

For Immediate Release

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New study shows TransLink's HandyDART contractor failing to meet demand:

Unions, climate, and seniors groups call on TransLink to bring HandyDART in house after report cites multiple 'intractable problems' with contracted out service.

Vancouver – A new study published this week found that in 2022 TransLink provided just half the HandyDART service per senior as it had in 2008, despite promising to work towards “Access for Everyone”.

“Private contractors with substandard wages and working conditions just can't attract the workers they need to deliver in today's labour market,” said Eric Doherty, the report author. “Even public transit agencies with better wages and conditions are having to work hard to attract and retain qualified workers.”

TransLink is also increasingly using taxis in HandyDART service as the contractor fails to provide the needed service—in 2022, the percentage of taxi trips reached 21%. TransLink previously recognized the safety and service quality problems with taxis, and committed to reducing the percentage of taxi trips in HandyDART service to 7% by 2021.

Sam Wiese, President of the BC Federation of Retired Union Members (BC FORUM) relayed concerns she has heard from her members and their families.

“With all due respect to taxi drivers, very few of them are proficient in the needs of mobility-challenged individuals. While a taxi driver may do their utmost to provide assistance, their bottom line is getting one passenger out as quickly as possible to go on to the next fare” said Wiese. “The HandyDart drivers are more attuned to our needs, take the time necessary to ensure a safe trip and seem happier to provide this very essential public service.”

The report, “*Access for Everyone? Publicly Operated HandyDART in Metro Vancouver*” by Eric Doherty of Ecopath Planning, asserts that TransLink's “Transport 2050” plan ignores the challenges of our ageing population and “makes HandyDART riders almost invisible.” Transport 2050 is TransLink's strategic plan.

The report pointed to TransLink's outsourcing of HandyDART as a root cause for many of the system's ailments.

“Every time a new contractor takes over, years of efficiency gains are lost as new management implements new procedures,” said Mark Beeching, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1724, the union that represents HandyDART workers. “Employee morale suffers along with efficiency, quality of service, and workplace health and safety.”

TransLink's HandyDART operation has been in the hands of four different corporations over the last few years.

The report highlights that although the TransLink Mayors' Council identified the need for more HandyDART service given the growing population of seniors in 2017, the Transport 2050 plan contains "no real acknowledgement of the need for increased HandyDART service," and in fact, "the terms 'HandyDART,' 'custom transit,' and 'paratransit,' are completely absent from the Transport 2050 executive summary."

Stephen von Sychowski, the President of the Vancouver and District Labour Council, expressed disappointment with the Transport 2050 plan and insufficient HandyDART service.

"HandyDART service, like all public transit, is not a nice-to-have. It's a crucial, must-have piece of infrastructure that people rely upon every day" said von Sychowski. "Riders and operators alike deserve a HandyDART system that is properly funded and puts people first, as part of the public transit system, not to enrich a private for-profit company. It's time for decision-makers to act."

TransLink refused to consult with ATU Local 1724 in developing Transport 2050.

The report also documents how in-house operations with permanent depots are needed to make the electrification of HandyDART practical.

"A private corporation's bottom line will always take priority over everything, whether that's providing adequate service levels to transitioning to electric power," said Seth Klein of the Climate Emergency Unit. "This report shows public HandyDART provision would advance climate justice by improving accessibility and speeding the transition to clean electric public transit for seniors and people with disabilities."

The report concludes that "a balanced examination of insourcing HandyDART should be one of the first steps towards Access for Everyone."

The report is available at ecoplanning.ca/access-for-everyone-final-2023-03-20

Media contacts:

Mark Beeching, ATU Local 1724 President - president.atu1724@shaw.ca 604 612 6995

Eric Doherty MCIP RPP, Report author - eric@ecoplanning.ca 250 818 8223