

# **Transit Agency Responses to COVID-19: A review of challenges and opportunities for continued service delivery**

## **Executive Summary**

### **Background & Context**

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has radically impacted public transport ridership and service provision across the country. Since the outbreak of the virus, transit agencies have had to adapt to new and rapidly evolving conditions. Many agencies modified services to reflect lower ridership levels and to ensure the safety of both riders and operators. These changes in service were guided by public health agencies, as well as major transit associations like the Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA) and International Association of Public Transport (UITP). Other agencies implemented precautionary measures like rear door boarding, temporary fare suspension, and reduced capacity limits to enable the safe continuity of operations. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, transit agencies are having to strike a balance between providing enough transportation options for essential travel and reducing service offerings to match the declining overall demand for mobility services.

Using a case study of Grand River Transit (GRT) in the Region of Waterloo, this report will document the impacts of COVID-19 on transit agencies and their responses, with a focus on modifications to services. By analyzing the challenges that transit agencies faced in modifying transit services, this report will offer guidance on the protocols and procedures that should be established for an effective pandemic response. Further, the findings of this report will help to inform discussions and guide decisions on the role and operation of public transit in future pandemic events.

### **Research Objectives**

The objective of this research is to examine how public transit agencies can continue to offer good quality transit services during a pandemic event. Thus, using a case study of GRT, the

research will examine the operational challenges that transit agencies faced in providing service during the COVID-19 pandemic, and innovative ways in which transit agencies adapted their operations to address these challenges. The research will also present select innovative practices of other transit agencies, done nationally and internationally, to address some of the operational challenges created by COVID-19.

### Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this report are:

How could Grand River Transit provide good quality transit service while maintaining the health and safety of its patrons?

1. What challenges did Grand River Transit face in modifying its bus and light-rail services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What have other transit agencies done, nationally and internationally, to address the immediate and short-term impacts of COVID-19?

### Methodology

This report utilized three qualitative research methods and techniques: document analysis, case study analysis, and semi-structured interviews. Document analysis was undertaken to highlight current practices and innovative solutions for continuing transit operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The single case study selected for this research was GRT in the Region of Waterloo. The analysis considered challenges experienced by GRT in modifying its bus and light-rail services. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals from GRT to gain insights that would not otherwise be available through document review or case study analysis. The interviews were to assess staff perspectives on current practices, service modifications (bus and light-rail), and new safety protocols.

## Findings

Transit agencies employed a range of strategies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

	<b>Summary of Strategies Employed by Transit Agencies</b>
<b>Masks and Face Coverings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandatory mask policy</li> <li>• Distribution of masks to operators and/or community</li> <li>• Development of public awareness and education campaigns</li> <li>• Installation of signage to encourage mask usage</li> </ul>
<b>Cleaning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased cleaning of vehicles, terminals, and high-touch surfaces</li> <li>• Supplied operators with cleaning kits and protective equipment</li> <li>• Added hand sanitizer dispenses in stations and vehicles</li> <li>• Tested new cleaning technologies</li> <li>• Offered personal hand straps to customers</li> </ul>
<b>On-Board Changes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited vehicle capacity and reduced passenger seating</li> <li>• Modified boarding and exiting</li> <li>• Tested new seat configuration to allow more space between riders</li> <li>• Supplied spare buses to collect overflow of passengers</li> <li>• Assessed different crowding levels</li> </ul>
<b>Communications</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequent communication regarding enhanced cleaning regimes</li> <li>• Provided clear updates on service changes, route modifications, and scheduling revisions</li> <li>• Established expectations for rider behaviour</li> <li>• Installation of accessible signage, floor decals, and wayfinding markers</li> <li>• Developed multi-channel communication campaigns</li> </ul>
<b>Employee Procedures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Installation of protective driver barriers</li> <li>• Supplied personal protective equipment</li> <li>• Encouraged the staggering of shifts and working from home, if possible</li> <li>• Frequent internal communication</li> </ul>
<b>Fare Collection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Temporary suspension of fare collection</li> <li>• Expedited rollout of contactless payment options</li> <li>• Transit pass reimbursements or extension programs</li> <li>• Suspension of post-secondary student transit pass programs</li> </ul>
<b>Service Changes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjusted service to reflect lower ridership</li> <li>• Reduced operating hours or adhered to weekend schedules</li> <li>• Monitored crowding levels and deployed extra buses on busy routes</li> <li>• Initiated on-demand transit service</li> <li>• Ensured the mobility of essential workers</li> </ul>

Interviewees identified a range of operational challenges resulting from COVID-19, including anticipating and planning for future travel demand, modifying interlined bus routes, and maintaining physical distancing on transit vehicles. In addition to these challenges, GRT faced significant revenue shortfalls and had to resort to reactive decision-making. Interviewees identified simple and straightforward messaging, collaboration among transit agencies, and context specific solutions as key components for an effective pandemic response.

### Recommendations

GRT and other transit agencies should focus on the following seven recommendations:

1. Develop an Emergency Preparedness Plan
2. Build partnerships and engage in pre-emptive communication with other transit agencies
3. Coordinate with community partners
4. Communicate all aspects of operation, but focus on health and safety
5. Provide multi-lingual resources and communications
6. Embrace new technologies and innovations for enhanced service delivery
7. Remain committed to providing good quality mobility services