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To: ["Direct to Mayor and Council - DL"](#)

Date: 9/12/2022 2:50:47 PM

Subject: CM: Council Memo - Reduced Fare Transit Pilot Update - RTS #14845

Attachments: ACCS - GM - Memo (Council) - Reduced Fare Transit Pilot Update - RTS #14845 (2022-09-12).pdf

Dear Mayor and Council,

Please find attached a memo from Sandra Singh, the General Manager of Arts, Culture, and Community Services, which provides a report back and update to Mayor and Council on the Reduced Fare Transit Pilot. In particular, this memo highlights:

- ☐ Background context to the Reduced Fare Transit Pilot ;
- ☐ The Reduced Fare Transit Pilot's methodology and limitations, and a discussion around key findings and barriers associated with transit;
- ☐ Next steps for City staff to forward the work on affordable and accessible transit; and
- ☐ Appendices for data analysis, key findings/themes, histograms and bar graphs, and recommendations to Translink.

Should you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact Sandra directly and she will ensure responses are provided through the weekly Q&A.

Best,
Paul

Paul Mochrie (he/him)
City Manager
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The City of Vancouver acknowledges that it is situated on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Snw̓x̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

MEMORANDUM

September 12, 2022

TO: Mayor & Council

CC: Paul Mochrie, City Manager
Karen Levitt, Deputy City Manager
Armin Amrolia, Deputy City Manager
Teresa Jong, Administration Services Manager, City Manager's Office
Maria Pontikis, Director, Civic Engagement and Communications
Katrina Leckovic, City Clerk
Anita Zaenker, Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office
Neil Monckton, Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office
Alvin Singh, Communications Director, Mayor's Office
Lon LaClaire, General Manager, Engineering Services
Theresa O'Donnell, General Manager, Planning, Urban Design, and Sustainability

FROM: Sandra Singh, General Manager, Arts, Culture and Community Services

SUBJECT: Reduced Fare Transit Pilot Study Update

RTS #: 14845

PURPOSE

This memo provides an update to Mayor and Council on findings from the Reduced Fare Transit Pilot Study (RTS 14024), and its contributions to the #AllOnBoard campaign endorsed by council (RTS 13962).

BACKGROUND

During engagements for the Poverty Reduction Plan (currently on hold given other related priorities and Council directions), access to affordable public transportation was a recurring challenge identified across all engagements with various groups. In 2019, a Council motion was passed to endorse the #AllOnBoard campaign, which called on the province and TransLink to develop a plan for free public transit for minors and reduced fare transit for people on low-income based on a sliding scale using a Market Basket Measure model. Other municipalities

have endorsed the #AllOnBoard campaign, including the City of North Vancouver, Richmond, Burnaby, New Westminster, and Port Moody. Regional bodies have also officially endorsed this campaign including the Lower Mainland Local Government Association, and Mayors' Council on Regional Transportation. Further, Red Women Rising report and the MMIWG Inquiry recommendations both include recommendations related to transit, specifically: (1) provide free transit passes for children ages 0-18 years old, all youth transitioning out of government care until the age of 25 years old, and for all adults on pensions, income assistance, and disability assistance; (2) expand public transit, including HandyDart and community-based passenger van programs; and (3) provide access to free transportation to and from medical appointments, especially for those with disabilities and the elderly.

The Provincial government currently operates a reduced fare transit program for low-income seniors, and people on Persons With Disability (PWD) income assistance. Most recently, the province also rolled out Phase 1 of providing free transit for youth 12 and under across the province. However, many residents who do not fit these eligibility criteria still struggle with affordable access to public transportation.

In June 2020 Council approved a staff recommendation to conduct a Reduced Fare Transit Pilot study targeting specific equity-seeking groups to better understand the impacts of affordable public transit on people's social determinants of health (RTS 13963).

The City received funding from the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) to conduct a Reduced Fare Transit Pilot program and evaluate the impacts of reduced fare transit for low-income residents. The goal of this pilot program is to understand the impacts that free/reduced fare transit has on participants' lives, including: participants' ability to access work, health and medical services, education, healthy and culturally appropriate food, recreation, community and civic life, and on the whole, help people transition out of poverty.

Reduced Fare Transit Pilot Methodology

The pilot provided 100 participants with free 1-zone transit passes over a 6-month period (October 2021 - March, 2022). Passes were distributed to individuals that currently do not have a transit pass via other means, such as through Provincial income assistance programs, or employer programs. Based on what was heard from the engagements, this study prioritized specific low-income groups including residents of low-income neighbourhoods, indigenous youth, racialized residents, newcomers to Canada, and families. To ensure the participants aligned with these equity seeking groups, the City collaborated with four community organizations to support the implementation of this pilot project, including recruitment of participants, distribution of passes, overall support during the pilot, and conducting the interviews and focus groups. These four community partners were:

- Single Mother's Alliance
- Urban Native Youth Association
- South Vancouver Neighbourhood House
- EMBERS Eastside Works

Methodology Limitations

- Only 66 out of the 100 initially recruited respondents completed the post-pilot survey responses.

- There is missing representation from 2SLGBTQIA+, gender-diverse/non-binary folks and specific racialized groups (Chinese, Black, S Asian, SE Asian, W Asian, Arab, etc.)
- Due to the small sample size and organizations that serve specific multiple intersections (i.e. Indigenous Youth), some of the disaggregate data is skewed towards the specific demographics of each organization;
- It will take time for the full consequences and results to manifest. With the pilot program only being 6 months, access to free short-term transit was not long enough for participants to change behaviours or places they would regularly visit (i.e. health appointments, basic needs, services)
- It also took time for participants to receive the transit passes through the community organizations, and learn how to use transit. Therefore, ridership data for the first month of the study was omitted from the analysis of this study.
- COVID-19 limited mobility throughout the pilot duration, as well as our ability to conduct focus groups as intended

DISCUSSION

Key Findings

The findings from this pilot demonstrated that access to free transit greatly impacted participants' social determinants of health. Overall, participants spoke about how free transit passes had drastically improved their lives and they expressed their appreciation. On this note, now that the pilot program had ended, participants will no longer have access to the compass card passes that were loaded with monthly fare. The analysis and methodology of this study focused primarily on capturing nuances of how various equity-seeking groups use transit. The mixed methods data analysis approach (See Appendix A) yielded significant indication that access to transit positively impacted participant's sense of safety and access to education, employment, basic needs, health, social connection, and overall freedom (See Appendix B).

Based on the ridership data, participants on average took 1.5 trips per day. However, by the end of the pilot, some participants were using transit over 5 times a day. Figure 1 and Figure 2 in Appendix C show the difference between the average # of trips between the beginning of the pilot (Nov-Jan) and the last 2 months (Feb-Mar). This comparison highlights the time it takes for participants to adopt transit as a choice of transportation. The average number of trips per day increased from 1 trip between November to January to an average of 2.5 trips per day in February and March.

A key consideration when interpreting ridership findings from this pilot is the broader impact that COVID-19 had on transit access. During the beginning of the pandemic there were significant reductions in transit service and the presumed risk of COVID-19 reduced transit ridership across the Metro Vancouver. The increase in ridership and use of passes aligns with the COVID-19 Provincial health measures; as these went down, pass use increased. This relationship between increased use of passes and a decrease in health measures is not correlated.

The findings from this pilot also demonstrated that the types of activities and places participants used transit for were quite varied based on which organization the participant was recruited from. For instance, participants from South Vancouver Neighbourhood house used transit to attend religious/spiritual gatherings, and childcare (over 90%) much more than other groups. However, some activities stayed more consistent among groups. The top three activities or

places participants used transit for were meeting their daily needs (88%), medical services (77%) and visiting family or friends (76%) (See Figure 3, Appendix C).

When asked what participants did more of with transit passes, the top three responses were saving money (88%), visiting friends/family (85%), and relax/leisure (77%). These three activities speak to the largest impact that participants spoke of around quality of life improvements. Respondents repeatedly spoke of being able to justify more leisure activities due to not having to spend money to get there (See Figure 4, Appendix C).

The Reduced Fare Transit Pilot also highlighted barriers with navigating the transit system:

- Some participants discussed the lack of transit in their neighbourhoods being a major barrier to making the switch to public transit from other modes of transportation.
- In a large urban centre like Vancouver, navigating the transit system often involves travelling through more than one zone. The complexity of a multi-zone system (multiple zones only in effect during certain hours depending on the day and on specific modes of public transportation) was confusing for participants. This led to possibly risking the safety of participants as accruing a negative balance on their card may have rendered them unable to return home.
- Some participants needed a higher level of support in navigating transit and the compass card system. During the course of the study, support was provided from community organizations, city staff, and TransLink such as reloading, registering and/or replacing participants' cards. This was in part due to some participant's lack of digital access and/or literacy to register and manage their cards.
- Transit passes were frequently lost (34 cards were lost and replaced over the course of the 6 month pilot). With the support of the community organizations, TransLink, and the City, participants were able to replace the cards to another account without having their cards registered. Wristbands and keychains alternatives were much more successful in preventing loss.

NEXT STEPS

- Conduct a jurisdictional scan of advocacy efforts, commitments, and strategies that align with these recommendations.
- Based on the original motion that endorsed the #AllOnBoard campaign and the results of this study, staff will share the results of the study with senior government colleagues and continue to discuss the need for free and/or reduced fare public transit for equity-denied groups, and people on low-income, including TransLink and BC Transit.
- Staff will use findings from this study to integrate transportation equity and an affordability lens into relevant City plans and implementation efforts.
- Staff will provide comments to regional bodies on the importance of the integration of transportation equity and affordability into regional planning.

FINAL REMARKS

The Reduced Fare Transit pilot demonstrates that the impact of free transit on those living in poverty is significantly beneficial in ways beyond simple cost. The data clearly shows that access to transit has impacted other social determinants of health, specifically around safety, education, employment, basic needs, health, social connection, and overall freedom.

The success of the pilot was grounded in working with community partners and peers while building on prior trusting relationships with vulnerable populations. Working with community serving organizations allowed for a trauma-informed and community-based approach to engage with the participants we were hoping to engage. It cannot be ignored that there is a link between barrier-free transit and the overall well-being of those who are struggling to make ends meet.

The findings from this pilot will be used to inform ongoing poverty reduction and equity work. The findings will also support further discussions regarding the importance of equitable fare and transit systems with regional and provincial government and public service colleagues.

By contributing to a growing body of evidence on the impact of low-income transit passes across North America, this pilot study could potentially influence wider funding changes and systemic changes in transit systems across BC and elsewhere; thereby assisting those living in poverty in overcoming a significant barrier to employment and dignity.

If Council requires further information, please feel free to contact me directly at sandra.singh@vancouver.ca and we will provide response through the weekly Council Q&A.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sandra Singh', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Sandra Singh, General Manager
Arts, Culture, and Community Services

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APPENDIX A: DATA ANALYSIS

The Reduced Fare Transit Pilot used a mixed methods approach, including individual interviews (each participant did a pre-pilot and post-pilot interview), focus groups, and monthly check-in meetings with the community partners at the Transit Pilot Advisory Committee meetings. There was intention to conduct more focus groups; however, increasing cases of COVID-19 during the pilot limited our ability to host in-person focus groups and virtual focus groups were too inaccessible for most of the participants. One organization (Single Mother's Alliance) was able to conduct focus groups with their participants, which we included in the qualitative analysis. The pre- and post-pilot interviews included demographic questions, as well as quantitative and qualitative questions about how free transit impacted various aspects of their lives. The pre- and post-pilot interviews were kept the same in order to do a comparative analysis of the responses before and after the participants had access to the 1-zone compass cards.

The community partners recruited and hired a total of 10 peer researchers, whose role was to support with data collection, conduct the pre- and post-pilot interviews, and to provide ongoing support and check-ins with participants throughout the pilot. Hiring peer researchers leveraged each organization's community networks and their established trust and relationships with participants to support this pilot project using the organization's established trauma-informed approaches. This approach led to better retention of participants throughout the pilot, and more nuanced responses to the survey.

City staff also facilitated monthly meetings with partner organizations to share insights, challenges, and anecdotes from the peer researchers and community organizations. Lastly, we received ridership data from the Compass Card office to get some more information about ridership patterns. Due to privacy and confidentiality issues, the data was provided in aggregate. We received information on the frequency of use, what mode of public transit was used, times of use, and adult vs. consession transit use.

For the analysis, we combined insights from the various methodologies used throughout the pilot. With the support of nursing students from VCC's Health Promotions Practicum program, qualitative data was coded, categorized, and synthesized into key themes that emerged from the responses. Qualitative responses based on the post-pilot interviews were examined by organization – the intention being to explore and identify any differences in the data based on the respective demographics that each partner organization served.

APPENDIX B: KEY FINDINGS AND IMPACTS ON SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Safety

Feeling safe getting somewhere can be a major barrier for anyone, especially equity-seeking individuals that are often more vulnerable to violence. Participants reported feeling safer travelling on transit rather than walking alone, especially at night. 49% of women/gender-diverse/non-binary participants reported being able to leave unsafe situations with the free transit pass during the study. Some participants also mentioned feeling safe from transit security and transit police because they did not have to resort to fare evasion or rely on bus drivers to give them a ride. Having access to transit passes also made it safer to travel to other communities that were less familiar.

Education

Students attended school more easily, frequently, and punctually due to the transit pass. 70% of youth (<18) said they used the transit pass to attend school. It also allowed for more freedom of choice for other family members (siblings and children) to get to school without having to rely on a parent, thus freeing up time for other family members. Some participants mentioned they were not going to school before receiving the transit pass due to not having an easy and reliable form of transportation. Participants also reported using the transit pass for volunteering (38%) and other types of training (26%).

Employment

Participant were able to more easily access employment, job interviews, volunteering, and professional development opportunities. Participants shared that they were able to commute to work more easily, pick-up more shifts at different times of the day, and travel around the city to search for employment opportunities. It took less time to commute to work, and some stated they felt safer taking shifts that required them to commute at night, knowing they could rely on transit. 85% of participants stated that free transit extremely or very much impacted their access to work, school, training/volunteering.

Basic Needs

One of the largest universal improvements for almost all participants was the improved ability to access basic needs, including groceries, shopping, going to medical appointments, childcare, and other social services. 98% of adults (18+) stated they used their transit pass to access basic needs. Many participants specifically highlighted that it was easier to access affordable grocery stores that were further away and included more culturally appropriate food. The transit pass also made things easier for participants as they would not need to walk long distances to carry their groceries. Participants also stated having more money to spend and more time to shop for groceries and household items. 73% of participants have reported to have more access to affordable food or household items. The two organizations that predominantly served families and single-parents families reported using transit to access Childcare the most (over 90% for SVNH, and over 40% from Single Mother's Alliance).

Health

The transit pass allowed for easier access to medical appointments, obtaining reliable medical support, and visiting pharmacies for prescriptions. 77% of participants used transit to go to medical office. 96% of parents used transit to attend medical related appointments. This is in contrast to 56% of participants who are not parents that used transit for medical appointments. Though both demographics used transit to attend medical appointments, parents significantly used transit more when including appointments for their dependents or other family members.

Participants also reported physical benefits as they were more inclined to visit exercise facilities, go out to nature (68% of participants reported using the pass to go out to nature), and play group sports. 80% of participants reported that having a free pass has very much or extremely improved their physical health extremely. 53% of participants reported that they have exercised more. Participants noted the pass helped alleviate any pain and pressure they had on their body as they no longer had to walk long distances.

Participants expressed an overall positive change in their mental health. Free transit extremely or very much impacted 95% of participant's mental or emotional wellbeing. Participants were less stressed about both money and time as they no longer worried about whether they had enough fare or how much it would cost them. Getting to places on time became easier. It allowed people to see friends, go out to nature, and exercise. Participants were able to explore new places, activities, and events around Vancouver, all of which improves one's mental and emotional wellbeing.

Social connection

Participants shared that having a free pass enabled the opportunity to meet with friends/family, take part in group activities, and access community programs. 85% participants reported being able to visit friends and family more frequently. 77% of participants reported that they did more relaxing/leisure activities. Participants were also able to access recreational and group activities more frequently, classes at community centres, sports, volunteering, and community and cultural events. Many participants shared that they felt less stigma needing to ask for a ride on the bus, and an increased sense of dignity and belonging while navigating transit. 82% of participants found the free transit pass very much or extremely impacted their self-esteem and community connection extremely. 68% of participants attended more community events.

Freedom

The transit pass gave more financial freedom. Participants were able to save money for necessities such as rent, bills, and groceries. Some also stated they were able to save money for their future, or allocate the saved money to use towards important things that they would enjoy, like leisure activities, self care, and better quality food. 88% of participants reported that they were able to save money. They also saved money by accessing less expensive options for services and needs (community centres, groceries, shopping, etc.). Participants felt less stressed because they did not have to worry about adding stored value to their compass card or buying another monthly pass.

Participants had more time available to get to where they needed to be, and discussed how less time commuting meant more time with friends/family, going to work on time or early, and more time to pursue other hobbies and interests. Many also mentioned the relief of not having to rush to keep their return trip home within the 90 minute transfer time to save the cost of another fare.

APPENDIX C: TRANSIT PILOT HISTOGRAMS AND BAR GRAPHS

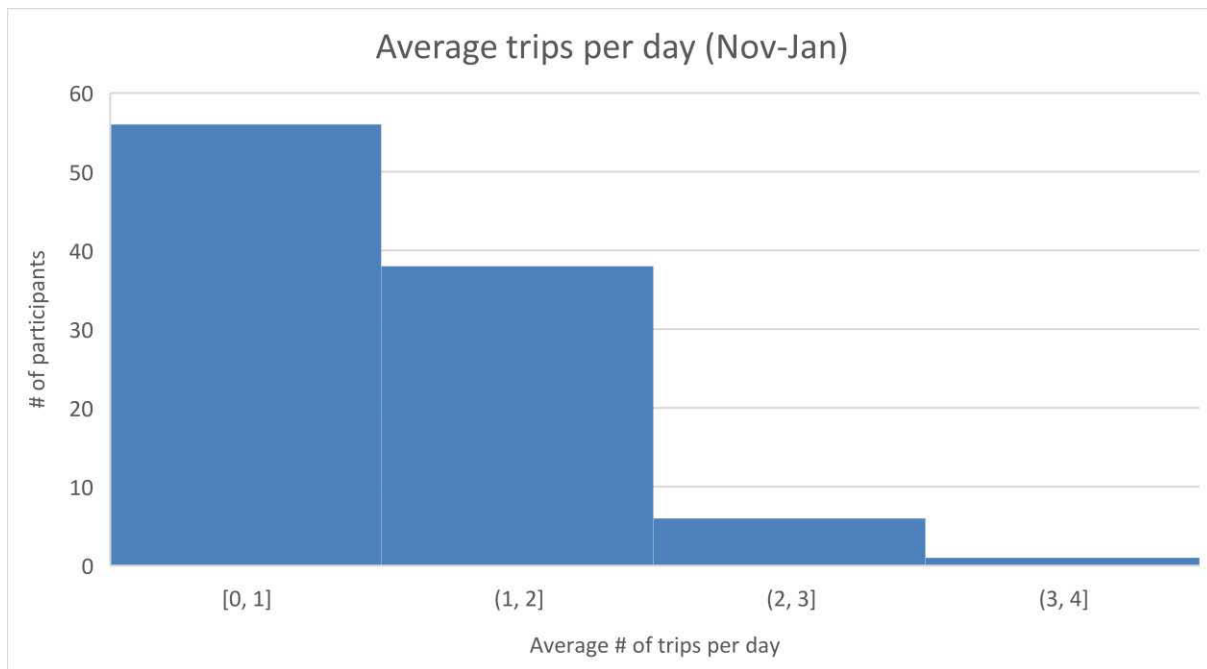


Figure 1. Average # of trips per day between November to January.

* “[and]” means inclusive; “(“ and “)” mean exclusive

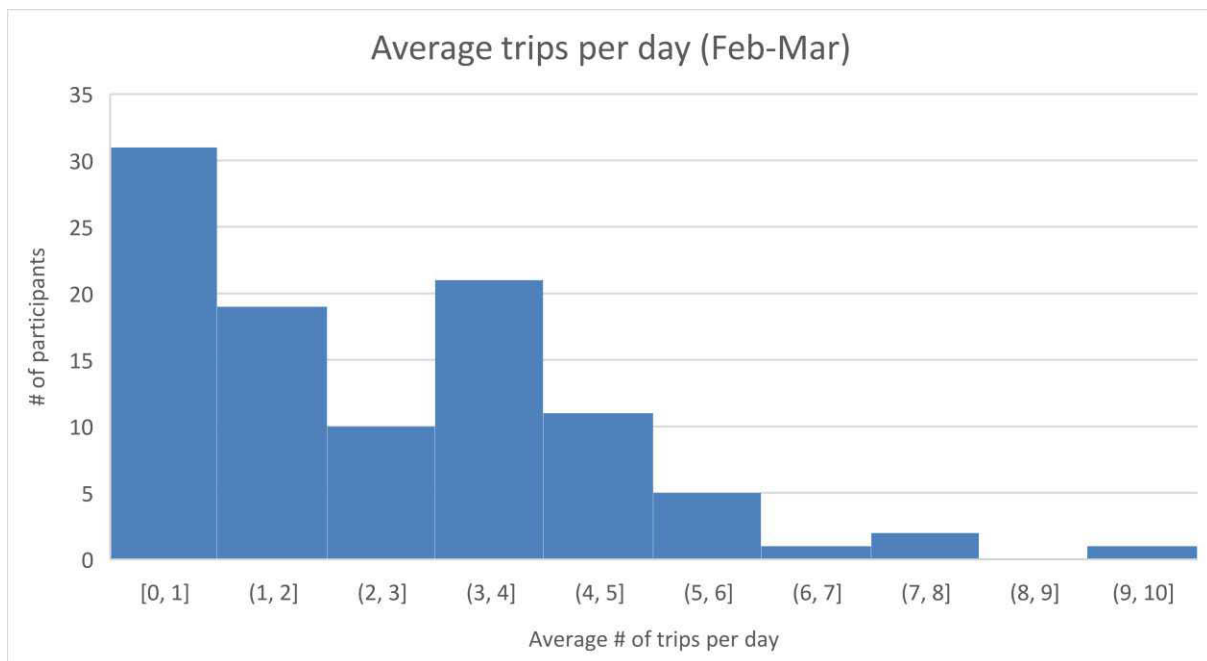


Figure 2. Average # of trips per day between February and March.

* “[and]” means inclusive; “(“ and “)” mean exclusive

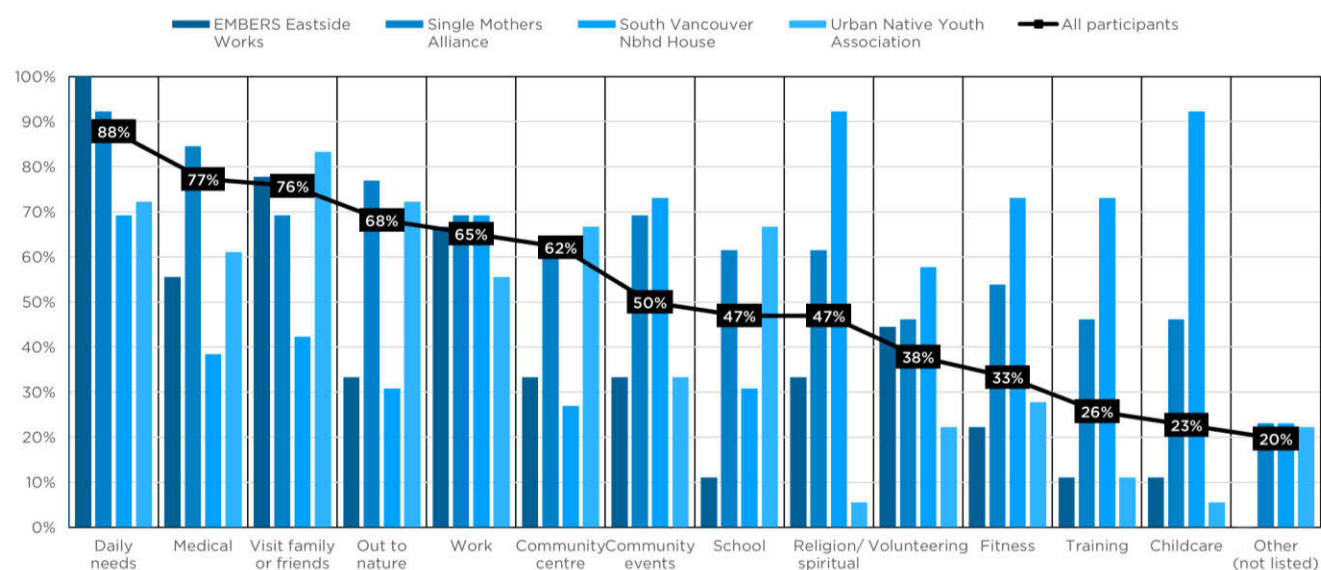


Figure 3. Where do participants take transit to?

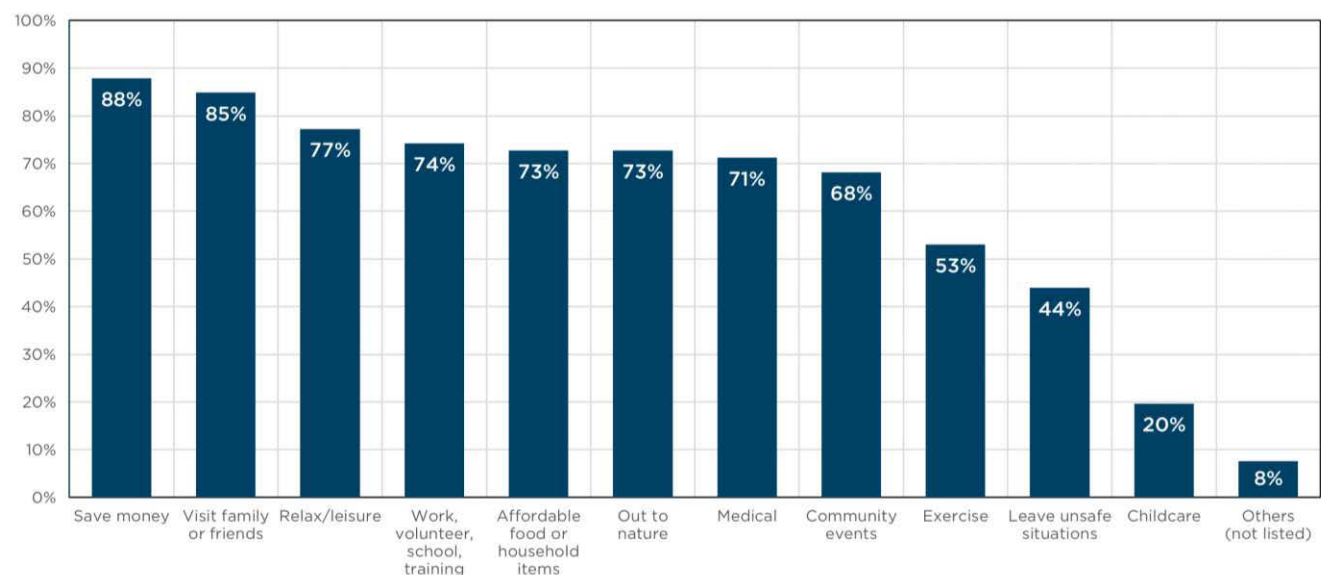


Figure 4. What do participants do more of?

The qualitative insights were placed into seven themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews, advisory committee meeting, and focus groups: safety, education, employment, basic needs, health, social connection, and freedom.

APPENDIX D: RECOMMENDATIONS TO TRANSLINK

Though one of the objective's of the pilot was to advocate for more equitable fare structures, other insights around the accessibility of the transit system were also uncovered. City staff will be working to advise TransLink to implement the following recommendations to make their services more accessible and affordable:

- Explore various models (i.e. #AllOnBoard campaign or the Red Women Rising recommendations) to **implement free or reduced fare transit for low-income and equity-seeking individuals**.
- Create a more equitable and accessible system for customers to register their cards, such as **making card registrations available at any kiosk**, or **creating a mobile-friendly app** for customers to register and monitor their card usage.
- Make **wristbands and keychain passes** more widely advertised and available to transit users.
- **Improve the existing zone system to be clearer** (i.e. better signage or clear announcements on the Skytrain when entering a different zone). Alternatively, change or remove the zone system to be more straightforward and congruent with people's everyday lives.
- Provide **more equitable transit options** across the City, especially in traditionally **lower income neighbourhoods**.
- Provide monthly transit pass as part of social assistance. Run a pilot that eliminates zones and see how this improves lives of people on income assistance.
- Provide transit passes to families involved with MCFD, where either children are not attending school, or health care issues are being neglected. This will clearly have positive impacts for families and may reduce the number of children moving into care.