



Engaging the Future

MAKING HANDYDART

A TRANSLINK SUBSIDIARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Our Position

The Coalition of handyDART Users (CHU) has prepared a report, *Engaging the Future: Making handyDART a TransLink Subsidiary*, to coincide with TransLink's Accessible Transit Strategic Plan review being undertaken in 2005-2006. We see this review as an ideal opportunity to make progress on the long-standing problems in the GVRD handyDART systems.

Our position is that the establishment of a single TransLink subsidiary to operate custom transit in the GVRD is the most visionary move TransLink could make. A subsidiary would consolidate what has been created to date and allow us to innovate and build for the future. With one integrated service many of the chronic problems, which the current custom transit structures have simply not been able to resolve, would be alleviated or even eliminated. The key improvements would include:

- A vastly improved, coordinated, quality service for riders.
- A single subsidiary to consolidate service throughout the current 8 zones.
- Uniformity of policies, standards of service, hours of operation and all other operational issues.
- A stable environment for employees that fosters training and development, fair working conditions, long-term service and service excellence.
- The ability for TransLink to long-term plan for all aspects of operations, including technologies; integration with other modes of transport; administrative, managerial and operational efficiencies; and, cost recovery from the Ministry of Health for medical trips.

Current TransLink Review

At its April 2005 Board Meeting, the TransLink board approved the continuation of existing handyDART contracts until December 31, 2006 and pledged to create a "broad consultation process" during the transit review.

TransLink should be rightfully proud of its commitment to 100% accessibility of its conventional bus fleet. The GVRD is a frontrunner in North America in its commitment to accessibility. However, there will always be a need for custom transit for a significant and growing segment of our population for reasons to do with both safety and service quality. A shift in a portion of ridership to conventional transit would not be justification for reducing the commitment to handyDART.

We have come a long way from "bunny buses" to small charity-run services to the multi-million dollar system of not-for-profit and private contractors in the GVRD. However, it will be no surprise to TransLink that handyDART users, as well as employee unions, have been saying for over a decade that the custom transit system is inherently flawed and under-performs as a result.

The good news is, we believe the solution is win-win-win: a single, TransLink subsidiary to run custom transit would be the hub of a great service for riders, a stable system for employees and a cost-effective integrated company for TransLink.

If it's Broke: Fix it

The service problems and inefficiencies caused by the multi-contractor, multi-zone system – and the short-term operator contracts – are well known to riders and community service agencies. Not only are they familiar, but they have remained virtually unchanged for more than a decade. We see these issues as inevitable outcomes of the current structure, rather than the fault of any particular player.

Briefly, here are the major inefficiencies that affect the quality and safety of service provided to riders.

- Service does not meet demand
- HandyDART is run by companies with tendered, short-term contracts
- Multiple zones and multiple contractors are poorly coordinated
- Lack of incentives for technological innovation
- Insecurity of employee contracts, seniority and benefits
- Lack of vision and planning because of fragmented system

We're in Their Hands

The two things that handyDART users care about the most are expanding the availability and flexibility of rides, and a safe and professional service with well-trained drivers and staff.

Custom transit drivers have a job that is very distinct from that of conventional bus drivers. 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—drivers, office staff and supervisors—is crucial to a safe, quality service for us.

CHU also urges TransLink to extend the current five-day training handyDART drivers receive. Custom transit drivers need a range of specialized skills to serve and ensure the safety of passengers with varied needs.

HandyDART is Here to Stay

HandyDART, of course, continues to have the unique character of being a specialized door-to-door service. It is an indispensable piece in the network of supports for people with disabilities and seniors that facilitates our contributions through work, school, volunteering and simply being in our communities.

CHU opposes any GVRD transit strategy that is based on a significant shift of people from the handyDART service to conventional buses. People need custom transit for a host of reasons from physical to cognitive impairments, community accessibility, safety and freedom of choice. With the upcoming demographic bulge of seniors we will be seeing in the Lower Mainland in the next 20 years, the need for a more efficient system will only grow, not diminish.

One Big Family

CHU believes that the key opportunity for TransLink's Accessible Transit Strategic Plan is the establishment of a single subsidiary for custom transit across the GVRD. The handyDART subsidiary would have the same financial and operational relationship to TransLink as other subsidiaries, such as Coast Mountain Bus Company, SeaBus and West Coast Express. One-third of the handyDART Board should be users nominated by community organizations.

One permanent subsidiary responsible for custom transit would create the ultimate win-win-win situation for all parties.

Riders

- Quality service through one central body with current, real-time dispatch technology.
- Increased availability of service for "non-priority" rides, e.g. volunteering or trips to visit family and friends.

TransLink

- One company permanently operating custom transit, eliminating the need for repeated tendering of contracts for several zones.
- Cost efficiency in all aspects of operation through consolidation of capital costs, administrative costs, supervisory level positions, vehicle lot rentals, employees, operational efficiencies and technologies.
- Ability to plan for seamless integration with other TransLink services: conventional buses, SkyTrain, West Coast Express and Sea Bus.

Employees

- Security of one permanent employer with employment policies, and wage and benefits agreements.
- Enhanced training and regular standardized skill upgrading.

Conclusion

CHU sees the Accessible Transit Strategic Plan review as TransLink's opportunity to set a new course that will make the GVRD a world class model for an integrated custom transit system, including a model for the "world" that will be watching during the 2010 Olympics and Paralympics.

TransLink has committed partners in the disability and seniors communities, and within the employee sector, who have a world of expertise to contribute to the development of a new subsidiary.

The Coalition of HandyDART Users is ready and available to be part of any advisory body during the current review. We welcome the opportunity to be part of developing a new vision and structure with TransLink.