Present: Roger Cook, Manager
Catherine McKay, Recording Secretary

The meeting was conducted by videoconference in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Call to Order

President Warren Dickert called the meeting order at 1:30 p.m..

2. Disclosure of Pecuniary Interest and Declaration of Conflict of Interest

None declared.

3. Approval of the Agenda

Motion #2021-0076

Moved by Mike Myatt; Seconded by Beth Hamilton

That the agenda for December 3, 2021 be amended to add item 9A Approval of Motions Made by Email, 9B Level of Service Committee Meeting Notes and Recommendations and 9C HR Committee Meeting Notes and Recommendations and that the agenda be accepted as so amended.

Carried

4. Minutes of the October 29, 2021 General Board Meeting

Motion #2021-077

Moved by Dean Leifso; Seconded by Beth Hamilton

That the Board approve and adopt the minutes of the October 29, 2021 General Board Meeting as circulated.

Carried

The Manager clarified the last bullet point in item 8E of the minutes noting that the partnership agreement is working as it was designed to. It is not driving the numbers up and ridership changes can result in an increase or decrease in the municipal share of each partner each year. The \$800,000 proposed contribution for 2022 would have represented a 6.67% increase over 2020.

Mike Myatt informed that Board that he received a call regarding hours of service from clients who wanted to go from Southampton to the Festival of Lights in Owen Sound but could not due to the hours of service ending at 6:00 p.m. The President noted that this issue will be covered later in the agenda.

5. Business Arising from the Minutes

The following items were reviewed as business arising:

- The Pay and Benefits Policy will be considered as item 8 on the agenda.

- The Manager has been in touch with Miguel Pelletier, Director, Transportation and Environmental Services regarding the Bruce County Master Transportation Plan and will be meeting with him again.
- Grey Highlands is considering including funding in its 2022 budget to join SMART.
- The August Civic holiday will be addressed in agenda item 8.
- The Manager reported that the administration of the vaccination policy is going smoothly.
- The Board will be reviewing the partnership agreement in the New Year.
- The budget and the Level of Service Committee meeting notes and recommendations will be covered in agenda item 9.
- The Board is working on how to make SMART meetings accessible to the public and this will be addressed at the next meeting.
- The Manager explained that according to Grey Bruce Public Health, SMART can carry more passengers as long as they are all vaccinated, although it is difficult to ensure that this is the case. He said that sticking to the load restrictions is manageable.

6. Correspondence

The items of correspondence were received for information.

7. Manager's Reports and Recommendations

A. Report 2021-35 October 2021 Operational

The Manager presented the report.

Motion #2021-078

Moved by Mike Myatt; Seconded by Ed McGugan

That Report 2021-35 October 2021 Operational be approved as presented.

Carried

The Manager noted that every year, ridership and population are used to calculate SMART's share of the pool of gas tax money such that if all transit services have the same change in ridership and population, they would see no change in their share. If population and ridership stay the same, the grant would change only if the overall pool of funds changes. The Province recognizes that the pool of gas tax funds has gone down and has indicated that it will top up the available funds for 2022. It usually makes a funding announcement in November each year although no word has been received so far this year. Funding is based on ridership in the previous year and SMART's share should be the same, as all services have experienced the same decline in ridership.

The Manager was asked to add to operational reports how the deficit is to be covered by gas tax funds because it appears from the budget that SMART is in a deficit position, which is not the case. The Manager explained that the operational deficit is fully funded by gas tax revenue.

B. Report 2021-36 2021 Client Surveys

The report was received for information and the Manager noted that the surveys contain some strongly positive comments along with concerns about service cuts and cost, although overall they are very supportive. The survey asked if SMART should have a booking "app" with half in favour. The results are expected to be available for the next Board meeting. More general surveys have been done in the past and this is the most detailed survey so far.

C. 2021-37 Group Excursion Fees

The Manager presented the report.

Motion #2021-079

Moved by Beth Hamilton; Seconded by Jim Frew

That Report 2021-37 Group Excursion Fees be approved as presented.

Carried

The following points were made in the discussion:

- Dave Cuyler had an inquiry from Community Living about whether rides to evening hockey games were individual or group. The Manager noted that the only option for rides after 6:00 p.m. during the week and after 5:00 p.m. on Saturday is excursions. Dave Cuyler said that he would explain this to Community Living. It was noted that hours of service will be discussed later on the agenda.
- The Manager provided an update on the 18 passenger bus which is 16 years old, being a 2006 model and in need of about \$10,000 in work to pass the emissions test. It is near the end of its life, will be used until just before Christmas and then sold.
- SMART's fleet consists of 1 30-passenger bus, and 11 9-passenger buses, plus 3 more on order.
- The rates in the report were reviewed, and it was noted that the Level of Service Committee discussed a single rate rather than two, and the Manager noted that smaller buses are cheaper to operate.
- Time is calculated from when the bus arrives at the group home or care residence and ends when unloading is finished. There is no fee for the trip from Solway to the membership area.

D. 2021-38 2022 Operational Budget - Revised

The Manager presented the report, noting that in the last line in the paragraph at the top of p. 32 in the package, the word "budget" should be "deficit".

Motion #2021-080

Moved by Jim Frew; Seconded by Beth Hamilton

That Report RAC2021-38 be approved and that SMART's 2022 Operational Budget be sent to member councils for comment.

Carried

The following points arose in the discussion:

- Nothing in writing has been received regarding government commitment to gas tax funding for 2022.
- The amount in the gas tax fund has no impact on the budget. If SMART receives more gas tax than it budgeted for, the funds go into the gas tax account and more would be left at the end of the year. It is better to budget for a lower amount of gas tax and get more, rather than vice versa.
- The per capita calculation done by the Manager is based on information found in the Ontario Specialized Transit Services Fact Book. The Province uses its own population statistics for its calculations.
- Mark Davis said that a 22% increase for Arran-Elderslie will be difficult to sell and he would a five year rolling average used as the basis for calculating the share. He asked if this issue could be voted on for 2023 to even out the hills and valleys of the contribution. The President noted the partnership agreement sets the method for calculating a partner's share and the agreement will be on a Board agenda early in 2022.
- The Manager estimated that the \$350,000 in the gas tax reserve is not a lot and includes last year's surplus. He believes it is prudent to keep those funds in the reserve and it is only due to COVID causing a reduction in rides that this amount is in the account. The President noted that this situation led to the level of service review. Mike Myatt further noted that a few years ago there was nothing in the reserve which led to changes being made and it would be a positive step to leave a healthy reserve for the next Board.
- The 30 passenger bus is a 2014 model and the same age now as the one it replaced. It cost \$175,000 in 2014 and would cost about \$300,000 to replace.
- The Manager noted that long rides cost more than short rides and it is important to monitor rides. He added that there is no direct correlation between the number of rides and the amount of gas tax funding. For example, a ride to London and back would result in the same amount of gas tax as a shorter ride, but would generate more revenue for SMART.

- Operational reports should refer to “capacity” rather than “rationing” of rides.
- The President thanked the Manager for his efforts in developing the budget.

8. Pay & Benefits Policy

Catherine McKay presented the policy noting that it simplifies the Group Health Benefit Plan by removing previous information about the specifics which are contained in the benefits booklet.

The addition of the Civic Holiday means that all SMART staff would have the day off with pay and those who work would be paid time and a half. The Manager said that the cost is about \$4,000 annually.

Motion #2021-081

Moved by Mike Myatt; Seconded by Dave Cuyler

That the Pay and Benefits Policy be approved as presented.

Carried

9. Other Business

A. Approval of Motions Made by Email

Motion #2021-082

Moved by Dave Cuyler; Seconded by Ed McGugan

That the Board approve a wage adjustment of a 2.9% increase for all SMART staff effective the first pay period of 2022.

Carried

Motion #2021-083

Moved by Mike Myatt; Seconded by Dave Cuyler

That the Board approve the resumption of group excursions, and that they be allowed outside of SMARTs regular hours of operation, effective immediately.

Carried

It was clarified that group excursions would be allowed on Sundays because Sunday is outside of regular operating hours.

B. Level of Service Committee Meeting Notes and Recommendations

Beth Hamilton noted that as a result of concerns raised about hours of operation and level of service, the Level of Service Committee met twice in November for more than an hour each time, with the Manager also in attendance. The Manager circulated the minutes of these meetings and an updated Level of Service Committee report to Board members prior to the meeting. When the Committee met in January 2019, SMART faced a number of challenges including a deficit funded by a line of credit and no capital funding. A strategic plan developed with the assistance of OMAFRA and the Town of Hanover identified the scope of services. In January 2020, a report was presented to the Board which compared SMART to seven peer municipalities listed in the Ontario Specialized Transit Services Fact Book. At that time, SMART was a service providing rides to any eligible client, anywhere in Ontario, anytime which gave rise to questions about sustainability. When the pandemic began, the Level of Service initiative was paused and as of March 1, 2021, SMART defined its service area and hours of operation as Monday to Friday, 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., and Saturday from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., but always providing service for dialysis. The Committee’s updated report made recommendations to allow group excursions, extend Friday and Saturday operating hours to midnight and to discuss Sunday and Christmas holiday service further with the Board.

Mike Myatt suggested that it is acceptable to revisit previous decisions which were the result of a lot of work but which perhaps went too far. He said he would like to see service extended to 9:00 p.m. Monday to Thursday to allow people to go out to the Festival of Lights and that this could be done

over a 3 – 4 week trial period. Most of the complaints he has received have related to people's inability to go to the Festival of Lights because they have to be home by 6:00 p.m. due to the hours of operation. He felt that it would be a positive step to extend the hours to midnight for one month.

Dave Cuyler noted that he too had received complaints which were difficult to hear and agreed that service should perhaps be opened up as much as possible for the holiday season, and in January usage could be reviewed and users surveyed. He noted that if the service isn't used, there is no cost.

The Manager explained that there would be some operational difficulties in extending service on short notice as it requires informing clients and it can be difficult to get information to all clients as some have understanding difficulties, and many do not have computers or email. If clients can't be informed of the changes, they won't be in a position to use the service during extended hours. Also, if there are more rides in the evening, fewer rides will be available during the day. He asked that hours of operation be consistent to avoid creating operational difficulties.

Ed McGugan agreed that there are a number of factors affecting client demand and a steady hand is required. He noted that the Board made a difficult decision on hours of service and only history will tell if it was correct. In the meantime, SMART may need to weather complaints and concerns by explaining the financial considerations, i.e. that the number of rides translates into costs and the municipalities are concerned about the cost and have the right to exercise their ability to withdraw from the partnership. He noted that capacity limits will be important going forward out of COVID.

Dean Leifso agreed adding that SMART needs to be consistent with service which may give rise to more complaints. While there may be letters from Councils about leaving, there is no more money and they may not be aware of the background of the level of service issue. He pointed out that SMART's clients are people who have no other transportation options but it may still have to cut back to the necessities. While social activities are important, it would be difficult to say that service should not be extended to take people to church. Service needs to be consistent taking into account the financial impact, capacity limits and possibly a "first come first served" approach which may cause people who are denied service to be unhappy. He asked if SMART should not go back to providing service seven days a week with load capacities in place.

Beth Hamilton noted that the Level of Service Committee stated that service should be consistent taking into account capacity and perhaps things could open up gradually in June. Every system has hours of operation and SMART should focus on the biggest need, recognizing that if there is a big ride on Monday evening, this might take hours away from Wednesday afternoon, for example.

Mark Davis pointed out the increase to Arran-Elderslie of 23% which he believes is out of proportion. He referred to carbon usage, suggesting that one person should not be put on a bus to see the Festival of Lights for example because this creates a large carbon footprint and thought should be given to how many tax dollars and how much fuel this requires. The President requested that Mark Davis and the Manager discuss this issue following the meeting.

The Manager fully supports evening service within budget and capacity limits. More evening rides will lead to fewer rides Monday to Thursday, but this can be spread over 5, 6 or 7 days. He added that SMART has always been a "first come first served" service and prior to COVID, the service was full. Expanding capacity would be better operationally if there were new hours of operation to work within. He added that many clients are in long term care facilities and going to the Festive of Lights is an important annual special event for them, even if they have been before. As for SMART's carbon footprint, electric vehicles might be an option once the issues can be overcome and hydrogen vehicles are still a few years away.

Beth Hamilton noted that SMART does not discriminate in where it takes clients except that long distance rides are for medical appointments only. She feels that opening up group excursions should address concerns in long term care homes and extending evening hours to midnight would allow people to go to a movie and dinner for example.

The President said that he is in favour of the change to midnight and weekend hours which will allow people to go to family events. He is not in favour of extending hours every night of the week, but perhaps Thursday to Saturday might be possible. The Manager is asked to manage within a budget and the Board cannot ask him to do more while not providing more funding.

The Manager explained that staffing on weekends might be difficult as only 4 or 5 drivers would be available and although some drivers want extra hours, there are staffing constraints. The President added that part of the challenge is deciding on the extended hours and that the changes should be implemented as soon as possible taking into account that the Manager has to operationalize them.

The Manager explained that the Christmas hours for this year have been communicated already and some rides have been turned down as not being within the hours of operation. It would not be fair to SMART clients to now reverse this change and it is not operationally feasible.

Discussion occurred about limits on capacity, which have always been in place.

Mike Myatt thanked Beth Hamilton and the Committee, noting that there did not seem to be an appetite to extend hours Monday through Thursday, but he supports extending hours to midnight on Friday and Saturday. It is heartbreaking to realize that people can't get where they want to go, and he would like to see hours of service reinstated, but that apparently will not happen today.

Beth Hamilton said that the Committee did not make a recommendation on Sunday service noting that there are many moving parts in such a decision and if it were to happen, time would be needed to staff up to the required level. She added that ridership is lower on Sunday and a ride to church actually equals two rides which uses up capacity.

The Manager said that pre-pandemic there were 20 – 25 rides on Sunday compared to 30 – 35 on Saturday. Drivers would have some concerns about now working Saturday and Sunday, since in the past the schedule gave them more consecutive days off. In addition, the Manager is the only point of contact which would mean he has to be available seven days a week with possibly no break. With capacity limits, operational efficiency declines and if there are more rides, there is greater efficiency, and so SMART should do as many rides as possible. He suggested reviewing Sunday service in 2022.

Ed McGugan said that there are two aspects to this issue, operational considerations and need. He noted that it is heartbreaking to have to limit Sunday operations, but the financial constraints are real. He would like to see service extended to Sunday, but it should be done in a step wise fashion. He cautioned against over-emphasizing efficiency to the detriment of effectiveness, which he has experienced and which had a negative effect on service. He suggested holding off on extending service to Sunday to first see the effect of the extension of hours on Friday and Saturday evening.

The Manager said that there is some elasticity in rides and cost, and without exact numbers, he would say that a 20% increase in the budget could result in an estimated 40 – 50% increase in rides since many of the costs are the same (e.g. insurance) regardless of the number of rides. Also, there are other holidays to consider, such as Thanksgiving which is very busy, as well as Easter.

Beth Hamilton suggested revisiting the issue of Sunday and Christmas service in six months, once it can be seen how the evening opening goes. Dave Cuyler said that review in six months would give

time to provide a lot of notice of any change. He added that the Level of Service Committee did a very good job. The President also thanked Beth Hamilton for chairing the Committee which made some difficult decisions.

The Board agreed to revisit the hours of operation in April and consider Sunday and holiday hours of service in the second quarter of 2022.

Motion #2021-084

Moved by Beth Hamilton; Seconded by Ed McGugan

That the Board approve the extension of operating hours on Friday and Saturday to midnight as soon as possible within the existing budget.

Carried

C. Human Resources Committee Meeting Notes and Recommendations

The President noted that Mike Myatt, Chair of the HR Committee, had left the meeting, so this item be deferred to the next meeting. He added that the Committee had done an in depth review of the benefits plan and agreed that the status quo should remain.

In concluding the meeting, the President thanked Jim Frew for his role in facilitating the donation from Flato Developments, noting that a picture had been taken of the cheque presentation which will be included with the press release. The next meeting on January 28, 2022 will include a review of the partnership agreement, specifically the question of municipal contributions being based on the previous year's ridership or whether there should be averaging of years, along with the strategic plan, so there will be significant and important material to cover. He also asked the Manager to be sure to share with the staff decisions on the pay increase and the additional paid holiday, noting that the staff will receive gift cards in lieu of a staff dinner.

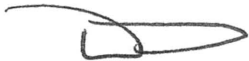
The President thanked Board Members for their input and willingness to engage in open conversations.

10. Adjournment

Moved by Dave Cuyler; Seconded by Mark Davis

That the Board of Directors of SMART adjourn at 3:40 p.m.

Carried



Warren Dickert, President



Catherine McKay, Recording Secretary