



# Engaging the Future

**MAKING HANDYDART  
A TRANSLINK SUBSIDIARY**

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prepared by  
Ann Vrlak

for  
the Coalition of handyDART Users

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## Acknowledgements

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## Our Position

The Coalition of handyDART Users (CHU) has prepared this report 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 tangible progress on the long-standing problems in the GVRD custom transit systems – problems which CHU believes are the inevitable outcome of a particular point of view. Namely, we believe TransLink may view custom transit service for citizens who need it as a marginal and temporary need.

This may seem to be an unfair assessment, but we believe it may explain some of the most debilitating aspects of custom transit in the GVRD: multiple contractors vs. integration into the network of conventional modes of transit or the short-term Annual Operating Agreement system whereby service providers can change every few years, jeopardizing employee skill levels, service quality and rider peace of mind.

CHU believes it is this underlying point of view that has held back a comprehensive, long-term commitment to custom transit in the GVRD, one that sees this service as something for “us,” rather than for “them.” The “us” being *all* of us: our families, friends or colleagues who may need this service tomorrow because of disability, injury or becoming less mobile through aging.

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

*Namely, we believe TransLink may view custom transit service for citizens who need it as a marginal and temporary need.*

*With this report, we are calling upon TransLink to adopt a new point of view – one that thinks “outside the box” to envision a system marked by excellence, stability and cost-effectiveness.*

*“For younger clients like myself, night school or social events are impossible without using costly taxis with taxi savers. This lack of access to the inexpensive handyDART is frustrating and unfair.” HANDYDART USER*

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.
- Increased service capacity to meet growing demand.
- 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.

With this report, we are calling upon TransLink to adopt a new point of view – one that thinks “outside the box” to envision a system marked by excellence, stability and cost-effectiveness.

## Current TransLink Review

In our brief prepared in November 2004<sup>1</sup>, CHU urged TransLink to suspend the Request for Proposal process for Vancouver handyDART and to maintain the other GVRD handyDART contracts during the review. At its April 2005 Board Meeting, the TransLink board approved the continuation of existing handyDART contracts until December 31, 2006. It also approved a recommendation from TransLink's Vice-President of Planning, Glen Leicester, for a "broad consultation process" during the review.<sup>2</sup>

It is the last recommendation from CHU's November 2004 brief, "[to] design a GVRD-wide handyDART plan that coordinates rides and removes jurisdictional boundaries", that is the focus of this report. Indeed, according to Mr. Leicester, "one of the key deliverables of the [Accessible Transit Strategic] plan will be the identification and evaluation of alternatives for service delivery models."<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Leicester rightly points out that TransLink's review must examine many factors in order to develop a broad-spectrum solution. He poses many relevant and insightful questions about the roles of our aging population, demographic shifts, other modes of transport and increasing medical trips on handyDART. He notes that "... none of the numerous questions can be answered without a comprehensive understanding of all the issues, opportunities and challenges. It is time to prepare the first plan that deals with all the range of issues in its entirety, rather than continuing a piecemeal approach that risks a suboptimal solution."<sup>4</sup>

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*TransLink should be rightfully proud of its commitment to 100% accessible conventional transit.*

*“Some people who have jobs can’t book [handyDART] for the times they need. More vans would be good. The booking system is not streamlined. Sometimes you get there late because of scheduling. Or sometimes they send two vans in the same direction, to the same place.” HANDYDART USER*

We applaud and fully support Mr. Leicester’s goal to seek a holistic analysis and solution to the complexities of this issue. However, we were very concerned to see his apparent inclination toward a solution based upon shifting handyDART riders to the conventional transit system, “with the role of handyDART becoming more for those who absolutely are unable to use the regular system.”<sup>5</sup>

CHU challenges this approach and strongly urges TransLink to avoid it in its review. Indeed, we make the case throughout this report for the need to strengthen, not weaken, the commitment to handyDART.

## **TransLink does many things right**

TransLink should be rightfully proud of its commitment to 100% accessible conventional transit. The GVRD is a frontrunner in North America in its commitment to accessibility. And, CHU sees many advantages in increasing people with disabilities’ and seniors’ use of conventional transit wherever possible through creative marketing and promotion, and ongoing education and training for riders.

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 because:

- All demographic projections for the GVRD show a rise in ridership for handyDART in years to come.

- An integrated, choice-based system is the goal for service quality, not an either/or demarcation of service. A door-to-door service is a unique need and one that will be increasing over time.
- People who are sometimes able to use conventional transit would still need handyDART for rides for certain locations, times or circumstances.

On the custom transit side, 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. TransLink has made considerable investment in handyDART for people who are unable to use the conventional system: people with physical, sensory or cognitive disabilities; seniors; and, increasingly, people requiring ongoing medical treatments, such as kidney dialysis.

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. We will look at this recommendation more in the section, *One Big Family*.

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## If it's Broke: Fix it

*“Because of where I live I have to go with the dialysis patients at 6:15 a.m., but I don't need to be at work until 8:30 a.m.”* HANDYDART USER

*In a 2001 memo, Larry Ward, TransLink former Senior Vice-President, said it very well: “No other group in the community is required to explain why they need to make a trip to a transit service provider.”*

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 prioritizes trips for medical, work or post-secondary education needs. We do not argue with these priorities, only that there is too little service left over for the host of other reasons people want to travel: to do volunteer work, take a night class, visit family, see a movie, go to a meeting– the list is varied and personal. These priorities, and the limitations they place upon us, make some of us feel we are seen as very narrow human beings indeed.

In a 2001 memo, Larry Ward, TransLink former Senior Vice-President, said it very well: “No other group in the community is required to explain why they need to make a trip to a transit service provider.”<sup>6</sup>

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms prohibits discrimination based on disability and CHU believes that discrimination exists in the GVRD because of inadequate

transportation for people with disabilities and seniors. Statistics from a few years ago put the percentage of unmet trip requests at only 1% to 2%.<sup>7</sup> However, this number does not reflect reality because many handyDART users do not try to book rides when they know they will be turned down. HandyDART users need and are entitled to a service that meets their varied transportation needs.

## Short-term contracts

Every three years, each handyDART contract in the GVRD is put to tender. From the riders' point of view, this practise puts our interests last. Contractors compete by lowering bids by any and all means which plays out as a "race to the bottom" in service quality. When contracts change hands, this translates into a loss of employee seniority, experience and skill. Also, when bidders have varying collective agreements with employees and with TransLink, the result is a patchwork system with different contract expiry dates. This leads to a loss of staff because of uncertainty of wages, working environment and working conditions.

In addition, employees are not guaranteed a job when contracts shift to a new operator. In fact, TransLink contributed to the problem several years ago by eliminating BC Transit's established policy of guarantees of employment in the Request for Proposal tendering process.

Labour relations experts, such as Graham Leslie and Vince Ready, have compiled reports detailing the many inequities the Annual Operating Agreement (AOA) system creates for employees.<sup>8,9</sup>

*"I just use handyDART in one zone. I can't hassle around with [crossing zones]; it's too complicated. It's hard enough to get one zone arranged."*

HANDYDART USER

*"We need dignity. There should be buses for personal use, not just medical appointments and work. They should have an on-call line for people who work. Especially since the Ministry [of Employment and Income Assistance] wants people with disabilities to get work; this needs to be supported, like for job hunting. Life is more than just doctors' appointments."*

HANDYDART USER

*Every three years, each handyDART contract in the GVRD is put to tender. From the riders' point of view, this practise puts our interests last.*

Riders want well-trained, experienced drivers who are familiar with a broad range of disabilities and health conditions. A system that discourages employee longevity and skill-building affects the quality of service we receive.

There is also no incentive for innovation in the short-term contract system. Business will not make long-term investments of time and money to improve the service for a contract they may lose in three years.

## **Multiple zones and multiple contractors**

Currently, handyDART is one of only 3 transit branches TransLink operates by contractor, rather than through a permanent subsidiary. The GVRD area is served by 7 separate handyDART contractors over 8 zones.

Transportation for people with disabilities and seniors among the various zones is hopelessly complicated and extremely frustrating. In the GVRD, we see 7 contractors with varying hours of operation, booking restrictions and policies. The service to riders falls woefully short of a reasonable level of access across boundary zones. Many people with disabilities and seniors have particular needs that make timely, efficient service a matter of safety, not only convenience.

The complexities are compounded by the various agreements under which handyDART employees work. Employees in Richmond, Burnaby/New Westminster, Port Moody, Coquitlam and Port Coquitlam are in a province-wide agreement with the Health Employers Association of BC funded by the Ministry of Health. In Delta, Surrey/White Rock and Langley, employees are in

another province-wide agreement with the Community Social Services Employers Association funded by the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Vancouver and North and West Vancouver services are operated by independent contractors with individual and unrelated collective agreements. This creates even more obstacles for a standardized, efficient and equitable system for riders and for employees.

## Stifling technological innovation

Prior to the recent introduction of the Trapeze dispatch software for handyDART providers, custom transit had been using the same software for 20 years – an example of how the current structure stifles technological innovation. Now, we are hearing from riders, agencies and drivers that problems are emerging with the routes and timelines generated by Trapeze. If experience is our guide, these problems will be addressed slowly and ineffectively because of the multi-contractor system: problems are more difficult to identify and rectify, and each zone may have its own ways of adjusting the system. There is no motivation to step back, look at the whole system and find a broad-based solution.

Global Positioning System (GPS) software is available for real-time dispatch and will no doubt continue being refined in years to come. A GPS system would be sophisticated enough to respond to a GVRD-wide network and react to minute-to-minute adjustments that are part of the daily routine of setting handyDART routes and using vans efficiently. A single subsidiary would be best positioned to invest in and upgrade technology that will vastly expand the capabilities of the system.

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## **Facilities for drivers and vehicles**

Facilities for handyDART employees and for vehicles are also temporary. HandyDART vehicle lots, for example, change periodically and have limited facilities for vehicle maintenance and cleaning. However, custom transit vehicles often require thorough cleaning due to passenger disabilities and medical conditions. Unlike drivers of conventional transit, many handyDART drivers are expected to maintain the cleanliness of vehicles. Vans need properly equipped facilities for cleaning, routine safety and maintenance checks of securement hardware.

## **Lack of vision**

All of these shortcomings are both the cause and effect of a lack of vision. The ability to plan for the future, for innovation, for excellence, are all limited. Though considerable financial and human resources are devoted to handyDART, they are spent juggling the status quo of multiple-zones and contracts. We believe a single subsidiary would allow these resources to be focused on a better vision, system-wide problem solving, coordination and excellence in service.

## We're in Their Hands

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.

*“My safety and comfort during a ride with handyDART depend on my driver’s skills, confidence and good judgement. Training is a key component in a driver’s abilities and therefore in my security.”*

*HANDYDART USER*

*Riders want well-trained, experienced drivers who are familiar with a broad range of disabilities and health conditions.*

*For those of us using handyDART, the employees we most appreciate are those with experience and sensitivity.*

## Employee Training

CHU 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.

In addition to the customer service provided by drivers, it is important to remember the professionalism and experience of the receptionists, taxi saver sales people, booking staff and dispatchers are crucial to handyDART service quality. These men and woman have first contact with riders, family members and medical/home care workers.

Experienced supervisors are also important. They understand the diverse client base and how drivers can and should meet these needs.

Standardization is currently an issue regarding ongoing training because some contractors routinely send drivers for refresher courses—and some don't. Therefore, expanded and standardized training for all staff will improve continuity of service, safety and staff satisfaction—and will also provide insurance for TransLink against potential liability.

## HandyDART is Here to Stay

We referred earlier to the statement by Mr. Leicester which suggests “the answer,” or at least “an answer,” may lie in more handyDART riders using conventional transit.

This suggestion may seem reasonable on its face, but we ask:

- Who are the people “absolutely” unable to use conventional transit and how will this be measured?
- Riders who use both handyDART and conventional transit do so depending on the availability of accessible conventional routes, access to the destination from the bus stop and whether or not they are traveling with a companion. We should not be limited to one mode of transport to the exclusion of others.

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.

Conventional bus operators are trained to handle passengers with mobility impairments, but their schedules allow little time for individual attention. There are many handyDART users whose level of disability requires more accommodation than time allows on conventional buses.

*CHU's position is this: we oppose any GVRD transit strategy that is based on a significant shift of people from the handyDART service to conventional buses.*

CHU's position is this: we oppose 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.

We believe there will always be a need for a stable, well-funded arm of TransLink that operates custom transit. 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. Instead of limiting choice, we should be looking at expanding it and benefiting all transit users.

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We also need a quality door-to-door service as an alternative to taxi services. Any person with a disability who uses taxis knows that some taxi drivers do not welcome passengers with disabilities during busy periods. Some drivers see the extra loading time as time they could be using for other fares.

HandyDART will therefore always have a place in a multi-modal, choice-based transportation network.

# 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. As per the TransLink Board's responsibilities, the Board would:

- Establish the subsidiary, along with its Board and Chair.
- Set policies and service standards.
- Approve transportation plans.
- Monitor the performance of the subsidiary.

To meet TransLink's commitment to consumer input, one-third of the handyDART Board should be users nominated by community organizations. We recommend 3-year terms to develop continuity and momentum in the Board's advisory and management activities.

The custom transit systems we have had since the early 80s have all laboured under the burden of the temporary. Given the current and expanding percentage of the GVRD population who need custom transit, it is difficult to justify this approach from a strategic or economic standpoint.

In TransLink's Resource Guide<sup>10</sup>, the Community Shuttles are defined as systems that exist where service does not warrant a commitment of conventional buses, at least until a sufficient level of ridership develops. Even so,

*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.*

the Shuttles are run by a subsidiary, rather than contractors. HandyDART, on the other hand, has been in existence for over 20 years, with the current GVRD population at about 2 million people, 26% (or 520,000) of which are seniors or people with a disability – and it is still run by a variety of contractors.

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

*“In the evenings the [conventional] buses in the suburbs run only once an hour and I have issues around energy, so having to wait affects me.” HANDYDART USER*

## Riders

- Quality service through one central body with current, real-time dispatch technology.
- Reliable, consistent service across the GVRD.
- Standardized policies, procedures and hours of operation throughout the GVRD region.
- Improved safety and quality of service, through employee stability, training and experience.
- 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 for multiple zones, contract evaluations, collective agreements and negotiations.
- Ability to bring the company under the umbrella of TransLink’s operational structures and policies for easier administration.

- Impetus to seek out and develop state-of-the-art dispatch systems that can oversee the entire GVRD region. TransLink has the expertise through its Intelligent Transportation Systems subsidiary – which “pursues technology options to improve the efficiency of roads and transit” – to identify, operationalize and customize a real-time Global Positioning System (GPS) for dispatch.
- 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.
- Ability to long-term plan for changes in service needs, emerging technologies, demographic fluctuations and integration with evolving conventional modes of transit.
- Incentive to set up well-equipped, cost-effective facilities for custom transit operations.
- Create greater opportunities to develop long-term plans, such as arranging cost-recovery through the Ministry of Health for medical trips.

*The custom transit systems we have had since the early 80s have all laboured under the burden of the temporary.*

## Employees

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

*“The biggest problem is that I live in Surrey and have a number of activities in Vancouver. My kids are in Vancouver. There is only one run in at 7:30 a.m. and it comes back at 12:30 p.m. – this doesn’t help me at all. If I take the handyDART to the SkyTrain in Surrey and go into Vancouver, I can’t hook up with the Vancouver system to get back.”* HANDYDART USER

- Ability to gain experience through stable employment.
- Greater ability to have input into the system over time through an ongoing relationship with their employer.

The ability to integrate seamlessly with other modes of transit is one of the great strengths of a single subsidiary. Other jurisdictions are having success in developing custom transit systems that are well-coordinated with other modes of transport.<sup>11,12</sup>

Another strength is the ability to expand service for riders beyond medical and work/education-related trips. CHU questions if our Charter right to be free from discrimination is fulfilled by a system that can get us to the dentist or to school, but not to visit family.

Yet another strength lies in acknowledging that custom transit is not only a service for people with disabilities, but just one part of a needed transportation infrastructure for all of us. As one writer from the European community put it: “benefits from improvements in transport accessibility are accrued not just to the disabled and aging communities, but to all clients of the transport system. Providing access for disabled people to public transport is not an isolated endeavour; it is a crucial part of a quality approach to public transport services which ensures that all passengers are provided with a high standard of public transport.”<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

**H**andyDART was originally established to fit the needs, demographics, technology and awareness of the day. We are in a very different world today. It is time for custom transit to catch up and reflect today's realities – and develop the ability to meet those of tomorrow.

A single, TransLink subsidiary for custom transit will enable:

- A bigger and better service for people with disabilities and seniors.
- A host of ways for TransLink to cut costs, improve operations and long-term plan.
- Employees to have job stability, better working conditions, more training and incentives for extended employment.

CHU sees this 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.

With a subsidiary to control custom transit, TransLink would also be in the position to offer unprecedented support to events that reflect our region's community values, such as the Terry Fox Run, the MS Walk, Rick Hansen's Walk and Roll, Remembrance Day and Canada Day events.

TransLink has committed partners in the disability and seniors communities, and within the employee sector,

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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. ■

## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Coalition of handyDART Users (CHU). *Equal Service: A Better Vision for handyDART*. November 2004.
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- <sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 2
- <sup>6</sup> Larry Ward. Memo to GVTA Board of Directors, *Development of a Strategic Plan for Accessible Transit*. January 4, 2001, p.14.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 6
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- <sup>10</sup> TransLink. *Resource Guide: On-Line Edition 2004*.
- <sup>11</sup> Wilson, Beth. Get SMART: Leveraging the Wisdom of Community, Community Transportation website, [www.cta.org](http://www.cta.org).
- <sup>12</sup> European Conference of Ministers of Transport, Council of Ministers, *Conclusions and Recommendations on Improving Access to Public Transport*, April 30, 2003.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 3