



For Immediate Release
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Seniors Advocate calls for new program to help with seniors transportation and makes several recommendations to improve existing programs.

Vancouver- Seniors Advocate Isobel Mackenzie today released *Seniors Transportation: Affordable, Appropriate and Available*. The report, which reflects over a year of consultation and research, concludes that changes are required to address some of the existing transportation systems and a new program will be required to fill some of the gaps.

“At the age of 65 approximately 90% of BC seniors have a driver’s licence but this drops to approximately 44% by the age of 85.” It is challenging when we begin retirement with driving ourselves to activities and appointments but find, many years later, that we are still living independently and engaged with our community but we are not able to get ourselves out and about by car any longer.

Most of the public transportation currently offered... traditional transit, HandyDART, Taxi Saver Vouchers, all offer support to *some* seniors *some* of the time, but none can fill *all* transportation needs for *all* seniors. While family and friends can fill many of the gaps they are a shrinking pool and “not all seniors have family and friends who can get them out and about,” stated Mackenzie.

The report highlights that getting a person from point A to B does not totally capture the transportation needs of frail and vulnerable seniors. Many seniors may have the physical ability to take a bus or use HandyDART, but they have cognitive challenges that require someone to accompany them, or their physical frailty requires someone to assist them throughout their trip. None of the current programs provide for these needs and even with recommended improvements, the report notes they will continue to fall short.

To fill the gap, Mackenzie has recommended a new program called “Community Drives” that would be administered under the existing home support program.

The provincial home support program assesses the physical and cognitive function of seniors, determines what their needs are, determines how much they can contribute to the cost of needed services and hires, schedules and supervises thousands of staff who deploy every day to assist seniors in maintaining their independence. Along with helping seniors get bathed, dressed and ensuring they take their medications, the program could easily schedule someone to pick up the senior and take them to a medical appointment. Using the existing infrastructure of home support will allow the program to get up and running quickly and will reduce

duplication. The report notes that a roundtrip outing on Translink's HandyDART costs the province about \$80, while an hour of home support can cost less than \$38.

In addition to the new service, Mackenzie has called for improvements on a number of fronts. "We need to offer a little more support to older seniors who may be trying to navigate the public bus system for the first time in 60 years," noted Mackenzie, who recommended a provincial "Seniors Bus Buddies" program be developed that would pair seniors up with someone who could help them figure out how the bus system works and even ride with them for the first few times.

HandyDART is a lifeline, especially for those who are wheelchair-bound, yet it is only offered in 25 out of 31 transit systems and only about one-quarter of the systems offer night and weekend service. Mackenzie has recommended that HandyDART be expanded to more transit systems and there be an increase in the number of night time and weekend routes.

The report recognizes the significant contribution that family members and friends make in providing transportation, and Mackenzie has recommended that costs related to fuel and parking be allowed as a tax deduction for those who drive those frail seniors who are no longer able to drive themselves. "The best deal for the BC tax payer is for family and friends to drive their loved ones; with rising costs, we should consider some relief through tax deductions just as we allow for people who drive their cars for business."

The report also touches on the contentious issue of the cost charged by physicians for the Driver Medical Examination Report (DMER). Mackenzie has recommended that all class 5 licence renewals that require a DMER be treated the same. This would result in physician reimbursement of \$75 for those who are required to complete the DMER because they are age 80 or older. "This is really an irritant rather than an impediment, but it is an issue I hear about surprisingly often and seniors do appear to have a point about age-based discrimination in terms of DMER costs that are subsidized by RoadSafetyBC," stated Mackenzie.

The report also comments on improvements for pedestrians recognizing that walking is a form of transportation used by many seniors and also examines the shortcomings of the taxi industry.

A complete list of the 15 recommendations made are attached and the full report is available at: <http://www.seniorsadvocatebc.ca/>

"The biggest thing we need to recognize is that transportation for frail seniors is a complex problem, and solving it will require many different solutions. But if everyone works together with a view of what is going to help seniors the most, we can make improvements."

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Recommendations

1. The Province coordinate with ICBC to get information about transportation alternatives and other community supports into the hands of those seniors who are not renewing their driver's licence.
2. The Province reimburse physicians a standardized rate for the completion of the DMER regardless of whether it is a blue or yellow form for those seeking to renew a class 5 licence.
3. The Province examine the possibility of expanding the range of health care professionals that can conduct the DMER.
4. The Province work with local governments to explore ways of achieving more pedestrian-friendly communities through the use of grants, tax incentives, rebates and other tools that local government may have or be given. Pedestrian-friendly developments in terms of location to shops and services should be incentivized, and infrastructure that supports mobility-challenged pedestrians moving about in the commercial hubs where shops and services are located should be required.
5. Support people who volunteer to drive their family members, friends or neighbours to medical appointments. Just as tax deductions are allowed for those who use their personal vehicles for business, examine the possibility of a similar tax relief program for someone who acts as the primary driver for a senior who is no longer in possession of a current driver's licence and qualifies for HandyDART and/or the Federal Disability Tax Credit.
6. All British Columbians regardless of where they live should have access to Taxi Saver vouchers if they qualify.
7. All taxi companies must require their drivers to accept Taxi Saver vouchers.
8. The Province work with BC Transit and TransLink to establish a standardized, province-wide "Seniors Bus Buddies" program that will connect seniors with local volunteers or staff that will work with the senior to initiate them into the use of public transit. This may require riding the bus with the senior for the first few times and ensuring they have numbers available to call if there are problems. Linking with ICBC and with the local Health Units will help ensure those who will benefit the most are connected to the service.
9. The Province work with BC Transit and TransLink to increase the number of benches at bus stops.
10. Create an annual seniors bus pass where the fee charged will be based on income. The pass should be considered eligible payment on HandyDART if the passenger has a HandyCard or handyPASS.
11. Develop a province-wide mandated training program for transit drivers focused on supporting senior transit users.
12. Continued efforts need to be made for increasing the availability of HandyDART services. Priority should be given to the 6 transit systems with no HandyDART followed by those communities with no evening and weekend services.
13. The fees charged to clients who use HandyDART should be reviewed, and a more progressive approach that recognizes income and frequency of use be applied to ensure that cost is not a barrier for low-income seniors who need to use HandyDART. In particular, the consideration should be given to allow the BC Bus Pass to be considered eligible payment.
14. HandyDART users should be able to access HandyDART anywhere in the province, regardless of the local transit authority they are registered with.
15. The government work with the Health Authorities and the affected unions to establish a community drives program that will be administered through the home support program in all areas of British Columbia. The principles of access and equity that are enshrined in the home and community care program should be applied.