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REPORT TO TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE MEETING OF WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 28, 2026

SUBJECT Fare Free Youth Transit, Resolution for AVICC/UBCM

ISSUE SUMMARY

To present a resolution to be submitted to the Association of Vancouver Island Coastal Communities (AVICC) and Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM) and supporting background information.

BACKGROUND

On November 12, the Capital Regional District (CRD) Board directed staff to develop a UBCM resolution:

That staff develop and provide the CRD Transportation Committee a draft UBCM resolution for consideration calling on the Province to increase fare-free transit to all youth in BC under 19 by adding another year's age eligibility of fare-free transit to each provincial budget year.

The Province of British Columbia currently funds the Get on Board! program which allows children aged 12 and under to ride BC Transit and TransLink services free of charge. While this program has reduced transportation costs for families and improved access to transit for younger children, fare-free eligibility ends at age 12. This creates a cost barrier for teenagers who increasingly rely on transit to access school, employment, recreation, and social opportunities.

Youth aged 13 to 18 often have limited independent transportation options and may not have access to a household vehicle. Transit fares can present a financial barrier for families, particularly those with multiple children or lower incomes. As a result, some youth reduce or avoid transit use during their teenage years, despite increasing mobility needs.

The loss of fare-free access at age 13 also interrupts the opportunity to reinforce regular transit use during a formative period when long-term travel behaviours are being established.

Benefits Expanding Fare Free Transit for Youth

Research indicates that fare-free transit for youth significantly improves access to education, employment, extra-curricular activities, health care, and social participation, particularly for families where costs had previously limited mobility¹. Parents also reported improved access to mental health and community supports, as well as improved confidence and well-being among youth. Encouraging transit use during the teenage years supports the development of lifelong, sustainable travel habits, contributing over time to reduced vehicle dependence, lower congestion and emissions, and greater social inclusion.

Local experience demonstrates that youth respond positively when fare barriers are removed. In the City of Victoria, approximately 75% of eligible youth participated in the ages 13-18 U-PASS program in 2024, averaging 17 transit rides per month. This level of uptake indicates that expanded fare-free access would generate meaningful and sustained ridership benefits.

¹ "Transit for Teens: Parental Perspectives on the Impact of Free Transit for Youth 13–18 in BC" (2023, Single Mothers' Alliance)

A Phased Expansion

While evidence demonstrates clear benefits of fare-free transit for youth aged 13–18, an immediate province-wide expansion may present fiscal challenges for the Province, and service capacity challenges to transit providers. A phased approach, adding one additional year of eligibility at a time, would reduce immediate financial impacts, allow for annual monitoring of ridership and cost impacts, and provide predictability for local governments, transit agencies, and families.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1

The Transportation Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board:

That the following resolution be submitted to the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities and the Union of British Columbia Municipalities:

WHEREAS the Province of British Columbia's Get on Board! program provides fare-free transit for children aged 12 and under, and youth older than 12 face cost barriers that limit access to education, employment, and community services and to establish lifelong, sustainable travel habits;

AND WHEREAS the immediate expansion of fare-free transit to all youth aged 13 to 18 may present fiscal challenges for the Province;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities and the Union of British Columbia Municipalities request that the Province of British Columbia implement a phased expansion of the fare-free youth transit program by increasing eligibility by one year at a time until fare-free transit is available to youth aged 13 through 18.

Alternative 2

That this report be referred back to staff for additional information based on Transportation Committee direction.

IMPLICATIONS

Alignment with Board & Corporate Priorities

Expanding fare-free transit for youth supports the CRD Board's strategic priority of improving transportation affordability and access across the region. It aligns with corporate objectives to advance equitable mobility and reduce barriers to essential services, education, and employment.

Alignment with Existing Plans & Strategies

This resolution complements regional transportation goals outlined in the CRD's Corporate Plan and Regional Growth Strategy, which emphasize sustainable, accessible transportation options. It also supports provincial and local commitments to increase transit ridership and reduce reliance on private vehicles.

Climate Implications

Fare-free access encourages youth to use transit during formative years which fosters long-term sustainable travel habits and a mode shift away from single-occupancy vehicles. This serves to reduce greenhouse gas emissions over time.

Environmental Implications

Greater transit use among youth helps reduce vehicle traffic and associated impacts such as air pollution and road congestion.

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Implications

Fare-free transit for youth addresses financial barriers that disproportionately affect low-income families and marginalized communities. Expanding eligibility promotes equitable access to education, employment, and social opportunities, ensuring that transportation is not a barrier to participation.

Social Implications

Improved transit access enhances youth independence, social inclusion, and participation in community life. Removing fare barriers strengthens connections to education, recreation, and health services, contributing to overall well-being and reducing isolation among teens.

CONCLUSION

The proposed resolution advances a practical and fiscally responsible approach to expanding fare-free transit for youth across the province. By phasing in eligibility over time, the Province can support equitable access, encourage lifelong sustainable transportation habits, and advance shared climate and transportation objectives.

RECOMMENDATION

The Transportation Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board:
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WHEREAS the Province of British Columbia's Get on Board! program provides fare-free transit for children aged 12 and under, and youth older than 12 face cost barriers that limit access to education, employment, and community services and to establish lifelong, sustainable travel habits;

AND WHEREAS the immediate expansion of fare-free transit to all youth aged 13 to 18 may present fiscal challenges for the Province;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities and the Union of British Columbia Municipalities request that the Province of British Columbia implement a phased expansion of the fare-free youth transit program by increasing eligibility by one year at a time until fare-free transit is available to youth aged 13 through 18.

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