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Final Report: CBE – Transportation Strategy Engagement

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Contents

Purpose	2
Background to Engagement	2
Scope of Engagement	3
Summary of Engagements	3
Sharing Back.....	6
Facilitators' Observations.....	7
Summary of Participant Evaluations	10
Conclusions.....	11
Certification	11

Purpose

Having concluded an extensive in-person and online engagement process from March-May 2016 regarding the transportation budget gap, the Calgary Board of Education (CBE) has collected a significant amount of community input on the transportation budget, as well as information regarding the engagement process. This document provides a consolidated record outlining the engagement process, and links to all of the input received.

Background to Engagement

The CBE made changes to transportation service levels for some elementary and junior high school students at the start of the 2015-16 school year, which resulted in some students travelling further than 1.6 and 1.8 km from home to their bus stop. Concerns were raised by some affected families that the new travel distances were not appropriate. As a result, the CBE took the necessary steps to ensure all students riding yellow school buses could access stops in alignment with the travel distances of 1.6 and 1.8 km for elementary and junior high students.

It was recognized at the time the decision was made that these changes represented a one-year solution. In an October 15, 2015 report to the Board of Trustees, it was stated:

- “The CBE will continue to be challenged to balance the cost of transportation with the level of fees and service expectations (i.e. ride times and travel distances to bus stops) within the current provincial government funding model. CBE administration is committed to working with all stakeholders in the development of a sustainable, long term transportation strategy.”

Delaney + Associates (D+A), a community and stakeholder engagement company, was commissioned by the CBE to design, facilitate and report on a series of in-person and online engagements in support of that commitment to work with the CBE community to develop such a strategy.

Scope of Engagement

The purpose of engaging stakeholders as part of the transportation strategy development process was to work directly with parents, students, staff and other stakeholders in order to ensure a safe, reliable and cost-efficient program. A technical review by School Bus Consultants found that the transportation budget gap could not be closed through operational efficiencies, leaving three possible areas where adjustments could help close the gap: transportation service levels, user fees and government funding.

The CBE worked directly with stakeholders to develop options that closed the transportation budget gap. All options needed to protect student safety. Within the engagement, aspects of transportation considered for changes included:

- a. Travel distances from student's home to the bus stop
- b. Bus ride time
- c. Eligibility for ridership (age, program affiliation and other factors)
- d. Bell times
- e. Number and location of bus stops
- f. Access to waivers
- g. User fees
- h. Two-year or three-year implementation plan for changes
- i. Low ridership routes

Summary of Engagements

a. CBE Staff Workshops

Two workshops with CBE staff were held on March 15, 2016 – one over the noon hour and one in the evening – with a total of 29 participants. The purpose of these sessions was to discuss and receive input on the engagement plan and the transportation factors, as outlined under Scope of Engagement, that were to be discussed during the community workshops.

b. Key Stakeholder Interviews

During the week of March 20, telephone interviews were conducted with representatives of two parent organizations: Calgary Association of Parents and School Councils (CAPSC) and Support our Students (SOS). The purpose of the interviews was to receive feedback on the format and design of the community workshops and to collect preliminary feedback on the degree of willingness to accept changes to the transportation factors being discussed at the workshops.

c. Student Interviews

During the week of March 20, telephone interviews were planned and conducted with CBE students. A Grade 9 regular program student who takes Calgary Transit to school, and a Grade 7 alternative program student who takes the yellow bus to school chose to participate. The purpose of the interviews was to receive feedback on the engagement plan. The interviewees were emailed a copy of the plan and asked to review some key sections in advance of the interviews.

d. Community Workshops

Fifteen workshops were held on April 6, 7 and 12, 2016 at schools throughout the CBE system. Five sessions were held concurrently on each of the three evenings, with one session in each of the five CBE Areas. Approximately 290 people participated across the 15 sessions. The majority of participants were parents of CBE students.

The 90-minute workshops were designed to focus on the transportation factors, outlined under Scope of Engagement, affecting CBE transportation service levels and costs, and to seek feedback on the willingness to accept changes to each factor. After short presentations and information-sharing, the majority of the workshop time was spent in small discussion groups organized around the nine transportation factors within the Scope of Engagement.

Participants were asked to discuss and record what aspects of each factor they wanted to “preserve” and what aspects were “flexible” or open to change. Each session also included an “Other” table for participants to discuss and record ideas not captured within the nine factors. The session design and 90-minute timeframe allowed for three rounds of discussion in each workshop, giving participants the opportunity to choose the three factors they most wanted to discuss.

Efforts were made, for all engagement activities, to recruit a representative sample of stakeholders. That is, including parents of students who use CBE transportation services, and those who do not, as well as alternative program users and regular program users.

e. Online Survey #1 - Factors

The first of two online surveys relating to the transportation strategy development process was open from April 6-17, 2016. It was available to the public through a link on the CBE website and via social media. More than 1,800 people started the survey, with approximately 1,600 completed responses. As with the in-person workshops, the survey was designed to seek feedback on the nine transportation factors and to gauge the level of willingness to accept changes to these factors.

f. Scenario-Building Workshop

With extensive input regarding the transportation factors outlined in the Scope of Engagement, the focus of the engagement process turned to developing possible scenarios where changes to various factors, or a combination of factors, would close the CBE's transportation budget gap. A workshop was held April 21 to begin that work, based on the engagement input collected to that point. Technical expertise was available at the session to provide information on what changes were possible and how those changes would likely impact the transportation budget/costs.

Nineteen (19) people participated in the three-hour workshop, including members of the Transportation Engagement Advisory Committee (TEAC), CBE staff and participants from the community workshops. Participants were provided with reports from the 15 community workshops and other input to review in advance of the session. During the session, participants worked in three groups to prepare different draft scenarios to close the transportation budget gap. The scenarios generated included different combinations of service levels and fee changes to balance the transportation budget.

g. Scenarios Generated from Analysis

Following the April 21 workshop, CBE transportation and finance staff worked to analyze and quantify financial implications for the draft scenarios generated by parents and other participants. In addition, based on technical resources and engagement input, staff generated derivative scenarios for consideration and discussion by the CBE community. A total of six scenarios were prepared and released to the public for discussion and further feedback.

h. Community Forums to Review Scenarios

Two community forums were held – one each on May 3 and 4 – to discuss and receive feedback on the six scenarios. The sessions were 2.5 hours each; one was held in northern Calgary and the other in the south. A total of 41 people participated in the forums. Participants were split into groups of 4-5 people, and the scenarios were discussed in a focus-group style. Participants were asked what they liked about the scenarios, what they didn't like, and how they would change the scenarios to make them more acceptable.

i. Online Survey #2 - Scenarios

The second online survey, designed to gather feedback on the scenarios, was launched on April 29 and remained open until May 8, 2016. The survey outlined the six scenarios, and asked respondents to rate each of them on a scale of 1-6 based on their degree of support for the scenario. The survey was available through a link on the CBE website, was emailed directly to parents who signed up for updates, and was promoted via social media. In the first 48 hours after announcement of the survey, over 1,000 people had completed it. Nearly 1,800 people in total completed the questions relating to the six scenarios.

Sharing Back

Visit our website to [learn what we heard](#) during the transportation engagement process.

Facilitators' Observations

NOTE: This section of the report is that which D+A provided to the CBE following the last in-person engagement session and prior to the close of online survey #2.

Purpose

Having concluded substantial in-person and online engagement, the CBE is now in possession of a large quantity of stakeholder input and faces the challenge of “making sense” of it all in order to make a difficult decision. The purpose of this document is to provide insights from the engagement facilitators to add a social dimension to the data.

Context

Delaney + Associates (D+A), a community and stakeholder engagement company, was commissioned by the CBE to design, facilitate and report on a series of in-person and online engagements in support of developing a long-term Transportation Strategy. The purpose of this report is to provide “observations” from the three independent, third-party D+A professional facilitators who facilitated in-person engagements. These observations are subjective and completely uninformed by technical expertise in the area of transportation planning and management.

Observations

Values

Engagement supports public decision making. Values are important in engagement because they support the interests that define the positions people and communities bring to discussions. The engagement team observed the following values present in the in-person discussions they attended (outlined alphabetically):

- a. Accountability – people need to take personal ownership for the choices they make
- b. Choice – within a public system, people value the ability to choose from the options that are presented to them
- c. Egalitarian – within a public system, all participants are treated equally
- d. Fairness – when making decisions, one group should not be disadvantaged over another
- e. Quality – the quality of education is the most important thing to consider when making decisions

Relations

No members of the engagement team live or have ever lived in Calgary. As such, we believe we are able to identify and distinguish unique and important traits about Calgarians and the communities they form. During the engagement discussions we attended, we observed that Calgarians are:

- a. Appreciative of the world-class educational system their children enjoy;
- b. Committed to collaborating with the CBE in order minimize the negative impacts on the quality of life for families and hardship for students in terms of travel to and from school;
- c. Largely congenial with each other when discussing opposing values-based subjects that impact their quality of life;
- d. Passionate about fairness, so the Transportation Strategy should not disadvantage one group (riders, non-riders, alternative programs) over another;
- e. Resolved that changes will take place that will have a negative impact on transportation services, either by decreased service levels and / or increased costs;
- f. Respectful of each other's opinion and the right to disagree;
- g. Hopeful these measures are temporary in nature and will be adjusted as the economic climate changes.

Common Ground

Stemming from the values and the relations Calgarians hold with each other is an unspoken social contract that aspires to sustain high quality public education. In an engagement context, we refer to this as the common ground between and among the parties – a place where there is very little disagreement. For the purposes of decision-making, this is the decision-maker's common ground for action; a part of the social license the decision-maker holds to act decisively.

The facilitation team has reflected collectively and discerns the following principles that were acceptable to the majority and, as such, could help to navigate the complexities of decision-making and communicating the decision to stakeholders:

- a. The quality of education for all should be safeguarded to greatest extent possible;
- b. Meeting the unique learning needs of each child is an important ideal to strive for;
- c. Safety is paramount;
- d. Negative impacts should be on parents before children;
- e. As stewards of public funds, the CBE needs to use business / financial logic in decision-making; that is, many people should not be disadvantaged to sustain the interests of a smaller group;
- f. Those who do not respect the needs of the many should be penalized for making that choice and, alternatively, those who embrace collective needs should be rewarded if possible (i.e. penalties for late transportation registration);

- g. Education is a partnership between home and school, and this extends to transportation to and from school;
- h. The education community extends beyond the CBE, and every effort should be made to collaborate with transportation partners such as Calgary Transit;
- i. There was recognition that, given the complexity of the pending decision, it will be very difficult to “spread the pain” evenly.

General Themes + Ideas

- a. There was little support for Scenario 5a.
- b. Parents wanted a fair balance of moderate fee increase and service changes; not a drastic fee increase or a drastic change of service but a fine balance between the two.
- c. Working with Calgary Transit needs to be investigated further.
- d. Many people were in support of Scenario 2.
- e. Large support of a sliding scale for waivers (pay what you can).
- f. Parents were either strongly for or strongly against removing mid-day service for kindergarten.
- g. Parents from alternative programs were heavily represented at the forums, so data needs to be adjusted / weighted for decisions to be evidence driven.
- h. There was a clear split between people who feel alternative program students should pay more and those who believe they should not.
- i. There was a growing sense that any differentiation in fees or service levels should be based on distance or cost of service rather than alternative vs. regular programs.
- j. Parents desired a mechanism in which certain community safety concerns could be heard by the transportation planning team.

In terms of expectations of parents on the CBE in making this decision, parents wanted to know, as early as possible, the transportation considerations of program choices, as these considerations would have a real bearing on parent choices.

Summary of Participant Evaluations

Participants of all in-person engagement events were asked to complete an evaluation survey with questions about the engagement event. Evaluation summaries from each individual session are available [online](#). Below is a consolidated record of all evaluations completed during the transportation engagement process from March through May, 2016.

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements:

P1) I was encouraged to share my thoughts and/or feedback during this engagement.

293 Agree **44** Somewhat Agree **4** Somewhat Disagree **1** Disagree **0** Not Applicable

P2) I was able to ask questions and learn about the opportunity for input/feedback prior to my participation in this engagement.

230 Agree **78** Somewhat Agree **13** Somewhat Disagree **11** Disagree **8** Not Applicable

P3) I had the information I needed to participate in a meaningful way.

193 Agree **118** Somewhat Agree **20** Somewhat Disagree **8** Disagree **1** Not Applicable

P4) I was able to provide input on the best way for me to share my thoughts and ideas.

209 Agree **95** Somewhat Agree **3** Somewhat Disagree **2** Disagree **1** Not Applicable

P5) I clearly understand all of the factors being considered in the decision making process and which of these factors I can and cannot influence.

157 Agree **129** Somewhat Agree **29** Somewhat Disagree **16** Disagree **0** Not Applicable

P6) My input was documented as part of the engagement process.

270 Agree **64** Somewhat Agree **6** Somewhat Disagree **0** Disagree **1** Not Applicable

Conclusions

After engaging with the CBE community during 23 in-person engagement events and two online surveys – involving more than 3,000 people over a three-month period – the CBE announced short-term transportation plans for the upcoming 2016-17 school year that align with what was heard during the engagement process. A long-term strategy has yet to be announced, but the CBE has significant community input with which to proceed.

We further conclude that, through this engagement, the community better understands and supports the trade-offs that need to be made when managing a large and complex system. We believe this enhanced understanding and shared values, based firmly on student success, have created common ground for action among all members of the CBE community. Furthermore, we believe this common ground empowers the CBE to go beyond the changes that have already been announced, to make future adjustments that will inevitably carry negative impacts, in terms of reduced services and/or increased user fees.

Certification

As a member in good standing with the International Association for Public Participation and with the International Association of Facilitators, and as a Certified Professional Facilitator, I declare that I helped to plan, design, facilitate and report on this engagement. I am a third-party, neutral professional with no interest or stake in the outcome of this engagement. The CBE issued me and Delaney + Associates a mandate to help engage stakeholders in a meaningful and forthright way and to report the results of that engagement accurately. I was present at many and oversaw all of the in-person engagement sessions and supervised the online portion.

The findings and conclusions outlined in this report are accurate to my knowledge:



Richard M. Delaney, CPF, MPA