

Blazing the trail with free transit

Summerland residents have always had little choice but to travel into Penticton for work, education, medical appointments, social services, or shopping. Rising fuel prices and other vehicle expenses, however, are making the trip more expensive.

There are also people who have difficulty accessing services because they don't own a car, particularly younger and older age demographics and those with low incomes.

One of Council's priorities is to build an adaptable and affordable community, part of which is to consider the cost of transportation and reliability of public transit.

To this end, we are piloting free bus fare for Summerland residents on the Route 30 bus to Penticton. The trial starts April 22 and runs for one year, from Earth Day 2023 to Earth Day 2024.

Any local resident can ride for free just by showing the bus driver a proof of address, like a driver's licence or BC Services card.

Free bus fare won't necessarily pull people out of poverty but it will keep money in their pockets and ensure essential services remain accessible. It reinforces the principle that mobility is a right and that transit is a public good, like schools and libraries – services that some people use more than others but which everyone pays into for the benefit of society.

BC Transit has a shared funding model that makes it possible to provide transit in smaller communities like Summerland, which would have difficulty funding a service entirely on its own.

Last year, operating costs for Route 30 amounted to \$234,400, of which the provincial government paid \$132,200 and the District of Summerland contributed \$102,200. Bus fares netted only \$11,300 in offsetting revenue.

While Summerland is blazing the free fare trail regionally, several other places in Canada and around the world already provide it seasonally or on certain routes. The result is usually increased ridership.

More people leaving their cars at home to take the bus helps reduce energy consumption and carbon emissions. But for public transit to be an attractive and everyday alternative for residents, it has to be convenient.

Free fares improve convenience by eliminating the need to carry exact change or figure out how to buy tickets.

People also want buses to be reliable, fast, and frequent.

The Route 30 bus rarely runs behind schedule and it gets you to Penticton almost as quickly as driving. And the number of trips throughout the day continues to increase.

Currently, there are nine round trips between Summerland and Penticton every weekday – five on Route 30 and four on the Route 70 Penticton-Kelowna bus, which stops in Summerland. The first bus leaves Summerland at 7:15am and the last one returns at 5:30pm, and there are plans for a Friday and Saturday night service running until 10pm.

Additionally, Route 30 makes five round trips on Saturdays and there could soon be a Sunday bus.

Demand is also growing for a local bus route to connect downtown Summerland with different parts of the community, particularly Trout Creek and Lowertown. The District will begin working with BC Transit to determine routing and scheduling for a local service, with its introduction remaining dependent on funding approval from both the Province and Council.

Doug Holmes is mayor of Summerland

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