

Access for Everyone?

Publicly Operated HandyDART In Metro Vancouver

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About the Author

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Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1724

ATU Local 1724 represents the workers in the Greater Vancouver regional area with the paratransit service known as HandyDART. We are the operators, office workers, mechanics and road supervisors that serve the elderly and those with special needs. More information is available at www.atu1724.com

Cover photo – TransLink - <https://buzzer.translink.ca/2021/03/translink-launches-handydart-modernization-program/>

Photographs by Eric Doherty except as noted

Updated in Sept 2023 to correct an error in Figure 4 and associated text

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Summary

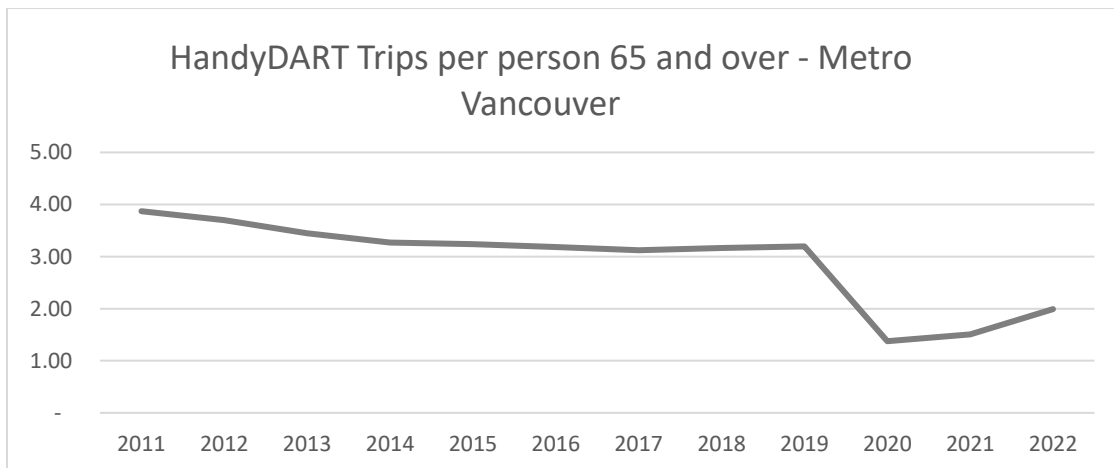
In early 2022 The TransLink Mayors’ Council and Board of Directors adopted Transport 2050, which aims to create a “fairer and more just and inclusive transportation system that truly delivers on the promise of Access for Everyone.” TransLink admits that in “the past, transportation justice has not been central to our regional mission and so, as a region, we have catching up to do.”

However, not only does Transport 2050 mostly ignore the challenge of population aging it also makes HandyDART riders almost invisible. HandyDART (and associated terms like paratransit and custom transit) are barely mentioned.

This is not only a TransLink responsibility. The minister responsible for TransLink states that the provincial government has been a “partner in developing Transport 2050 since its inception.” TransLink is a creation of the provincial government, receives provincial funding, and has a legislated responsibility to consider all relevant provincial objectives including those regarding HandyDART provision.

The rates of disability for British Columbia range from 13% for the 15 to 24 age group to 51% for people 75 and over. This year the oldest people in the baby boom generation turn 78, and in the coming decade providing the services and urban environment older seniors need will be a defining social and political challenge in Metro Vancouver and across the country.

HandyDART service per senior was dropping even before pandemic

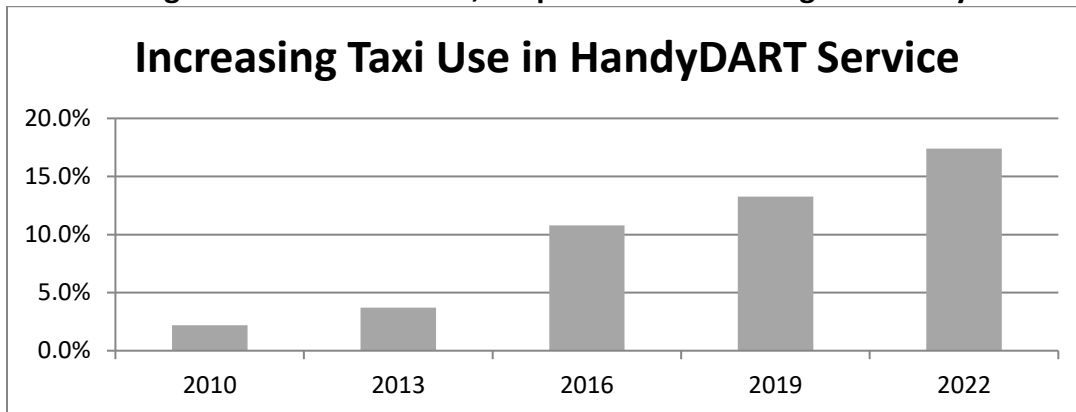


The number of HandyDART trips per person 65 and over declined significantly between 2011 and 2019, as shown in the graph above. In 2019, before the COVID pandemic, TransLink provided twenty two percent less HandyDART service per person 65 and over

than in 2008. In 2022, with demand again outstripping supply as pandemic restrictions eased, TransLink provided 1.99 trips per senior, only half the HandyDART service per person 65 and over than in 2008.

In 2022 the percentage of taxi trips also reached 17%, reflecting the inability of the private contractor to attract, train, and retain workers in a tight labour market. This also seems to reflect a disregard for targets set in TransLink plans – the previous TransLink 10 Year Plan called for reducing the percentage of taxi trips to 7% by 2021.

Taxi usage has climbed to 17%, despite TransLink’s target of 7% by 2021



Experience in Metro Vancouver and elsewhere shows that substituting taxis for dedicated custom transit vehicles results in sub-standard safety and service, often without any real reduction in costs.

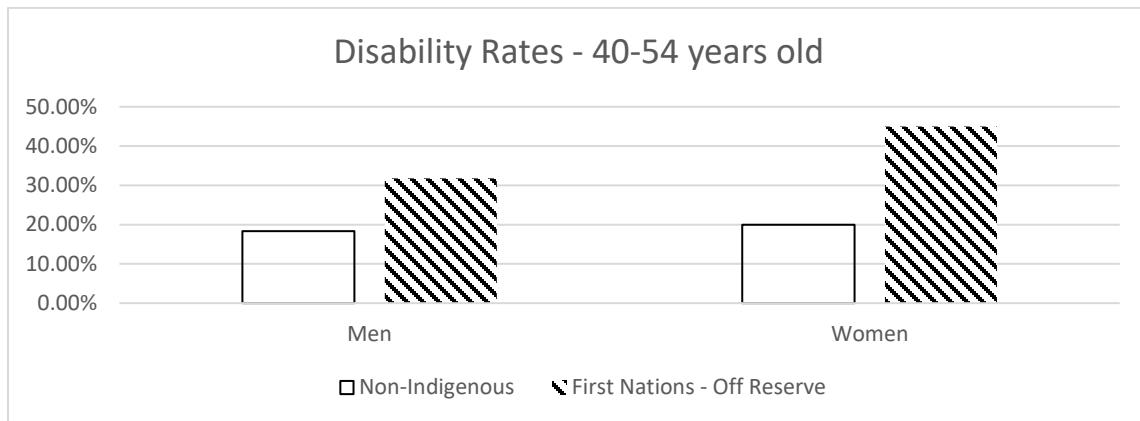
In 2017 the Mayors’ Council on Regional Transportation noted that TransLink’s 2017 “10-Year Vision . . . will still leave Metro Vancouver with about half of the accessible transit trips per capita that are provided in other similar Canadian cities, including the Capital Region.” The same report states that HandyDART service “expansion in the Mayors’ Vision is expected to address the increased demand to some degree, but analysis shows that it is likely insufficient to catch up or keep pace with need.”

The Legislature’s Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services budget consultation reports have also recommended “increasing accessible transportation options such as HandyDART” (or similar wording) for several years running.

Disabilities caused by COVID-19 will increase the need for HandyDART service, and other mobility options for people with disabilities, in both the short and long term. These disabilities will also reduce the availability of workers able to do the physically and mentally demanding work of operating a HandyDART vehicle and assisting passengers.

Transport 2050 notes that Indigenous people emphasized the need for “improved accessibility for people with disabilities and mobility challenges.” However, it does not recognize that Indigenous people have much higher rates of disability than the general population. For example, the rate of disability for First Nations women 40 to 54 years old is 45%, more than double the rate for non-Indigenous women the same age as shown below.

The disability rate of First Nations women is more than double that of non-Indigenous women 40-54 years old



If Access for Everyone is to include Indigenous Peoples, TransLink needs to greatly improve accessibility for persons with disabilities (including HandyDART service) region wide but particularly on reserve lands and other areas with high indigenous populations.

Public HandyDART Provision Essential for Increasing and Improving service

The rationale for contracting out transit services has been that as workers have less job security working for a private contractor, wages will be enough lower to offset the corporations profit margin and additional administrative expenses. However, with an aging population and the effects of the COVID pandemic, transit agencies across North America are having great difficulty attracting and retaining enough qualified workers.

Stability is crucial for attracting and retaining qualified workers

Over the last few years, TransLink’s HandyDART operations have been in the hands of four different corporations. Every time a new contractor takes over, years of efficiency gains are lost as new management implements new procedures. Employee morale suffers along with efficiency, quality of service, and workplace health & safety. Stability is crucial for attracting and retaining qualified workers.

Contacting out also means that TransLink staff do not gain the knowledge and experience they would if involved directly in HandyDART operations. It seems likely that Transport 2050 would not have the glaring gaps it has regarding aging and HandyDART if TransLink staff were directly involved in providing HandyDART service.

Large for-profit operators have a history of performance issues that affect riders and consume large amounts of transit agency staff time – including problems related to low wages and resulting staff turnover. Part of the problem is that it is impractically complex to align public service with the profit motive in large public transit systems – a contract that covered all aspects of quality service would be enormously complex and difficult to enforce.

Multiple disability rights organizations have supported in-house HandyDART service as a way to improve staff retention, on the basis that experienced operators provide better and more sensitive service.

The intractable problems with contracting out custom transit services, and the recognition of the benefits of living wages and decent working conditions, have resulted in a number of jurisdictions directly providing paratransit as a public service. The Regional District of Nanaimo, City of Nelson, District of Powell River and the Sunshine Coast Regional District all chose to provide BC Transit HandyDART and conventional transit directly as a public service rather than pay a multinational corporation to do so.

The BC government’s recent decision that about 5,000 health care workers should be “once again directly employed by the government and health authorities” was based on the evidence that “employees who feel secure and safe in their jobs provide higher-quality care for people, and in turn employers can attract and retain staff at a higher and more consistent level.”

Proper public sector comparator needed

At this point, it is essential that TransLink conduct a proper and unbiased Public Sector Comparator (PSC) to compare the costs and benefits of continued outsourcing to insourcing of HandyDART. TransLink committed to do a multiple accounts evaluation PSC in 2016, but then reneged on this commitment.

HandyDART riders should be involved in selecting the criteria to be considered. And the union representing HandyDART workers should be involved in selecting the company to do the work, and have input into the design of the PSC. The full PSC, not just a summary, should be made public.

Electrification of HandyDART requires permanent facilities

Electric transit vehicles have multiple benefits for riders including quieter smoother operation, and better air quality inside and outside the vehicle. These benefits are more important for HandyDART riders, many of whom have conditions exacerbated by pollution, than for the general public. Transitioning TransLink’s conventional bus fleet to quiet clean electric power while leaving the HandyDART fleet burning fossil fuels would be discriminatory and incompatible with the Transport 2050 commitment to equity.

However, it is not practical to electrify TransLink’s HandyDART fleet without permanent, publicly owned, operations and maintenance centres. All of TransLink’s HandyDART centres are leased temporary facilities. These, sometimes substandard, temporary facilities are also a factor in high staff turnover – substandard facilities translate into substandard working conditions.

It is time for TransLink to do what BC Transit Victoria has already done, and get funding from the provincial and federal governments for permanent operations centres with equipment for charging electric HandyDART vehicles. This would shift a significant proportion of the cost of HandyDART from TransLink’s operating budget to a capital expense. Capital expenses are eligible for federal and provincial funding, so this could be a major financial benefit for TransLink.

Multiple benefits of quality HandyDART

There are many benefits to providing good quality transit service that is accessible to all, and poor quality paratransit is never a good choice. Quantifying the economic and social benefits of improving HandyDART service are beyond the scope of this study. But, given the costs and negative social consequences of inadequate service, improving HandyDART service is a very good investment.

Failing to increase the amount of high-quality door-to-door custom transit service would impose substantial costs on the public health system and family care givers, as well as infringing on the rights of the increasing population of people living with disabilities.

Access for Everyone – sidewalks, bus lanes, rolling & more

Improving the conventional transit system, the sidewalk network, and numerous other features of our communities is essential to creating the “Access for Everyone” that Transport 2050 claims to aim for. Many, but not all, of these measures are mentioned in Transport 2050. And there is considerable potential to moderate the increase in HandyDART service that will be required, with adequate investment and re-allocation of road space. Some of these changes can also increase the efficiency of HandyDART service.

Some of the measures that have the potential to increase accessibility and moderate the need for HandyDART service increases include:

- Increasing regular transit service frequencies, and using larger buses, to reduce overcrowding.
- Improving transit priority measures, including transit lanes that can be used by HandyDART, and equipping HandyDART vehicles to activate transit signal priority.
- Installing accessible public washrooms at major transit transfer points.
- Creating many more high-quality bike and roll routes, and welcoming people riding power wheelchairs and mobility scooters to use these facilities.
- Building and improving sidewalks and crosswalks region wide. Transit is not accessible without good quality sidewalks all the way to and from the transit stop.
- Improving bus stops, with more transit shelters with spaces to sit and park wheelchairs out of the rain.
- Locating affordable housing, including for seniors and people with disabilities, in walkable areas with good quality transit.

Even with all these measures, a large increase in HandyDART service still will be needed.

Reallocating investment to meet Transport 2050 goals

The provincial government has set a target of reducing light duty vehicle kilometres traveled 25% by 2030, and is making action to meet this target central to the forthcoming BC Clean Transportation Action Plan. And it makes no sense to spend billions widening highways if your objective is to have much less traffic in the future.

Funding should be shifted away from highway expansion, which makes traffic worse and increases greenhouse gas pollution, to public transit infrastructure including permanent facilities for an expanded and electric HandyDART fleet.

A balanced examination of insourcing HandyDART should be one of the first steps towards Access for Everyone

In 2021 the Capital Regional District (CRD) voted to advocate for transportation investments that contribute to meeting regional sustainable transportation, affordability, and greenhouse gas reduction targets. A similar policy in Metro Vancouver could see billions of dollars shifted to transit capital projects, including new permanent HandyDART facilities, over the next decade.

Conclusion

TransLink has some catching up to do, and a balanced examination of insourcing HandyDART should be one of the first steps towards Access for Everyone.

1) Introduction & context

This report documents a compelling case for a HandyDART system in Metro Vancouver that is publicly operated (rather than being contracted out), has highly prioritized access to the road network along with transit buses, and is electrified along with the rest of TransLink’s fleet. It is also crucial that HandyDART service is increased to meet the present need and keep up with the increasing number of people with disabilities in the region, which is largely linked to our aging population.

The promise of “Access for Everyone”, set out by TransLink and the Government of BC in Transport 2050, cannot be met without meeting these conditions.

HandyDART is a custom transit service for people with physical and/or cognitive disabilities who cannot use the regular transit system for at least some trips. HandyDART is not just for older seniors. The people who benefit from HandyDART include children on their way to school and specialized programs, young adults on their way to work and medical appointments, and middle-aged people going to rehabilitation programs. Any one of us – even young able-bodied people – could be using these kinds of services next year on a temporary or permanent basis; however, the probability of needing custom transit service increases greatly with age.

The promise of Transport 2050 – Access for Everyone

In early 2022 The TransLink Mayors’ Council and Board of Directors adopted Transport 2050, which boldly promises “Access for Everyone”.¹ Their message lists key “Challenges and Opportunities”, which include:

- “the accelerating climate emergency whose destructive impacts we are now clearly feeling”
- “the affordability crisis leaving many struggling”
- “relationship with Indigenous Peoples”
- “recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic”

Notably absent from this list of challenges, and Transport 2050 as a whole, is Metro Vancouver’s aging population. Population aging translates to a higher number of people with disabilities (as discussed in section 2 below).

The Mayors’ Council and Board states that “each of these challenges also present us with an opportunity to do better — to become the just, equitable, inclusive, and carbon-free region we aspire to be.” P4

¹ www.translink.ca/plans-and-projects/strategies-plans-and-guidelines/transit-and-transportation-planning/transport-2050

By ignoring the challenges of our aging population, Transport 2050 repeats the mistakes of the past, at the same time as promising to change and do better in the future:

“The transportation future we want is one where no one gets left behind.

To create this fairer and more just and inclusive transportation system that truly delivers on the promise of Access for Everyone, we need to take steps to help lessen the struggles and reduce the barriers that people face. In the past, transportation justice has not been central to our regional mission and so, as a region, we have catching up to do.” P 19

Not only does Transport 2050 mostly ignore the challenge of population aging it also makes HandyDART riders almost invisible. HandyDART (and associated terms like paratransit and custom transit are barely mentioned). The one HandyDART shown in the whole document is far in the background, behind a skateboarder. Making the most vulnerable transit riders invisible is a serious flaw in a document that is supposed to guide transportation in Metro Vancouver in the next crucial decade and beyond. TransLink has some serious “catching up to do.”

Provincial and regional district responsibility

Transport 2050 also promises to break down the conflicting silos that have led to so many contradictory policies, and so much finger pointing between levels of government, in the past. It includes a letter from George Heyman, then Minister Responsible for TransLink, claiming that the provincial government has been a “partner in developing Transport 2050 since its inception” and that they are “supportive of the steps Transport 2050 takes towards advancing reconciliation and social equity to make it easier for everyone to travel around the region and access opportunities” (p 5).

Similar promises have been made in the past, but there are some indications that the provincial government may be making a real change of direction. The upcoming Clean Transportation Action plan is one example of the potential for positive change at the provincial level.

It is helpful to recognize that TransLink is a creation of the provincial government, receives provincial funding, and has a legislated responsibility to consider all relevant provincial objectives including those regarding paratransit (HandyDART) provision.

Transport 2050 notes that the “South Coast British Columbia Transportation Authority Act requires TransLink to “consider regional land use objectives, provincial transportation and economic objectives, and provincial and regional environmental and emissions reduction objectives.” P 35

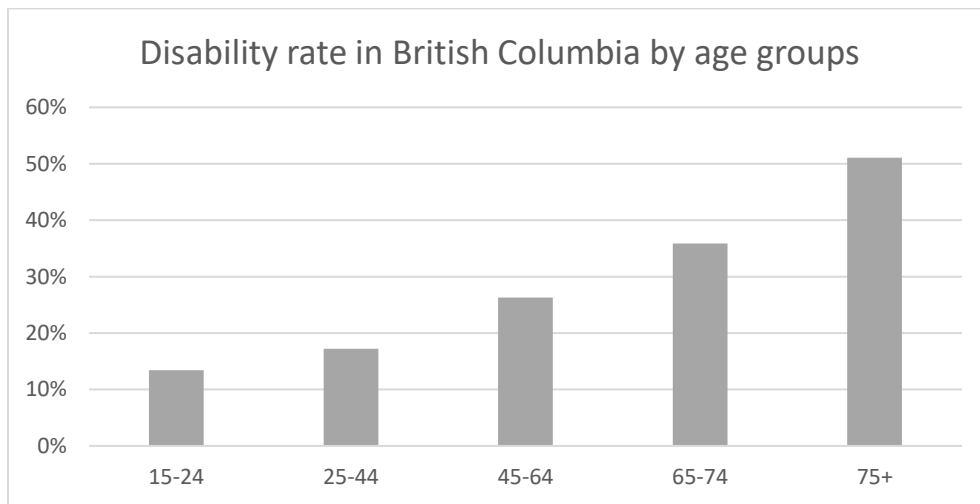
2) Aging population, growing HandyDART demand, and human rights

In 2017 the Mayors’ Council on Regional Transportation released a backgrounder titled *HandyDART: A Backbone of Provincial Healthcare*, which notes that TransLink’s 2017 “10-Year Vision . . . will still leave Metro Vancouver with about half of the accessible transit trips per capita that are provided in other similar Canadian cities, including the Capital Region.”²

“Providing the services and urban environment older seniors need will be a defining social and political challenge”

In the same year, Statistics Canada was conducting the most recent Canadian Survey on Disability. The rates of disability for British Columbia, ranging from 13% for the 15 to 24 age group to 51% for people 75 and over, are shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 – Disability increases with age, particularly past age 70



Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Disability³

The 2021 census revealed important information on Canada’s aging population. The Canadian Press reported that “seniors over the age of 85 are the fastest-growing age group in the country, marking another milestone on the slow march to what experts warn will be a crisis in care for the country’s elders. . . . The pace of aging is expected to accelerate with every new candle added to the boomer generation’s birthday cake.”⁴

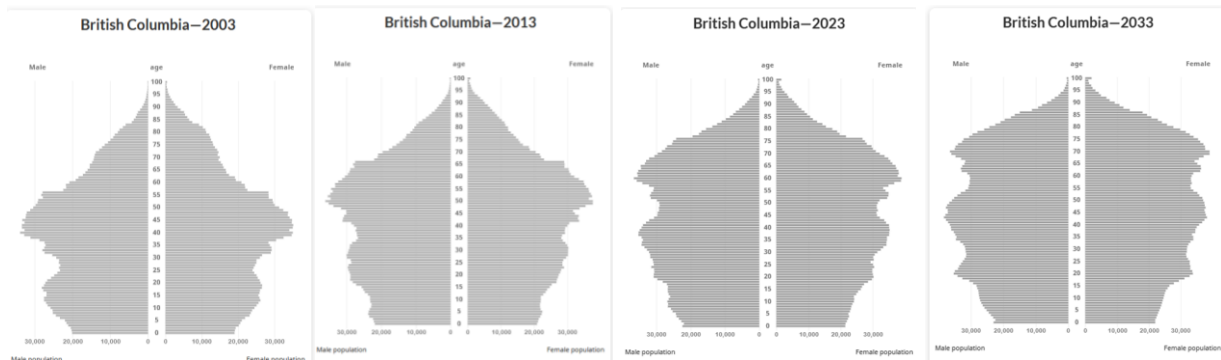
² ecoplanning.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Mayors-Council-HandyDART-backgrounder-April-2017.pdf

³ www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-607-x/71-607-x2019035-eng.htm

⁴ www.timescolonist.com/national-news/2021-census-shows-number-of-seniors-over-85-expected-to-triple-in-next-25-years-5303975

This year the oldest people in the baby boom generation turn 78, and in the coming decade providing the services and urban environment older seniors need will be a defining social and political challenge in Metro Vancouver and across the country. Figure 2, the Statistics Canada age ‘pyramids’ (which become less and less pyramid shaped over time) below illustrate the scale of change over the past two decades and the coming one.

Figure 2 – Age ‘pyramids’ show impact of Baby Boom generation aging 2003 - 2033



Source: www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/dv-vd/pyramid/index-en.htm

The boomer generation is generally healthier and more active than previous generations, but disability increases sharply after age 70. A key question is how to provide the needed services so a larger proportion of older seniors can live independently, and transportation is a key and often neglected component of that.

The Canadian Press notes that “Wait-lists for long-term care beds can already stretch on for years, leaving people stuck in hospitals because there is nowhere else for them to go, or families struggling to care for their loved ones at home.” But the boomer generation had fewer children than previous generations, so a larger proportion don’t have family to provide care such as driving them to medical appointments and social activities. In addition, a significant proportion of the children of boomers don’t own cars or have driver’s licences. Meeting the “Access for Everyone” aspiration of Transport 2050 means that people with disabilities of any age should not have to have family who can drive them in order to live well.

More HandyDART service can reduce long-term care and hospital stay expenses. The BC Seniors Advocate states “On average, a long-term care bed costs taxpayers \$27,740 more per year than two hours of daily home support.”⁵ Good paratransit service is one of the crucial supports that allows people to live independently.

⁵ www.seniorsadvocatebc.ca/osa-reports/report-home-support-review/

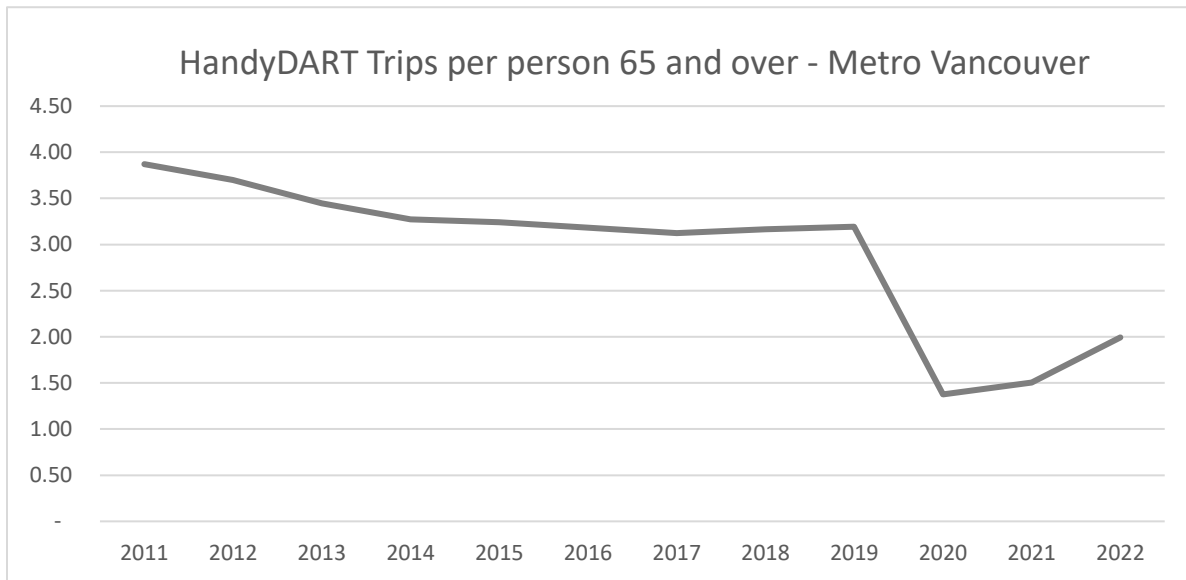
During the pandemic, substandard privatized long-term care cost lives and drove the societal recognition that public and non-profit provision of services to vulnerable populations is superior to what for-profit corporations provide.

TransLink held the number of HandyDART trips per capita approximately constant over the last decade, until the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the number of HandyDART trips per person 65 and over declined significantly between 2011 and 2019 as shown in Figure 3 below. In 2011 TransLink was providing 3.87 trips per year for every person 65 and over (down from 4.07 in 2008). By 2013, when the crisis of HandyDART service was documented in the report *Metro Vancouver’s Aging Population and the Need for Improved HandyDART Service*, and widely reported in the media, the level had dropped to 3.45.⁶ From 2017 to 2019 the levels ranged from 3.12 to 3.19 trips per person 65 and over.

The number of people with disabilities will increase at almost twice the rate of population growth

In 2019, before the COVID pandemic, TransLink provided twenty two percent less HandyDART service per person 65 and over than in 2008. *In 2022, with demand again outstripping supply as pandemic restrictions eased, TransLink provided 1.99 trips per senior, only half the HandyDART service per person 65 and over than in 2008.*

Figure 3 - HandyDART service per senior was dropping even before pandemic



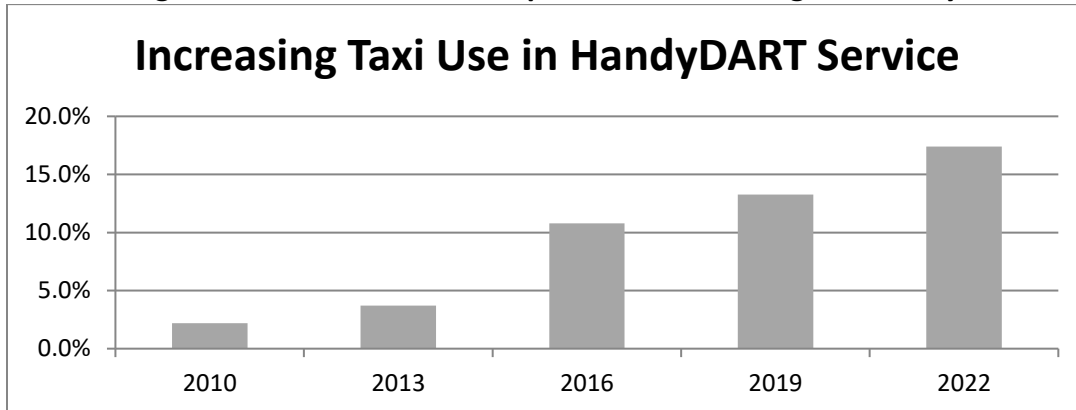
Data Sources: TransLink Data & Statistics Canada. Table 17-10-0135-01 Population estimates⁷

⁶ ecoplanning.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/ATU-HandyDART-Report-Final-Nov-15-2013.pdf;
www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/handydart-trip-denials-up-670-since-2008-says-group-1.2433056

⁷ January 2023 www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1710013501

In 2022 the percentage of taxi trips also reached 17%, reflecting the inability of the private contractor to attract, train, and retain workers in a tight labour market. This also seems to reflect a disregard for targets set in TransLink plans – the previous TransLink 10 Year Plan called for reducing the percentage of taxi trips to 7% by 2021.

Figure 4 Taxi usage has climbed to 17%, despite TransLink’s target of 7% by 2021⁸



Source: TransLink data

Experience in Metro Vancouver and elsewhere shows that substituting taxis for dedicated custom transit vehicles results in sub-standard safety and service, often without any real reduction in costs. The low pay and resulting high turnover in the taxi industry creates intractable problems. These serious issues with taxis in HandyDART service are discussed in the Appendix, and in more detail in the 2017 report *Metro Vancouver’s Aging Population and the need for Quality HandyDART Service*.⁹

According to Human Resources and Skill Development Canada, due to an aging population, the number of people with disabilities in Canada will increase at almost twice the rate of population growth through 2036.¹⁰ Metro Vancouver has many of the specialized medical facilities in British Columbia, such as the G.F. Strong Rehabilitation Centre. Many with severe disabilities and serious medical conditions – particularly older people – will likely relocate here to access specialized healthcare in the coming years.

TransLink acknowledged HandyDART crisis in 2017, but not in Transport 2050

In March 2017 TransLink published documents revealing that TransLink provides less HandyDART service per capita than comparable transit agencies. One document states:

⁸ 2022 data updated to correct an error in the original version of this report.

⁹ ecoplanning.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Quality-HandyDART-Final-Oct-16-2017.pdf

¹⁰ HRDC (2011) *Federal Disability Report* Figure 1.9.

Demand for HandyDART Currently Outstrips Supply and is Anticipated to Grow: Up until late 2016, there had been no increase in HandyDART service since 2009 . . . we heard from many customers that it can be difficult to get a trip when needed and that many customers have stopped calling out of frustration. In addition, HandyDART is currently providing fewer trips per capita than our peer custom transit agencies, which indicates that there is likely latent demand for the service. Furthermore, recent BC Stats projections indicate the number of people in Metro Vancouver aged 70 or older will increase by 55% over the next ten years, which could translate into a greater need for HandyDART service, as the incidence of disabilities increases at this age.

The 10-Year Vision would still leave Metro Vancouver with half the service provided in similar Canadian cities

The same report states that HandyDART service “expansion in the Mayors’ Vision is expected to address the increased demand to some degree, but analysis shows that it is likely insufficient to catch up or keep pace with need.”¹¹

The next month, the Mayors’ Council chimed in with this statement:

“The 10-Year Vision will increase this service by 30% [but] will still leave Metro Vancouver with about half of the accessible transit trips per capita that are provided in other similar Canadian cities, including the Capital Region. This service shortfall is in large part a reflection of the lack of provincial support for this service. . .

The Mayors’ Council is calling on all B.C. political parties to . . . commit to improving service above and beyond the 30% increase proposed in the 10-Year Vision, so our residents have access services at a level comparable to other major Canadian cities.¹²

Unfortunately, there is no real acknowledgement of the need for increased HandyDART service in Transport 2050. The terms “HandyDART”, “custom transit” and “paratransit” are completely absent from the Transport 2050 executive summary. Transport 2050 does discuss the impacts of our aging population, stating “As our population ages, seniors transitioning away from driving — and encountering new accessibility challenges — will require more safe and comfortable choices, particularly as more people ‘age in place.’”

TransLink provided twenty two percent less HandyDART service per person 65 and over in 2019 than in 2008.

¹¹ Custom Transit Service Delivery Review: Outcomes and Recommendations (March 22, 2017) handydartriders.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/HandyDART-Service-Review-March-2017.pdf

¹² mayorscouncil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Backgrounder-HandyDART-1.pdf

However, this passage is found on page 161 and is not followed up with any substantive discussion of the need for improved HandyDART service.

Transport 2050 could be a step backwards, not forward, in TransLink's journey towards providing "Access for Everyone".

Legislature committee recommends more HandyDART

The Legislature's Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services BC Budget consultation reports have recommended "increasing accessible transportation options such as HandyDART" (or similar wording) for several years running including 2023.¹³

A large and rapid increase in HandyDART service is needed to restore service to pre-COVID levels and reverse this reduction in service relative to need.

Adequate HandyDART service is essential for many seniors and people with disability to live independently rather than going into long-term care, and the ongoing COVID pandemic will add to the need.

COVID has created more need for HandyDART

A significant, but not yet well documented, percentage of the Canadian population has been disabled by COVID-19 already. Some of these disabilities will be permanent, and some will last for years. Those affected include all age groups including children, younger working age people, and seniors who were healthy and active before contracting COVID.¹⁴

Disabilities caused by COVID-19 will increase the need for HandyDART service, and other mobility options for people with disabilities, in both the short and long term. These disabilities will also reduce the availability of workers able to do the physically and mentally demanding work of operating a HandyDART vehicle and assisting passengers.

The ongoing COVID pandemic is having severe impacts on older seniors and people with disabilities.¹⁵ The federal *COVID-19 Disability Advisory Group Report* documented access related harms including "social isolation and loss of access to supports [and] loss of access to services crucial to well-being, including occupational therapy, mental health services, and maintenance/repairs of disability aids."¹⁶ Improved HandyDART service is one way of reducing this ongoing harm.

¹³ Quote is from p96 of Budget 2022 report -

www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/finances/budget/consultations

¹⁴ E.g. www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-tsunami-of-disability-is-coming-as-a-result-of-long-covid-19/; www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2022/mar/30/long-covid-coronavirus-covid-pandemic-health; www.webmd.com/covid/news/20230306/long-covid-takes-toll-on-health-care-system

¹⁵ theyee.ca/Analysis/2022/03/30/Stop-Leaving-Disabled-People-Behind/

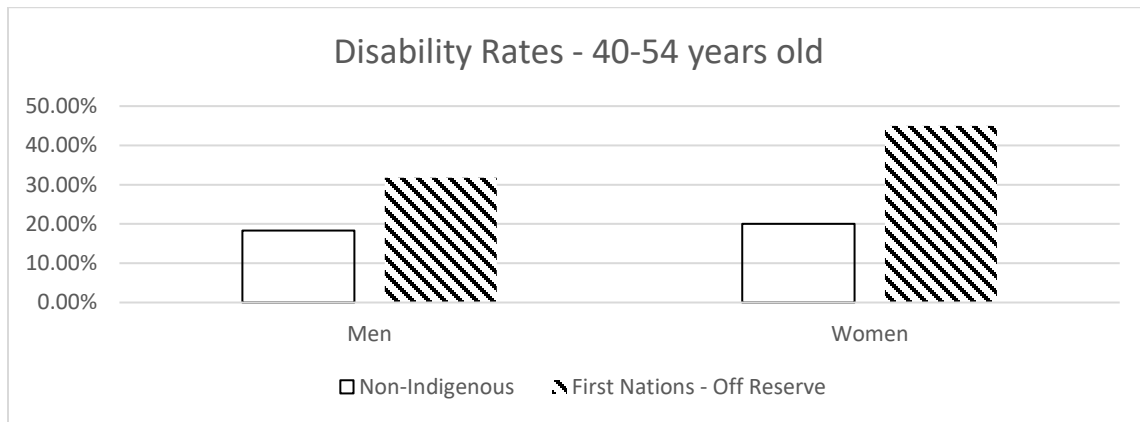
¹⁶ www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/disability-advisory-group/reports/2020-advisory-group-report.html#h2.03

Indigenous peoples and disability

Transport 2050 notes that Indigenous people emphasized the need for “improved accessibility for people with disabilities and mobility challenges” in the consultation phase. However, crucial context is missing from Transport 2050.

The British Columbia Aboriginal Network on Disability Society (BCANDS) asserts that the “Indigenous population of Canada experience a disability rate much higher than that of the general population, at approximately 30% to 35%”.¹⁷ This is backed up by Statistics Canada, which produced a study of disability rates of Indigenous peoples in Canada for the first time in 2019.¹⁸ For example, the rate of disability for First Nations women 40 to 54 years old is 45%, more than double the rate for non-Indigenous women the same age as shown in Figure 5 below.¹⁹

Figure 5. The disability rate of First Nations women is more than double that of non-Indigenous women 40-54 years old



Source: Statistics Canada - *Indigenous people with disabilities in Canada* (2019).

In this study Statistics Canada states that

“In Canada, disability is defined using the social model of disability, which takes into account not just a person’s impairments or task difficulties, but also the added impact of environmental barriers to create disability. These environmental barriers can be . . . attitudinal resulting in discrimination and exclusion.”

By this definition, inadequate transit service (particularly HandyDART service) increases disability rates among Indigenous people and the general population rather than merely worsening conditions for persons with disabilities.

¹⁷ www.bcands.bc.ca/

¹⁸ www.straight.com/news/1336741/statistics-canada-reports-high-rates-disability-among-inuit-metis-and-reserve-first;

¹⁹ P3 www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/89-653-x/89-653-x2019005-eng.pdf?st=OX64TB2s

TransLink 2050 states that:

“Indigenous communities were purposefully isolated from society, causing marginalization, economic disparity, and impacts on the health and safety of Indigenous Peoples. TransLink collectively acknowledges that past decisions have shaped our region’s current transportation system, including access and mobility options being unavailable for many Indigenous communities” P 10.

These health impacts combined with the lack of “access and mobility options” translate to elevated disability rates. If Access for Everyone is to include Indigenous Peoples, TransLink needs to greatly improve accessibility for persons with disabilities (including HandyDART service) region wide but particularly on reserve lands and other areas with high indigenous populations.

3) Public HandyDART essential for increasing and improving service

The rationale for contracting out transit services has been that as workers have less job security working for a private contractor, wages will be enough lower to offset the corporations profit margin and additional administrative expenses. However, with an aging population and the effects of the COVID pandemic, transit agencies across North America are having great difficulty attracting and retaining enough qualified workers.

Decent wages, working conditions and future prospects are now essential for attracting enough workers to maintain, never mind increase, service. And TransLink is failing to attract and retain workers to their HandyDART service.

Over the last few years, TransLink’s HandyDART operations have been in the hands of four different corporations. TransLink terminated their contract US based MV Transportation group (MVT Canadian Bus) and entered into a contract with UK-based FirstGroup in 2017. This transfer was controlled by TransLink, but nevertheless caused considerable disruption.

However, in 2021, EQT AB of Sweden bought out FirstGroup’s North American operations and subsequently separated the transit and school bus operations. In 2022 EQT sold the division that operates HandyDART for TransLink to Transdev, which is headquartered in France. TransLink had no control over these two transfers between multinational corporations.

Every time a new contractor takes over, years of efficiency gains are lost as new management implements new procedures. Employee morale suffers along with efficiency, quality of service, and workplace health & safety.

The cost of HandyDART is inflated due to the funding of profit and the cost of administering contracted out services meanwhile creating instability that conventional transit is not burdened by. Stability is crucial for attracting and retaining qualified workers and there is presently a nearly unprecedented shortage of qualified workers.

Contacting out also means that TransLink staff do not gain the knowledge and experience they would if involved directly in HandyDART operations. It seems likely that Transport 2050 would not have the glaring gaps it has regarding aging and HandyDART if TransLink staff were directly involved in providing HandyDART service.

The original shift of all TransLink HandyDART services from mainly non-profit contractors to the series of for profit corporations had decidedly mixed results. The consolidation to one contract reduced some of the previous problems with trips between zones served by different contractors. However, other problems emerged with service quality and efficiency. The 2012 TransLink Commissioner’s report states:



HANDYDART RIDER SPEAKS TO MEDIA

“The consolidation of operations to one contractor does not appear to have produced any economies of scale. Instead, slippage has occurred in service cost efficiency and effectiveness, as well as productivity.”²⁰

The privatization of HandyDART services also had a negative impact on HandyDART riders, including poor service and a strike largely resulting from MVT’s attempt to eliminate pensions for workers.²¹

A contract that covered all aspects of quality service would be enormously complex and difficult to enforce

Privatization in conventional public transit service has a poor track record – most notably the disastrous experience from the UK, including the London Underground ‘public private partnership’ which cost the public billions and went bankrupt in 2007.²² The problems with trying to create and enforce contracts that create financial incentives for providing good service have proven to be immense, and the failures

²⁰ Shirocca Consulting (2012) TransLink Efficiency Review. P 42.

²¹ Matthew Burrows (Nov 25, 2009) *Georgia Straight* “HandyDart strike leaves disabled passengers out in the cold”

²² E.g. Todd Litman (2011) *Contrasting Visions of Urban Transport - Critique of “Fixing Transit: The Case For Privatization”* Victoria Transport Policy Institute vtpi.org/cont_vis.pdf; CUPE (2008) *Metronet P3 failure ‘spectacular’*; Centre for Civic Governance (2016) *Back in House: Why local governments are bringing services home.* columbiainstitute.eco/research/our-latest-publication-is-out-back-in-house-workbook-why-local-governments-are-bringing-services-home/

have been extremely costly both in terms of financial cost and the impact of poor transit service on individuals and society.

In the conventional transit sector large for-profit operators have a history of performance issues that affect riders and consume large amounts of transit agency staff time – including problems related to low wages and resulting staff turnover. As one former public sector manager with experience with contracting out put it:

“If you had a contractor that wanted to run the business and not maximize their profit at every turn, then it would be fine . . . As it tends to work out, you’re spending 85 percent of the time making sure that they’re doing everything in the contract instead of doing the things you need to be doing”²³

The idea that the poor treatment of employees and poor service to riders goes hand in hand is illustrated by the fact that some full time paratransit drivers in the US have to rely on food stamps to feed their children. For example, speaking at an event organized by the Washington Interfaith Network (an affiliate of the Metro Vancouver Alliance) Karen Reed spoke about how her and her daughter rely on social services and were homeless for three months despite her working far more than full time hours for First Transit.²⁴ Corporations that pay substandard wages and impose miserable working conditions when they can get away with it cannot be expected to treat vulnerable riders with any more consideration.

Poor treatment of employees and poor service to riders goes hand in hand

Private Contracts Impractically Complex

In the book *A Very Public Solution* the late Australian transportation planning professor Paul Mees put forward a compelling and well documented case that for-profit companies should not be involved in coordinating and planning functions in conventional public transit. Mees explains that it is impractically complex to align public service with the profit motive in large public transit systems.²⁵ The same argument applies to custom transit – a contract that covered all aspects of quality service would be enormously complex and difficult to enforce.

The public solution

In 2005 the Coalition of HandyDART Users (CHU) published a report calling for HandyDART to be operated as a subsidiary of TransLink rather than being contracted out. One of the

²³ Zusha Elinson (March 9, 2013) “MV Transportation woes go beyond Tahoe” *Lake Tahoe News*. laketahoenews.net/2013/03/mv-transportation-woes-go-beyond-tahoe

²⁴ Video by ATU Local 689 (Jan 10, 2015) *Metro Access Operator Karen Reed tells Mayor Bowser of Perils of Outsourcing Buses in the District*. <https://youtu.be/NybfVVtwaA>

²⁵ (2000) *A very public solution: Transport in the dispersed city*. Melbourne University Press.

main justifications for this proposed change was to improve staff retention, as they believed that experienced operators provide better and more sensitive service:

“The two things that handyDART users care about the most are:

- 1) expanding the availability and flexibility of rides, and
- 2) a safe and professional service with well-trained drivers.

Custom transit employees are the people we interact with every day. Drivers have a job that is very distinct from that of conventional bus drivers, including:

- Experience, training and sensitivity with a range of disabilities, conditions and impairments.
- Provision of a door-to-door service.
- Planning custom routes.
- Safety and securement of passengers.
- One-on-one attention for passengers.

For those of us using handyDART, the employees we most appreciate are those with experience and sensitivity. These are qualities and abilities that drivers develop through serving customers with a variety of needs over time. This is why it is CHU’s position that longevity and training of employees is crucial to a safe, quality service for us – and why we are proposing a permanent subsidiary. The instability of the current contracting process undermines staff longevity.”²⁶

Custom transit drivers facing substandard pay and working conditions quit as soon as they find better jobs, and the only way to overcome this is to improve wages, benefits and working conditions. A TRB report asserts that the “difficulty in hiring, training, and retaining qualified paratransit drivers will continue to be a problem in the paratransit industry until the industry finds a way to compensate quality drivers.”²⁷

Given the poor track record that for-profit companies have for service quality and cost effectiveness, CHU’s recommendation that HandyDART be operated as a publicly owned subsidiary of TransLink should be seriously considered.

As Washington D.C.-area disability rights advocate Carol Tyson said at a transit forum in 2015, “the system that encourages privatization and discourages ensuring workers are paid living wages and benefits is intertwined with the system that denies the supports and services that people with disabilities need to remain in the community.”²⁸

²⁶ Ann Vrlak (2005) *Engaging the Future: Making HandyDART a TransLink Subsidiary*. Coalition of handyDART Users. P 13. handydartriders.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Engaging-Future-2005.pdf

²⁷ Roy Lave & Rosemary Mathias (2000) *State of the Art of Paratransit*. Transportation Research Board. Pp 3-4

²⁸ (Oct 14, 2015) DC Fair Transit Forum https://youtu.be/fVV-rextu_0?t=3m36s

Examples of shifts to In-house provision

The intractable problems with contracting out custom transit services, and the recognition of the benefits of living wages and decent working conditions, have resulted in a number of jurisdictions directly providing the service as a public service. Some examples include:

- In 2015, Calgary HandiBus was taken over and amalgamated with Access Calgary. The HandiBus operators become Calgary Transit employees.²⁹
- The City of Ottawa took over the operation of Para Transpo in 2007 after numerous problems with the service First Bus Canada was providing.³⁰
- After a scathing audit, in 2015 the Alberta municipality of Wood Buffalo (Fort McMurray) announced it would terminate its 15 year contract with Tok Transit after only two years and deliver both conventional and Paratransit in-house.^{31 32} According to one media report “many of the complaints the auditors heard centred around specialized transit provided to seniors and people with disabilities.”³³
- In 2016 the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority took over managing the VTA Paratransit service directly after the FBI raided the offices of the company operating their paratransit service, to investigate allegations of over billing.³⁴

These are examples of the “growing international trend” of ‘insourcing’ services that were previously contracted out.³⁵ A prime example of the trend is the BC government’s recent decision that about 5,000 health care workers should be “once again directly employed by the government and health authorities”.³⁶ A government media release regarding this insourcing decision states that “Evidence has shown that employees who feel secure and safe in their jobs provide higher-quality care for people, and in turn employers can attract and retain staff at a higher and more consistent level.”³⁷

²⁹ City of Calgary (May 6, 2015) *Calgary HandiBus employees joining Calgary Transit family* newsroom.calgary.ca/calgary-handibus-employees-joining-calgary-transit-family

³⁰ Hugh Adami (Sept 2, 2013) Ottawa Citizen “For disabled mom, Para Transpo’s a tough call” ottawacitizen.com/news/ottawa%20%20area/public-citizen-for-disabled-mom-para-transpos-a-tough-call

³¹ Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (2015) *FAQ: New Era For Transit in Wood Buffalo*.

³² Centre for Civic Governance (2016) *Back in House: Why local governments are bringing services home*. columbiainstitute.eco/research/our-latest-publication-is-out-back-in-house-workbook-why-local-governments-are-bringing-services-home/

³³ Rebekah Benoit (2015) “RMWB commits in-house transit services will be better after terminating contract” fortmacconnect.ca

³⁴ NBC Bay Area (Nov. 3, 2016) *FBI Raids Paratransit Operator Prompting VTA to Scramble to Help Disabled Riders* nbcbayarea.com/news/local/FBI-Raids-Paratransit-Operator-Prompting-VTA-to-Scramble-For-Alternate-Plans-399884971.html

³⁵ Keith Reynolds, Gaetan Royer and Charley Beresford (21 Sep 2016) *Like London and Paris, Sooke BC Is Voting Privatization Out of Style*. theyee.ca/Opinion/2016/09/21/Sooke-Voting-Privatization-Out/

³⁶ theyee.ca/News/2022/12/20/Health-Workers-Celebrate-After-Bitter-Battle-Rights/

³⁷ *Cleaning, dietary workers coming back in-house at B.C. hospitals* (Aug 30 2021) news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2021HLTH0157-001703

The Regional District of Nanaimo, City of Nelson (Regional District of Central Kootenay), District of Powell River and the Sunshine Coast Regional District all chose to provide BC Transit HandyDART and conventional transit directly as a public service rather than pay a multinational corporation to do so.³⁸

Proper public sector comparator needed

At this point, it is essential that TransLink conduct a proper and unbiased Public Sector Comparator (PSC) to compare the costs and benefits of continued outsourcing to insourcing of HandyDART.

Corporate consulting firms like PwC and KPMG are highly biased to favor privatization. Rachel Tansey of the Corporate Europe Observatory refers to them as “Professional (privatisation of) services firms.”³⁹

In 2015 I recommended that HandyDART riders be involved in selecting an outside group to conduct a participatory Multiple Accounts Evaluation PSC. I also suggested that public confidence in the results would be enhanced if the group doing the work was conducted by a smaller firm and led by professionals with a code of conduct requiring clear and accurate communications with the public.

In 2016, then TransLink CEO Kevin Desmond committed to a ‘public sector comparator’ to evaluate the costs and benefits of bringing HandyDART in-house as part of a “Custom Transit Service Delivery Review . . . in response to a number of questions that had been raised at TransLink Board meetings, particularity around responsiveness to customer concerns, and the standards and quality of HandyDART and taxi services, and the HandyDART service model.” The “Stakeholder Advisory Committee [was supposed to help develop] evaluation criteria for service delivery models”⁴⁰

The Custom Transit Service Delivery Review initially included a Multiple Accounts Evaluation (MAE) of service delivery models. Multiple Accounts Evaluation allows multiple factors, such as safety and quality of service to be evaluated (TransLink regularly uses MAE evaluations in evaluating projects such as rapid transit lines).

However, at some stage the MAE was terminated, and only a financial analysis was done. TransLink hired PwC to do the financial review. PwC is one of the scandal-prone big international accounting & consulting partnerships “the most secretive of all large global

³⁸ www.bctransit.com/about/funding-and-governance/regional; mypowellrivernow.com/33024/news/service-provider-change-coming-for-paratransit-and-handydart/

³⁹ corporateeurope.org/en/power-lobbies/2017/06/creeping-privatisation-healthcare

⁴⁰ *Custom Transit Service Delivery Review* translink.ca/en/Plans-and-Projects/Custom-Transit-Service-Review.aspx (accessed Sept. 21, 2017).

institutions.”⁴¹ It is also one of the firms the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives identifies as having “potential conflict of interest, because accurate auditing would sometimes speak against corporate practices that yield general consulting revenues” such as contracting out and ‘private public partnerships.’⁴² The names and qualifications of the people who did the financial analysis were not included in the thin and vaguely worded report summary that was released to the public.

PwC was apparently not informed that the MAE had been cancelled and wrote that: “The outputs from the PSC were incorporated into the final Multiple Account Evaluation (“MAE”) used by TransLink and the project Stakeholder Advisory Committee to prepare the final recommendation to the TransLink Board.”[sic]⁴³

As should be expected, PwC’s report suggested that contracting out would save money, apparently on the basis that wage rates and benefits would be suppressed compared to in-house provision.

This time a proper, transparent, Public Sector Comparator is needed. HandyDART riders should be involved in selecting the criteria to be considered. And the union representing HandyDART workers should be involved in selecting the company to do the work, and have input into the design of the PSC. The full PSC, not just a summary, should be made public.

4) Electrification of HandyDART requires permanent facilities

Electric transit vehicles have multiple benefits for riders including quieter smoother operation, and better air quality inside and outside the vehicle. These benefits are more important for HandyDART riders, many of whom have conditions exacerbated by pollution, than for the general public. Transitioning TransLink’s conventional bus fleet to quiet clean electric power while leaving the HandyDART fleet burning fossil fuels would be discriminatory and incompatible with the Transport 2050 commitment to equity.

With provincial, federal and regional funds, BC Transit Victoria has built a new permanent HandyDART centre to “respond to the growing needs for handyDART services in Greater Victoria [with] infrastructure to support a fully electric fleet... installed during

⁴¹ michaelwest.com.au/pwc-scandal-whos-guarding-the-guards-nobody/

⁴² Stuart Murray (2006) *CCPA. Value for Money? Cautionary lessons about P3s from British Columbia*. p 32 policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/BC_Office_Pubs/bc_2006/P3_value_for_money.pdf

⁴³ (March 2017) TransLink Custom Transit Service Delivery Review: Public Sector Comparator Executive Report for Public Board Meeting. P2 handydartriders.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/TL-HandyDART-Public-Sector-Comparator-March-2017.pdf

construction”⁴⁴ In contrast, TransLink has a detailed Low Carbon Fleet Transition Plan that fails to even mention HandyDART.⁴⁵

Multiple manufacturers are already taking orders for electric vehicles suitable for HandyDART use. Many of the present HandyDART vehicles are based on the Ford Transit chassis, and Ford is already taking orders for the electric Transit chassis. As a major purchaser of paratransit vehicles and small buses TransLink is well positioned to lead in the testing of new types of electric vehicles and charging systems rather than passively waiting as other transit agencies to do so.

However, it is not practical to electrify TransLink’s HandyDART fleet without permanent, publicly owned, operations and maintenance centres. All of TransLink’s HandyDART centres are leased temporary facilities. These, sometimes substandard, temporary facilities are also a factor in high staff turnover – substandard facilities translate into substandard working conditions and erode staff morale. If HandyDART lags far behind the rest of the transit system in electrification, this will also erode morale and make it harder to attract and retain qualified operators.

Capital expenses (particularly for the electrification of transit) are eligible for federal and provincial funding, so this could be a major financial benefit for TransLink

It is time for TransLink to do what Victoria has already done and get funding from the provincial and federal governments for permanent operations centres with equipment for charging electric HandyDART vehicles. This would shift a significant proportion of the cost of HandyDART from TransLink’s operating budget (which is largely funded by property taxes and fares) to a capital expense. Capital expenses (particularly for the electrification of transit) are eligible for federal and provincial funding, so this could be a major financial benefit for TransLink.

5) Multiple Benefits of Quality HandyDART

There are many benefits to providing good quality transit service that is accessible to all, and poor quality paratransit is never a good choice. Accessible transit, including HandyDART, evolved as our society acknowledged the benefits of allowing people with physical and/or cognitive disabilities to live and participate in society rather than being physically segregated in institutions or isolated at home.

A report by the Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA) asserts that even a small reduction in the barriers to employment and education for people with disabilities would

⁴⁴ www.bctransit.com/viewroyal/handydart

⁴⁵ www.translink.ca/news/2020/february/translink%20low%20carbon%20fleet%20strategy; www.translink.ca/-/media/translink/media-releases/2021/january/translink_low_carbon_fleet_transition_plan_update_2021_01_18.pdf

have annual economic benefits in the hundreds of millions of dollars. The study also suggests that reductions in health care costs with improvements to accessible transit would be substantial.⁴⁶ There are economic benefits of freeing family care-givers to seek employment and costs borne by the public health system to forcing people with disabilities into institutions.

This CUTA report also identifies substantial safety benefits to accessible transit improvements. People 70 and older get into more crashes per kilometre than any other group except young males.⁴⁷ Without good options, people will be tempted to keep driving even when their ability to do so safely is impaired.

Accessible transportation services are a key component in helping seniors to stay active, involved and engaged in their communities

With an aging population, it will be essential to have high quality programs, and transportation to these programs, so that older people with disabilities can fully participate in their communities. The Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations of BC (COSCO) asserts that "Accessible transportation services are a key component in helping seniors to stay active, involved and engaged in their communities."⁴⁸ Custom transit services such as HandyDART are essential for meeting the growing demand not met by regular transit service.

Quantifying the economic and social benefits of improving HandyDART service, along with improvements to the rest of the transit system, are beyond the scope of this study. But, given the costs and negative social consequences of inadequate service, improving HandyDART service is a very good investment.

Failing to increase the amount of high-quality door-to-door custom transit service would impose substantial costs on the public health system and family care givers, as well as infringing on the rights of the increasing population of people living with disabilities. And given the shortage of qualified workers, it is impractical to provide the volume and quality of service needed without insourcing the (presently outsourced) HandyDART service in Metro Vancouver as discussed in section 2 above.

⁴⁶ CUTA (2013) *Value Case for Accessible Transit in Canada*. cutaactu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/cutareport_valuecaseforaccessibletransitincanada.pdf

⁴⁷ Statistics Canada (2011) *Profile of seniors' transportation habits*. statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2012001/article/11619-eng.htm

⁴⁸ (April 2013) *COSCO News*. P 10

6) Access for Everyone – sidewalks, bus lanes, rolling & more

It is tempting to think that the answer to providing accessible transportation is simply to force some of the people who now use HandyDART onto the regular transit system, which is now equipped with low-floor buses and other features to reduce barriers for people with disabilities. This approach is exactly the opposite of what Transport 2050 promises regarding equity, as it would likely result in many of the most vulnerable HandyDART passengers becoming isolated and unable to access transit.⁴⁹

Transport 2050 includes a “bold vision to build out an extensive network of transit that is both fast (competitive with cars) and reliable, travelling in dedicated lanes, free from congestion” (P 29). If this is done in a way that maximizes the benefits for HandyDART, including equipping HandyDART vehicles to activate transit signal priority, it could significantly improve HandyDART cost effectiveness, speed, and reliability.

Improving the conventional transit system, the sidewalk network, and numerous other features of our communities is essential to creating the “Access for Everyone” that Transport 2050 claims to aim for. Many, but not all, of these measures are mentioned in Transport 2050. And there is considerable potential to moderate the increase in HandyDART service that will be required, with adequate investment and re-allocation of road space. Some of these changes can also increase the efficiency of HandyDART service.

Some of the measures that have the potential to increase accessibility and moderate the need for HandyDART service increases include:

- Increasing regular transit service frequencies, and using larger buses, to reduce overcrowding. Overcrowding makes accessing transit very difficult, and even dangerous, for many people with disabilities.
- Improving transit priority measures, including transit lanes (and busways on bus rapid transit routes) that can be used by HandyDART vehicles and equipping HandyDART vehicles to activate transit signal priority.
- Installing accessible public washrooms at rapid transit stations and major transit transfer points.
- Creating more spaces on buses for wheelchairs, mobility scooters and baby carriages. Most buses have only two spaces, and these are often full on some routes.



**MOBILITY SCOOTER ON
PROTECTED BIKE & ROLL LANE**

⁴⁹ E.g. www.straight.com/news/jean-swanson-handydart-users-oppose-proposed-application-procedures-sure-to-reduce-ridership

- Extend the scope of the “walking, cycling, and transit skills training, resources, and support programs” promised in Transport 2050 to include wheelchairs and mobility scooters.⁵⁰
- Creating many more high-quality bike and roll routes, with changes in regulations and signage to clarify that people riding power wheelchairs and mobility scooters are permitted and encouraged to use these facilities.⁵¹
- Building and improving sidewalks and crosswalks region wide. Transit is not accessible without good quality sidewalks all the way to and from the transit stop. One dangerous street crossing can make a trip dangerous and terrifying for a frail senior with mobility disabilities.
- Improving bus stops, with more transit shelters with spaces to sit and park wheelchairs out of the rain.
- Making bus stops accessible to wheelchairs. Significant progress has been made in making bus stops accessible, but many bus stops are still not accessible.
- Clarifying Transport 2050’s ambition regarding making electric bicycles and micromobility devices affordable for people living on low incomes to explicitly prioritize mobility scooters and wheelchairs.⁵²
- Locating the services used by people with disabilities, including medical facilities, on major transit routes. And improving transit service and reliability to existing facilities.
- Locating affordable housing, including for seniors and people with disabilities, in walkable areas with good quality transit.

Many of these improvements would require cooperation between multiple levels of government and funding agencies, and Transport 2050 is a significant step forward in that it proposes coordinated action led by TransLink.

Bus stops are only accessible if the neighbourhood has good sidewalks and crosswalks

These changes also involve considerable amounts of money – for example providing increased transit capacity and building sidewalks will likely cost billions in capital costs alone. In the case of transit overcrowding at peak periods, on some routes improved HandyDART service might be more cost effective than increasing regular service enough to allow reasonable and reliable access for vulnerable riders.

Other changes, such as concentrating health care facilities and employment in walkable areas with good quality accessible transit, will realistically happen only over decades and only with much stronger commitment from governments, including municipalities and the

⁵⁰ Section 4.2.6. p 183.

⁵¹ For current background on the use of wheelchairs and mobility scooters on bike and roll routes see www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/city-council-bike-lane-pilot-1.6218673

⁵² Transport 2050 messaging regarding wheelchairs and mobility scooters is inconsistent. See sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.4

province. So far, the implementation of regional plans has been inconsistent – making it more difficult for people with disabilities to get where they need to go.

7) Reallocating investment to meet Transport 2050 goals

People with disabilities tend to have much lower incomes than people who do not. This is largely related to the barriers to employment they face, resulting in both lower income during working years and lower retirement income. According to the Disability Without Poverty Network, about one in five people who reported an activity limitation live in poverty. Individuals relying on the Persons with Disability benefit live well below the poverty line – the Statistics Canada Low Income Cut Off.⁵³

People with disabilities living in poverty need affordable transportation. Even regular transit fares for using HandyDART are a barrier. The half-price taxi saver coupons available from TransLink are far too expensive for many to use regularly, even for short trips; the social expectation to tip taxi drivers poses an additional barrier.

People with disabilities face significant barriers in getting to potential employment locations, given that many cannot drive even if able to purchase and operate a reliable car or accessible van.

The transportation planning and advocacy gap

One of the acknowledged failures of regional planning in Metro Vancouver has been the failure to coordinate transportation and land use planning to concentrate employment and residential development in transit and pedestrian friendly areas. For example, the provincial government took on \$4.2 billion in debt for the expansion of Highway 1 and the Port Mann Bridge. The project was funded despite being opposed by the Regional District Board on the basis that it conflicted with regional transit-oriented land use objectives and would stimulate automobile dependant residential and commercial land use.

While employment is an important issue, so is the ability to participate fully in society. People with disabilities have a right to social activity and to access recreation facilities

Neither TransLink nor the Metro Vancouver Regional District have shown real leadership on transportation planning in the region in recent years, instead allowing the provincial government to proceed with billions of dollars of highway expansion projects (without even opposing federal funding going to these projects instead of transit improvements).

⁵³ Disability Without Poverty Network (2012) *Overdue: The Case for Increasing the Persons with Disabilities Benefit in BC*. P5.

As a result of this failure of regional planning, much of the recent employment growth has been located in automobile-dominated office parks or other locations with poor transit service and incomplete sidewalk networks. Even young people without disabilities find accessing these new employment locations by transit and walking a severe challenge. Given that many older buildings are not wheelchair accessible, this means that many of the newer accessible worksites are inaccessible without HandyDART – even for the proportion of people with disabilities who can use regular transit.

While employment is an important issue, so is the ability to participate fully in society. Lower income people, including people of all ages with disabilities, have a right to social activity and to access recreation facilities and parks. Restricting HandyDART service, or imposing higher fares, would further isolate those in deep poverty. Social isolation is associated with a wide range of negative physical and mental health impacts, so inadequate HandyDART service translates to increased health care costs and shorter lifespans for some of the most vulnerable.

In an ideal world Metro Vancouver would rapidly be transitioning to an age-friendly region with greatly improved access for people with disabilities. But the fact is that people with disabilities are living and looking for work where many recently developed areas are inaccessible without an automobile or custom transit. Improved HandyDART service is essential for overcoming the barriers exacerbated by recent regional planning and transportation infrastructure decisions.

As discussed above, TransLink is legislatively obligated to consider provincial policy objectives. The provincial government has set a target of reducing light duty vehicle kilometres traveled 25% by 2030, and is making action to meet this target central to the forthcoming BC Clean Transportation Action Plan.⁵⁴ And it makes no sense to spend billions widening highways if your objective is to have much less traffic in the future.

The obvious implication is that funding should be shifted away from highway expansion, which makes traffic worse and increases greenhouse gas pollution, to public transit infrastructure including permanent facilities for an expanded and electric HandyDART fleet.

A similar policy in Metro Vancouver could see billions of dollars shifted to transit

In 2021 the Capital Regional District (CRD) unanimously approved a groundbreaking new policy on transportation infrastructure prioritization in the region. Greater Victoria's regional district is now prepared to advocate for transportation investments that contribute to meeting regional sustainable transportation, affordability, and greenhouse gas reduction

⁵⁴ www.pibc.bc.ca/sites/default/files/internal_pages_pdfs/planning-west/PIBC-PW-Winter2022-CleanBC-Roadmap-PG22-24-Web.pdf; www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/electricity-alternative-energy/transportation-energies/clean-transportation-policies-programs/clean-transportation-action-plan

targets. As a result, the region could see hundreds of millions of provincial and federal dollars invested in electric rapid bus lines, cycling routes, and sidewalks instead of highway expansion projects.⁵⁵

A similar policy in Metro Vancouver could see billions of dollars shifted to transit capital projects, including new permanent HandyDART facilities, over the next decade. This could go a long way towards meeting the affordability and equity objectives TransLink set out in Transport 2050. TransLink is the obvious choice to lead these advocacy efforts.

8) Conclusion

This report:

- Points out that Transport 2050 aims to create a “fairer and more just and inclusive transportation system that truly delivers on the promise of Access for Everyone” and admits that TransLink has “catching up to do.”
- Notes that Transport 2050 mostly ignore the challenge of population aging.
- Shows that rates of disability increase greatly with age, that Metro Vancouver’s population is aging rapidly, and asserts that in the coming decade providing the services and urban environment older seniors need will be a defining social and political challenge.
- Documents that the number of HandyDART trips per person 65 and over declined significantly between 2011 and 2019.
- Shows that 2022 TransLink provided only half the HandyDART service per person 65 and over than in 2008.
- Points out that the percentage of taxi trips also reached 17% in 2022, compared to TransLink’s target of reducing taxi use to 7% by 2021.
- Documents that substituting taxis for dedicated custom transit vehicles results in sub-standard safety and service.
- Notes that 2017 TransLink admitted that it provides only “about half of the accessible transit trips per capita that are provided in other similar Canadian cities” and that much more service is needed.
- Quotes the Legislature’s Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services recommendation to increase “accessible transportation options such as HandyDART.”
- Asserts that disabilities caused by COVID-19 will increase the need for HandyDART service, and reduce the availability of workers able to be HandyDART operators.
- Points out that Indigenous people have much higher rates of disability than the general population, and asserts that if Access for Everyone is to include Indigenous

⁵⁵ www.capitaldaily.ca/news/opinion-crd-must-push-province-to-fund-rapid-bus-instead-of-expanding-highways

Peoples, TransLink needs to greatly improve accessibility for persons with disabilities.

- Asserts that public HandyDART provision is essential for increasing and improving service because:
 - The rationale for contracting out transit services was based on contractors' ability to get away with lower wages and benefits than the public sector.
 - With an aging population and the effects of the COVID pandemic, transit agencies across North America are having great difficulty attracting and retaining qualified workers.
 - Over the last few years, TransLink's HandyDART operations have been in the hands of four different corporations. Every time a new contractor takes over, years of efficiency gains are lost and employee morale suffers along with efficiency and quality of service.
 - Stability is crucial for attracting and retaining qualified workers.
 - For-profit operators have a history of performance issues that affect riders and consume large amounts of transit agency staff time – including problems related to low wages and resulting staff turnover.
 - Multiple disability rights organizations have supported in-house HandyDART service as a way to improve staff retention, on the basis that experienced operators provide better and more sensitive service.
- Points out that the BC government's recent decision that about 5,000 health care workers should be "once again directly employed by the government and health authorities" was based on evidence that "employees who feel secure and safe in their jobs provide higher-quality care for people, and in turn employers can attract and retain staff at a higher and more consistent level."
- Notes that TransLink committed to do a multiple accounts evaluation Public Sector Comparator (PSC) in 2016, but then reneged on this commitment.
- Asserts that TransLink must conduct a proper and unbiased PSC to compare the costs and benefits of continued outsourcing to insourcing of HandyDART.
- Proposes that HandyDART riders should be involved in selecting the criteria to be considered. And the union representing HandyDART workers should be involved in selecting the company to do the work, and have input into the design.
- Asserts that transitioning TransLink's conventional bus fleet to quiet clean electric power while leaving the HandyDART fleet burning fossil fuels would be incompatible with the Transport 2050 commitment to equity.
- Documents that it is not practical to electrify TransLink's HandyDART fleet without permanent operations and maintenance centres, and asserts that substandard, temporary facilities are a factor in high staff turnover.
- Asserts that TransLink should do what BC Transit Victoria has already done, and get funding from the provincial and federal governments for permanent operations centres.

Access for Everyone?

- Notes that capital expenses are eligible for federal and provincial funding, so permanent HandyDART centres could be a major financial benefit for TransLink.
- Asserts that failing to improve HandyDART service would impose substantial costs on the public health system and family care givers, as well as infringing on the rights of the increasing population of people living with disabilities.
- Proposes improving the conventional transit system, the sidewalk network, and numerous other features of our communities, as well as improving HandyDART service, to create the “Access for Everyone” that Transport 2050 claims to aim for.
- Notes that the provincial government has set a target of reducing light duty vehicle kilometres traveled 25% by 2030, and it makes no sense to spend billions widening highways if your objective is to have much less traffic in the future.
- Proposes that TransLink should advocate for shifting provincial and federal funding away from highway expansion, which makes traffic worse and increases greenhouse gas pollution, to public transit infrastructure including permanent facilities for an expanded and electric HandyDART fleet.

In conclusion, TransLink has some catching up to do, and a balanced examination of insourcing HandyDART should be one of the first steps towards Access for Everyone.

Appendix - History of the HandyDART crisis

When elected mayors and councillors sat on the TransLink Board from 1999 to 2007, they increased HandyDART service hours by about 5% per year to keep up with demand. But after then Premier Gordon Campbell and Transport Minister Kevin Falcon imposed an appointed board in 2008 everything changed.

Once the appointed board was in place, HandyDART service hours were frozen and HandyDART trip denials soared. The situation for conventional transit was similar. In 2008, the Provincial Liberals unveiled a grandiose pre-election transit plan.⁵⁶ After the election they reneged on many of their transit promises and cancelled planned conventional transit bus service increases.

Most transit agencies have long acknowledged that an aging population will require more custom transit service. For example, BC Transit's 2011 long range plan for the Victoria area states: "The aging population will increase the demand for handyDART and other custom transit services in the future. This will require an increase in resources."⁵⁷ The same report notes that there is likely a hidden demand for HandyDART service by people who have given up on requesting service due to a lack of capacity.

The City of Vancouver's Persons with Disabilities Advisory Committee (PWDAC) responded to the service freeze and proposed that HandyDART funding and service be increased to meet the needs of the increasing population of people with disabilities. They also opposed invasive processes to screen HandyDART applicants as a way of reducing costs:

The Liberal government attempted to cover up the crisis they created

"Access Transit (TransLink) has been contemplating a new process to deal with increasing demand for HandyDART without increasing funding to meet the need. The process they are contemplating is an invasive, time-consuming, and upsetting process, which would discourage many people, especially persons with language issues, developmental disabilities, persons who are older, frail or confused, from applying for HandyDART. In essence, it solves the problem of not enough HandyDART rides by eliminating the most vulnerable of users."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ E.g. Kenneth Chan (2015) *The \$14 billion transit plan the B.C. Liberals conveniently forgot* dailyhive.com/vancouver/the-14-billion-transit-plan-the-b-c-liberals-conveniently-forgot

⁵⁷ BC Transit (2011) *Transit Future Plan: Victoria Region*. P30. www.bctransit.com/victoria/transit-future/victoria-transit-future-plan

⁵⁸ (2011) *Issues and Concerns about the Translink Report: "Moving Forward: Improving Metro Vancouver's Transportation Network."* p15

The impact on people who need the service the most should be considered with regard to the type and quality of service offered, not just the formal screening process. If people with severe disabilities find that the service does not meet their needs, they will be screened out and not use the service. The cost of this silent screening process may not show up on TransLink's financial statements, but the individuals, families and the public health care system will pay the price.

The 2013 report *Metro Vancouver's Aging Population and the Need for Improved HandyDART Service* documented that trip denials soared by over 600% between 2008 and 2012.⁵⁹ Shortly after the report was published, and the soaring trip denials were widely reported in the media, the contractor and TransLink re-defined trip denials – apparently to disguise the crisis.⁶⁰ One headline resulting from TransLink and the contractor's re-definition of denial and misleading communications was "HandyDART trip denials plummet."⁶¹ Instead of increasing HandyDART service, the provincial Liberal government seemingly attempted to cover up the crisis they created.

HandyDART Riders' Alliance creates pressure for increased service

In 2013 the HandyDART Riders Alliance was formed. This group of HandyDART riders and allies greatly increased the media coverage of the freeze in HandyDART service, and the resulting crisis.

After the 2013 election, the provincial Liberal government imposed a referendum requirement on new funding for TransLink, but made the TransLink Mayors' Council responsible for developing the plan to be voted on. The provincial Liberal government also imposed a very rushed timeline, ensuring that through public consultation would be impossible. The HandyDART Riders' Alliance and allies had to scramble to mount a campaign to get the Mayors Council to include funding for increased HandyDART service in their plan. The mayors' plan was released in June 2014 and included a 30% increase in HandyDART bus service hours over 10 years. The HandyDART Riders' Alliance campaigned for the yes side in the referendum on the basis of this commitment. The referendum did not pass, but the Mayors' hastily drafted plan became the de-facto transit plan for the region.

**TransLink
committed to
considering
taking
HandyDART in-
house**

The HandyDART Riders' Alliance succeeded in keeping the HandyDART crisis in the public eye throughout 2014 and 2015. And after the HandyDART Riders' Alliance organized a large

⁵⁹ ecoplanning.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/ATU-HandyDART-Report-Final-Nov-15-2013.pdf

⁶⁰ E.g. CBC (Nov 19, 2013) HandyDART trip denials up 670% since 2008, says group. cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/handydart-trip-denials-up-670-since-2008-says-group-1.2433056

⁶¹ Michael Mui, 24 Hours Vancouver (December 16, 2014)

presence at the December 2015 TransLink board meeting, the TransLink board chair Barry Forbes was interviewed by the Vancouver Sun and said:

All of us were pretty moved by the comments from the folks . . . We are concerned. We had an offer to work with these folks more and we want to do that. We will consider (taking HandyDART) in-house.

The Vancouver Sun also interviewed HandyDART riders:

At the meeting, Pam Winthrop said she drives her 20-year-old son from Ladner to Richmond every day so he can get a HandyDart to his Vancouver school. He never arrives on time. Bet Tuason, who is on kidney dialysis, said he has passed out three times — and has had to be resuscitated — while waiting for HandyDart to show up, while Sandra Bryan has missed her medical appointments and claims she has been abused by the HandyDart call centre after she complained.

Beth McKellar, who suffered a spinal cord injury 16 years ago, urged TransLink to do the right thing, noting that many people are told to take taxis instead of HandyDart, and wind up stranded because there are none available.⁶²

Public sector comparator promised & canceled

At this same TransLink board meeting I recommended that HandyDART riders be involved in selecting an outside group to conduct a participatory Multiple Accounts Evaluation Public Sector Comparator (PSC). I also suggested that public confidence in the results would be enhanced if the group doing the work was conducted by a smaller firm and led by professionals with a code of conduct requiring clear and accurate communications with the public, such as Registered Professional Planners.

In June 2016, TransLink CEO Kevin Desmond committed to involving HandyDART riders in designing a ‘public sector comparator’ to evaluate

the costs and benefits of bringing HandyDART in-house as part of a “Custom Transit Service Delivery Review . . . in response to a number of questions that had been raised at TransLink Board meetings, particularly around responsiveness to customer concerns, and the standards and quality of HandyDART and taxi services, and the



HANDYDART RIDERS’ ALLIANCE PUT QUALITY OF SERVICE ON PUBLIC AGENDA

⁶² Kelly Sinoski, Vancouver Sun (Dec 9, 2015) “TransLink to consider taking HandyDart in house” vancouver.sun.com/news/local-news/translink-to-consider-taking-handydart-in-house

HandyDART service model.” The “Stakeholder Advisory Committee [was supposed to help develop] evaluation criteria for service delivery models”⁶³

The HandyDART Riders’ Alliance media release in response stated that they were “very pleased with the significant commitments made by TransLink’s CEO Kevin Desmond at today’s board meeting.”

The Custom Transit Service Delivery Review initially included a Multiple Accounts Evaluation (MAE) of service delivery models as recommended by Ecopath Planning and requested by the HandyDART Riders’ Alliance. Multiple Accounts Evaluation allows multiple factors, such as safety and quality of service to be evaluated (TransLink regularly uses MAE evaluations in evaluating projects such as rapid transit lines).

However, at some stage the MAE was terminated, and only a financial analysis was done. TransLink hired PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) to do the financial review, one of the firms the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives identifies as having “potential conflict of interest, because accurate auditing would sometimes speak against corporate practices that yield general consulting revenues” such as contracting out and ‘private public partnerships.’⁶⁴ The names and qualifications of the people who did the financial analysis were not included in the report summary that was released to the public.

PwC was apparently not informed that the MAE had been cancelled and wrote this in their Public Sector Comparator (PSC) report: “The outputs from the PSC were incorporated into the final Multiple Account Evaluation (“MAE”) used by TransLink and the project Stakeholder Advisory Committee to prepare the final recommendation to the TransLink Board.”[sic]⁶⁵

It is not clear if these decisions were made by TransLink or by the provincial Liberal government

Promised Increase Diverted to Taxis

In September 2016, the new TransLink CEO announced that \$820,000 was going to increase HandyDART service as an emergency top up to meet demand, and that 90% of this would go to HandyDART buses. In fact, the data provided by TransLink shows that slightly *less* than the ‘budgeted’ number of HandyDART bus trips were delivered (also slightly less than

⁶³ *Custom Transit Service Delivery Review* translink.ca/en/Plans-and-Projects/Custom-Transit-Service-Review.aspx (accessed Sept. 21, 2017).

⁶⁴ Stuart Murray (2006) *CCPA. Value for Money? Cautionary lessons about P3s from British Columbia*. p 32 policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/BC_Office_Pubs/bc_2006/P3_value_for_money.pdf

⁶⁵ (March 2017) TransLink Custom Transit Service Delivery Review: Public Sector Comparator Executive Report for Public Board Meeting. P2 handydartriders.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/TL-HandyDART-Public-Sector-Comparator-March-2017.pdf

delivered in 2015), and instead taxi trips were increased by almost 30%.⁶⁶ This resulted in a record high of 10.8% taxi trips, up from less than 1% in 2008 and 3.7% in 2013.

In November 2016, the appointed TransLink Board and the Mayors' Council both voted unanimously to approve a 'Phase One Plan' which includes a 15% HandyDART increase over 3 years, starting in January 2017. This was a faster increase than what was originally in the mayors plan, and is a recognition that the need for HandyDART greatly exceeds the supply. TransLink staff and executives assured the HandyDART Riders Alliance that this increase would be in the form of HandyDART bus hours, not trips using taxis.

TransLink acknowledges HandyDART crisis

In March 2017 TransLink published documents revealing that TransLink provides less HandyDART service per capita than comparable transit agencies. One document states:

Demand for HandyDART Currently Outstrips Supply and is Anticipated to Grow: Up until late 2016, there had been no increase in HandyDART service since 2009 . . . we heard from many customers that it can be difficult to get a trip when needed and that many customers have stopped calling out of frustration. In addition, HandyDART is currently providing fewer trips per capita than our peer custom transit agencies, which indicates that there is likely latent demand for the service. Furthermore, recent BC Stats projections indicate the number of people in Metro Vancouver aged 70 or older will increase by 55% over the next ten years, which could translate into a greater need for HandyDART service, as the incidence of disabilities increases at this age.

The same report states that HandyDART service "expansion in the Mayors' Vision is expected to address the increased demand to some degree, but analysis shows that it is likely insufficient to catch up or keep pace with need."⁶⁷

The next month, the Mayors' Council chimed in with this statement:

"The 10-Year Vision will increase this service by 30% [but] will still leave Metro Vancouver with about half of the accessible transit trips per capita that are provided in other similar Canadian cities, including the Capital Region. This service shortfall is in large part a reflection of the lack of provincial support for this service which is a backbone of the provincially funded healthcare system. This represents a download of provincial costs onto regional taxpayers.

⁶⁶ Backgrounder - HandyDART Service Provision (Provided to HandyDART Riders' Alliance by TransLink on Jan 25, 2017)

⁶⁷ Custom Transit Service Delivery Review: Outcomes and Recommendations (March 22, 2017) handydartriders.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/HandyDART-Service-Review-March-2017.pdf

The Mayors' Council is calling on all B.C. political parties to . . . commit to improving service above and beyond the 30% increase proposed in the 10-Year Vision, so our residents have access services at a level comparable to other major Canadian cities.⁶⁸

NDP promises action – Human Rights complaint

At the Metro Vancouver Alliance (MVA) provincial electoral assembly in April 2017, NDP leader John Horgan committed to providing funding through a special grant to increase HandyDART service hours by 5% per year (above previously planned increases) for four years starting in 2018 for both TransLink and BC Transit HandyDART services.⁶⁹

In June of 2017 the HandyDART Riders' Alliance filed a class-action complaint with the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal alleging discrimination in the form of inadequate HandyDART service. The complaint alleges inferior transit service is provided to people with physical and mental disabilities compared to people who can use conventional public transit.

NDP leader John Horgan committed to increase HandyDART service hours 20% above previously planned increases

The complaint states that

“People are being denied access to transit because they are unable to use conventional transit without assistance. Dignity & self-esteem are damaged. Safety is put at risk. . . We are unable to access physiotherapy appointments, specialist’s appointments and other medical or recreational events. We are being disconnected from our communities and our families and friends. We are being isolated. This in turn causes depression, anxiety, fear and loneliness.”

Some of the incidents and patterns documented in the complaint include:

- An elderly and disabled client who was picked up at 8 am in Burnaby for an appointment in Surrey and did not get home until 6 pm.
- A client the HandyDART contractor took to dialysis treatment, but then abandoned to make his own way home on the bus at 9 pm in the snow.
- Riders forced to pay twice when the trip involves transferring from HandyDART bus to taxi.

The complaint quotes a number of individual riders, family members and health professionals. Quotes include:

⁶⁸ mayorscouncil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Backgrounder-HandyDART-1.pdf

⁶⁹ Metro Vancouver Alliance. (no date) *Over 800 delegates heard commitments from provincial party leaders. Our Provincial Election Accountability Assembly was a success!* metvanalliance.org

- “During the summer, the taxi service could not be depended upon to pick up HandyDART clients as they would take passengers from the Cruise ships as priority as that is where the money is. This is a taxi driver’s priority. Our client had to wait until 6pm or later for a taxi to finally show up.”
- “This client is 15 years old with the mental capacity of a 4 year old. They attend dialysis at BC Children’s Hospital three times weekly. They live in Burnaby. Their problem is that HandyDART has been denying them return trips home from BC Children’s as their trip does not fall between the hours scheduled by MVT for Service between Vancouver and outlying communities.”
- “No bus showed up and when I called to ask ‘where’s my ride’, dispatch indicated that a taxi is on its way – for some reason a taxi never showed up till about 10:15 am and I had missed my physio appointment”

The HandyDART Riders’ Alliance complaint was accepted by the Human Rights Tribunal, and a negotiated settlement was announced in 2019.⁷⁰

John Horgan became Premier of BC in July 2017 but did not fulfil his commitments to fund an fund an increase HandyDART service in Metro Vancouver.

Move to replace HandyDART service with taxis

Safe and good quality HandyDART service that meets the needs of the most vulnerable riders should not be negotiable, it should be the baseline. However, once the elected TransLink board was removed in 2008, TransLink and/or provincial government officials seem to have decided that safety and quality of service was not important.

In 2012 Martin Crilly, then TransLink Commissioner, released the *TransLink Efficiency Review* by Shirocca Consulting of North Vancouver.⁷¹ Shirocca Consulting concludes that:

“Increasing the use of non-dedicated vehicles, such as taxis, could be done relatively quickly and would offer cost savings. While it is acknowledged there maybe concerns over service quality, these can be managed.”⁷²

As discussed below, safety and service quality problems with taxis in custom transit service are extremely difficult to overcome so this unsupported assurance that these problems “can be managed” should be viewed with scepticism. Unsupported claims of cost savings should be viewed with similar scepticism.

⁷⁰ Media Release: TransLink and HandyDART Riders’ Alliance Announce Settlement Agreement (March 22, 2019) handydartriders.ca/?p=484

⁷¹ Martin Crilly’s term as TransLink Commissioner ended April 30, 2013

⁷² p 92

Following the Shirocca report, TransLink announced cuts of 10,000 hours in HandyDART service, about 2% of the service, with the stated intention of re-allocating the money to taxis. In a letter to the Vancouver Sun, TransLink’s Chief Operating Officer claimed to “expect an overall addition of 7,000 customer trips” with this funding re-allocation.⁷³ In response to a freedom of information request, TransLink explained that the claimed ‘expectation’ of 7,000 additional trips is based on comparing “low-productivity HandyDART runs” – with the fewest trips per hour – to “average taxi trip cost.”⁷⁴ Comparing the highest cost HandyDART trips to the average taxi trip cost as appears to have been done in this case seems to be poor methodology at best. Accurately estimating the taxi cost for these trips would be fairly complex since factors such as traffic congestion affect taxi fares; it should be expected that some of the low-productivity HandyDART runs operate in heavy traffic.

The assertion that taxis provide much less expensive service is not borne out by the available evidence. Instead, taxis seem to be providing a less demanding type of service to people with less severe disabilities at costs similar to dedicated services such as HandyDART. Anecdotal reports suggest that taxis contracted by HandyDART often provide only curb to curb service rather than the reliable door to door service required by many of the HandyDART users.

Even if taxis were substantially less expensive, unsafe and poor quality service is never a bargain.

Are Taxis Cheaper & Good Enough?

There is a history of simplistic and misleading claims regarding the cost of HandyDART service compared to taxis in Metro Vancouver. For example, in 1995 a group calling itself Fair Access to Custom Transit (F.A.C.T.) proposed replacing HandyDART service completely with taxis as a cost saving measure. In response, BC Transit staff pointed out significant errors in F.A.C.T.’s analysis and noted that Maple Ridge Cabs had recently lost a HandyDART contract and that Yellow Cabs of Vancouver had recently submitted a proposal with the “highest cost (about 18 percent higher than the successful proposer) and lowest evaluation score of all four proposals”⁷⁵

BC Transit staff pointed out that the taxi proposal had the highest cost and lowest evaluation score

of all four proposals”⁷⁵

The BC Coalition of People with Disabilities (BCCPD) rejected the F.A.C.T. taxi proposal and any privatization of HandyDART, stating that it would “leave the most vulnerable consumers isolated and disempowered [and] make it very difficult to monitor the system to ensure that standards of safety are being

⁷³ Doug Kelsey (June 6, 2013) “HandyDart pilot project an attempt to better meet demand” *Vancouver Sun*.

⁷⁴ Liina Marshall (Sept. 9, 2013) *FOI Request 2013/172*. TransLink – Access Transit. TransLink withheld all actual cost information on the basis that it could “harm the financial or economic interests of a public body.”

⁷⁵ Glen Leicester (May 2, 1995) *F.A.C.T. Report on Taxi Service*. BC Transit. P5

met and abuses are not occurring.”⁷⁶ ⁷⁷ The BCCPD raised an important point about the most vulnerable HandyDART riders: lowering standards through increased contracting to taxis may create a system that is not suitable for the people who need it the most. The Amalgamated Transit Union noted in its analysis of the F.A.C.T. proposal that “Poor service from the taxi industry is not the fault of the taxi drivers, but how those drivers are rewarded for their service. They are rewarded for speed over safety.”⁷⁸

Experience in the US also shows that substituting taxis for dedicated vehicles with specially trained drivers results in sub-standard service to passengers with disabilities. For example, a 2008 US Transportation Research Board report notes that using dedicated vehicles rather than taxis results in better trained drivers “providing a better quality of service to paratransit passengers” (p 22). The same report suggests that metered taxis are often available for custom transit only when other taxi business is slow.⁷⁹

The HandyDART Riders’ Alliance claimed that taxis are often completely unavailable at peak demand times, and when anything is going on that increases the demand for taxis (such as a major sporting event or the arrival of a cruise ship). The union representing HandyDART drivers confirmed this information.

TransLink’s 2017 *Custom Transit Service Delivery Review: Outcomes and Recommendations* report discusses some of these persistent problems:

Persistent and significant concerns have been raised about the customer service provided by taxis. Training of taxi drivers that provide custom transit trips is currently inconsistent and not on par with the training for HandyDART drivers. As such, we have heard reports from customers that safety protocols and general good customer service practices are not always followed. Furthermore, customers are not informed that their trip will be provided by a taxi and the advance notification call is often not provided or is inaccurate. In addition, taxis often neglect to display appropriate HandyDART signage and it can be difficult for customers to discern, particularly in busy locations, if the arriving taxi is for their trip.

A US Transportation Research Board (TRB) report points out that the skills and personality traits that make for a successful taxi driver are very different from those that make for a good custom transit driver providing safe door-to-door service for people with severe disabilities. “Taxicab drivers tend to be independent contractors. Finding people who have

⁷⁶ The BCCPD has since changed its name to Disability Alliance BC

⁷⁷ BCCPD (June 1995) *Response to the FACT Brief*. P 3.

⁷⁸ Craig Wright (1995) *Cheaper equals better??? A comparison of accessible, door to door transportation services for persons with disabilities in BC*. Canadian Council of the Amalgamated Transit Union. P13

⁷⁹ David Chia (2008) *Policies and Practices for Effectively and Efficiently Meeting ADA Paratransit Demand*. Transportation Research Board. P25

the entrepreneurial skills to be independent contractors and who meet all the requirements of a paratransit driver is an even more difficult task.”⁸⁰

A coordinator for a day program for older adults in Metro Vancouver described in a June 2013 letter how substituting taxis for regular HandyDART service puts clients at risk and creates extra work for hospital staff.

“On three separate occasions a specific client was dropped off at the emergency entrance as opposed to the planned drop off area which is the Day Program for Older Adults entrance . . . It was fortunate that staff in emergency approached our client and took him down to the Day Program. This client has dementia . . . and several other complex medical conditions. This client would not have been able to navigate his way through the hospital to get to the Day Program. . . We are very concerned about the use of taxis with our clients who mostly have been diagnosed with some form of dementia or Alzheimer’s disease.”

A more detailed timeline and description of issues with taxis in paratransit service is included in the 2017 Ecopath Planning report *Metro Vancouver’s Aging Population and the need for Quality HandyDART Service*.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Roy Lave & Rosemary Mathias (2000) *State of the Art of Paratransit*. Transportation Research Board. Pp 3-4.

⁸¹ ecoplanning.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Quality-HandyDART-Final-Oct-16-2017.pdf