

TransLink (Vancouver, BC)

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The South Coast British Columbia Transportation Authority (SCBCTA, also known as TransLink) operates Metro Vancouver’s regional transit system. They act as the local administrator of two Provincial government programs; the U-Pass BC program, a universal pass program for students at publicly-funded post-secondary institutions, and the BC Bus Pass Program, a program for low-income seniors or persons with disabilities.

TransLink also managed a regional Employer Pass program; it was discontinued at the end of 2013 for policy and equity reasons. In 2016, TransLink began offering a Compass Pass for Organizations, which is a non-discounted fare program that provides administrative support to organizations wishing to promote transit use to their employees or members.

U-Pass BC Program

In 2003, TransLink piloted a U-Pass program with the two largest post-secondary institutions (PSI’s) in the region. The pilot was a universal/”all-in” program, with mandatory U-Pass fees charged in association with other student association fees, where only a limited number of exemptions were permitted. As a result, virtually all students had access to a transit pass that allowed travel on all of TransLink’s conventional services (i.e., buses, rapid rail and ferry) and provided a discount on TransLink’s commuter rail service while attending courses at their PSI.

The discounted mandatory program fees charged to students were determined for each PSI individually based on the estimated revenue TransLink earned from students using transit at each PSI. The program was founded on a “revenue-neutral” policy for TransLink, in order to allow for the creation of a significantly discounted fee. Initially, the program received some financial support in the form of sponsorship from an environmentally conscious credit union. The pilot was successful and the program was formally launched and expanded to an additional two PSIs.

As a result of a demand from students at other PSIs for a standard-priced U-Pass program, in 2011, the Province of BC, through the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, entered into an agreement with TransLink to offer a U-Pass BC Program to all publicly-funded PSIs in Metro Vancouver. Under this program, the Province provided funding to TransLink in order to allow the program to offer a discounted, standard fee for U-Pass BC to eligible students, with similar transit access as the previous U-Pass program.

The funding and standardized U-Pass BC fees are established through negotiations between the Province and TransLink, with the Province consulting student associations and PSIs with respect to the mandatory fees. The program is delivered through a funding agreement between the Province and TransLink, which also sets out the strict eligibility and exemption criteria for students, and standard program agreements negotiated between TransLink and a U-Pass BC Advisory Committee (consisting of

representatives from all participating PSIs and their respective student associations, each representing their own interests for the program). Participation in the program by a PSI or student association is at their own respective discretion; in order for student associations to enter into the agreement, they must first obtain approval from their members through a referendum. The program agreements have had three-year terms, but the lengths of the terms are ultimately dependent on the level of funding available to the Province.

In 2011, the standard, mandatory U-Pass BC monthly fee was set at \$30 and has since been increased to \$41, representing a 76% discount compared to an equivalent 3-zone Adult monthly fare pass (which does not provide a similar discount on TransLink's commuter rail services) and is lower than TransLink's \$53 Concession monthly passes that are available to seniors and children and youth between the ages of 5 to 18. In 2016, there were over 130,000 students at 10 PSIs eligible to use a U-Pass BC, with actual usage rates between about 60% and 89%, depending on the PSI attended.

The program was initially delivered on paper-based fare media, but was later transitioned to TransLink's smart card system – Compass. A standard interface has been developed by TransLink and PSIs must ensure they can meet the interface requirements in order to share student eligibility information with TransLink for the delivery of the U-Pass BC fares to students. To obtain their U-Pass BC, students must follow the following steps:

1. Acquire a regular Adult Compass Cards through regular sales channels
2. Log into TransLink's U-Pass BC website, which is linked to each PSIs access site
3. Link the Adult Compass Card to the U-Pass BC Student Account
4. Request the available monthly U-Pass BC to be loaded onto the linked Compass Card
5. Loading of the U-Pass BC fare onto the Compass Card could take upwards of 2 days

The right to privacy and protection of personal information was very important to students and PSIs. The interface and information shared by PSIs to TransLink is limited to student identification numbers, and the identities of students for the purposes of loading their U-Pass BC fares is protected through the use of masked identification numbers. When using a U-Pass BC fare loaded on a Compass Card, the students must also present their Student ID issued by their PSI as proof-of-eligibility for use of that fare. Upon inspection, a fare officer will look at the last 4-digits of the Student ID to match it to the same information on their inspection unit that is associated with the linked Compass Card. If the information does not match or the student cannot provide their Student ID, then they are subject to being issued a fare infraction ticket.

The current program agreements are set to expire Dec-2019. TransLink, the Province of BC, PSIs and student associations have been engaged in discussions on the future delivery of this program. TransLink is currently engaged in a Transit Fare Review, which may impact how this program is delivered in the future. Also, the Province is looking at the sustainability of this program going forward as its funding is currently dependent on Treasury Board approval every three years.

BC Bus Pass Program

Under legislation, the Province of BC, through the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, is required to offer a BC Bus Pass program to low income seniors or persons with disabilities. The BC Bus Pass program is delivered in Metro Vancouver by TransLink under a Province of BC service agreement.

Eligibility criteria are established by the Provincial government and are consistent for all transit agencies across the Province. In order to receive a BC Bus Pass, an individual must fill out an application form with the Province in order to assess their eligibility for the program. Once approved, the participant's information is sent to TransLink through a secure interface in order to produce a personalized Concession Compass Card, which includes the individual's name and year of birth. This information is required in order to verify the person's identity when using the discounted fare for travel on TransLink's transit services, at which time the customer must also present a government issued ID to prove their identity. If the information does not match or the individual cannot provide an accompanying government issued ID, then they are subject to being issued a fare infraction ticket.

For low-income seniors, the only payment for the BC Bus Pass is an annual administration fee of \$45 for a BC Bus Pass that is valid for the calendar year ending each December, irrespective of when the individual applied for the pass.

For low-income persons with disabilities, the Province provides the the option to receive a BC Bus Pass through their disability assistance payments; and allow participation in the program on a month-by-month basis.

Under the agreement between the Province and TransLink, the Province pays TransLink for the passes issued to customers based on the equivalent value of a monthly Concession fare, \$53.

Compass Passes for External Organizations

In 2016, TransLink introduced a service for organizations to purchase monthly fares on Compass Cards for their members and/or employees. By participating in the program, organizations or their members do not receive any discounted fare from TransLink, but receive administrative support from TransLink to manage the loading of monthly fares onto members'/employees' Compass Cards. The organizations themselves have the discretion to subsidize a portion or all of the cost of the monthly fares purchased from TransLink or simply pass them through to their members/employees.

In order to participate in the program, an organization would enter into an agreement with TransLink for the purchase and administration of Compass Passes for members/employees. TransLink then provides the organizations with a guide, electronic files and access to a secure file transfer service in order to share information about the members' Compass cards and type of monthly fare required (i.e., 1-zone, 2-zone, or commuter-rail monthly passes, etc.). Once the files are received by TransLink staff, they upload the information into the Compass system in order to load the monthly fare products onto the members'/employees' Compass Cards. Under the agreement, the organization agrees to pre-pay the

monthly fares being purchased for its members/employees and all fares are subject to cancellation if there is an issue with payment.

There are currently 10 organizations with over 500 members in total participating in this program.

Prior to 2014, TransLink managed an Employer Pass Program (EPP) across the Metro Vancouver region. When the program was originally developed, it was seen as a way of encouraging greater use of transit in centrally located parts of the region where system capacity remained available. The program was designed and managed internally by TransLink staff. The program was open to employers in the region with 25 or more employees. The program was “opt-in”, with participation decisions left up to individual employees. Customers participating in the EPP were eligible for a 15% discount off of the equivalent monthly pass price in exchange for a 1-year commitment to the program. In 2013, the EPP program included 300 employers and 27,000 employees.

In 2013, a decision was made to cancel the program on policy and equity grounds. TransLink felt that given the organization’s original impetus for the program, namely encouraging greater transit use and increasing service productivity, the program had been successful and had fulfilled its purpose. TransLink has very strong transit mode share in and around regional town centers and is experiencing significant crowding and customer pass-ups in major corridors. In the face of increasing criticism of overcrowded services and a lack of resources to invest in new capacity, the provision of an ongoing discount no longer met the program’s policy objectives. It was also believed that the structure of the program was inequitable, with the 25 employee threshold being arbitrary, excluding transit discounts to smaller employers. There were also equity concerns around the need to provide discounted transit access when many employers were offering matching discounts; there was a feeling that if more affordable travel was to be offered in the region, different groups might be better suited to receive that benefit.