Introduction/Background

Winnipeg Transit is currently reviewing whether or not to add people with intellectual disabilities to the list of allowed disabilities on Handi-Transit. At present they only allow people with physical disabilities. They are looking at where service would be needed and what the demand for it would be. This review is in progress. This Case-in-Point explores what other cities have done in this context and how this can be applied to Winnipeg. Edmonton is of particular interest because it allows people with intellectual disabilities access to its para-transit service. This city is a good case study because of their relatively recent expansion of eligibility criteria to include those with intellectual disabilities. This was implemented in 1989.

An intellectual disability is any disorder requiring special attention to or alternate methods for communicating concepts and instructions. Individuals with intellectual disabilities may have difficulty acquiring, storing, or retrieving information. This can include things most people take for granted, like reading and understanding directions, getting...
on the correct vehicle, getting off at the right stop, and understanding announcements.

Para-transit services are used by people in Winnipeg who are physically disabled. In other jurisdictions, there are more categories of eligible people. Some questions that need to be answered for Winnipeg are: Because of the fluid nature of transit programs, I will be focusing on what lessons have been learned and how this can be of use in other jurisdictions that are undergoing equivalent processes and changes to their para-transit programs.

For economic reasons, allowing people to use Para-transit represents a huge drain on resources. From a political standpoint, transit agencies must serve the largest amount of people possible to maintain their mission of providing transportation to those who need it. Handi-Transit is an expensive service. Subsidy levels are often 10 times more than those for conventional transit systems. Because of the cost issues, any expansion of Handi-Transit needs to be carefully considered and studied. Too much expansion will dilute service and increase costs, too little expansion will cause the system to fail many potential riders who require such services.

Edmonton’s Experience

Edmonton expanded its eligibility criteria to include people with intellectual disabilities in 1989. ETS, Edmonton Transit System, uses the same criteria for people with intellectual disabilities as it does with physical disabilities when determining eligibility for their para-transit service, DATS. DATS, or Disabled Adult Transit Service, allows anybody who cannot use regular transit safely or with dignity, access. Some of the criteria include: can the applicant get to a bus stop; board a bus; safely ride a bus; learn bus routes; and learn schedules. If the applicant is unable to do any of the above, they are granted access to DATS.

In their first year of eligibility, 214 people with intellectual disabilities signed up to use DATS. The number of people with intellectual disabilities registering for DATS grew at a rapid pace during the first 5 years. This can be accounted for by realizing that organisations, families and individuals learned about the service over time. Growth was anywhere from 10-20 percent in these first 5 years (1989-1994). For the next 5 years, 1994-1999 growth slowed to less that 10%. Between 1999 and 2005, growth has fluctuated wildly. Both positive and negative growth have been recorded,
indicating that the growth in registrants is perhaps leveling off.

In 1989 Edmonton’s population was about 600,000 people. In 2005, Edmonton’s population was estimated at about 712,000 people. This is a growth rate of about 18.7% over 16 years, or about 1.2% growth per year. The growth in DATS registrants has greatly outpaced this growth. In the past 17 years, the growth of registrants with intellectual disabilities has grown at a faster rate than that of physically disabled registrants. In 1999 DATS booted anyone who had not used DATS in the past 2 years, off of their registers. This caused a large drop in the number of registrants, most of whom were registrants with physical disabilities.

While the number of rides given has been slowly growing, the percentage of those trips taken by people with intellectual disabilities has increased. People with intellectual disabilities now take anywhere from 50-60% of all DATS trips made. They do this in spite of only constituting 40% of DATS registrants. This should be seen as a cautionary note to any transit agency looking into accommodating people with intellectual disabilities. They take a higher number of trips per year that people with physical disabilities.

In an effort to manage demand, ETS has implemented a few different strategies. Their first effort was the introduction of low floor buses, which started in 1993 and is ongoing. ETS aims to eventually have a full low floor fleet. While this will not directly impact people with intellectual disabilities, it will free up more places in the DATS vehicles to accommodate more trips. ETS started a Mobility Choices travel training program in 1996. This is to educate people on how to ride regular transit, including identifying the bus, getting on the bus, paying the fare, riding the bus and
getting off the bus. ETS started allowing attendants free rides on their regular service in 1996. Since many people with intellectual disabilities need attendants to get around, this is an easy way of encouraging use of the mainline service. ETS also required re-registration for all riders starting in 2004. DATS registrants dropped because of people not re-registering for the service. ETS has recently started denying rides to people with intellectual disabilities who are traveling with an attendant. They are asked to ride the regular system instead. ETS’s final demand management strategy is not fully meeting demand, which forces people to look for alternative modes of transportation.

ETS has not created any specific standards for transporting people with intellectual disabilities. They have only two cautionary notes that DATS drivers should follow. First, ‘Do not leave alone’ and second ‘take to destination only’. No other standards have been required, as people with intellectual disabilities can be treated the same as those with physical difficulties for the most part.

Applicability to Winnipeg

Winnipeg had a 2001 population of 619,544. A source at Special Olympics Manitoba estimates that about 1.3-2.5% of the population has an intellectual disability. The vast majority of these people are high functioning and able to ride regular transit with few to no problems. Many often just need a one day training session and some notes to bring with them to remember bus numbers and transfer stops. But a small minority need either lots of help to ride regular transit or are incapable of riding regular transit. This small minority is the potential population that would be able to take advantage of an expansion in Handi-Transit’s eligibility criteria.

The number of people in this small minority is difficult to estimate. The source at Special Olympics Manitoba believes the number to be 0.3-.8% of the total population. This would mean, that in the city of Winnipeg, there would be a potential ridership of between 1859 and 4956 people. Edmonton’s experience shows that about 0.62% of the population has registered for DATS as a person with an intellectual disability unable to ride regular transit. The 0.62% has, however, taken 16 years of growth. It did not happen all at once. Winnipeg’s Handi-Transit could expect much the same. This means there would be plenty of time after expanding the eligibility criteria to mitigate demand before it becomes a problem.

Because people with intellectual disabilities ride DATS at a higher rate than people with physical disabilities, Handi-Transit should anticipate that an expanded eligibility criteria will lead to a proportionally larger number of rides being requested. People with intellectual disabilities make
up 40% of registrants on DATS and they take about 50-60% of all trips given. This amounts to 90-110 trips per year per person with an intellectual disability on DATS. If we are to translate this to what Handi-Transit can expect, then there will be anywhere from 167,310 (=1859 * 90) to 545,160 (=4956 * 110) more trips being requested per year; 14,425 to 45,430 more trips per month; or 458 to 1494 more trips requested per day.

If Handi-Transit decides to expand its eligibility criteria to include people with intellectual disabilities, there are a number of things that could be done to mitigate the demand. Following Edmonton’s lead would be a good first start. Anticipating that people with intellectual disabilities will use Handi-Transit at a higher rate than people with physical difficulties should lead to demand management programs directed at this demographic. Travel training, bus buddies, technology and other programs to enable individuals to use regular transit service should be paramount. Many individuals with intellectual disabilities require minimal help to access regular transit, but without this help, they will be relegated to Handi-Transit.

Many of the technologies and techniques used to assist individuals with hearing and visual and other physical impairments are beneficial to individuals with intellectual disabilities. These types of helpful technology include: fare boxes that show how much fare has been paid; digital stop announcements and LED readouts; and travel computers which display bus number, bus arrival time, transfer points and other pertinent information.

A starting point for Winnipeg Transit should be to anticipate the demand from people with intellectual disabilities for Handi-Transit service. After the initial expansion of the criteria, Handi-Transit can expect low double digit growth in registrations from people with intellectual disabilities. Programs should be started alongside the criteria expansion to help and encourage people with intellectual and physical disabilities to use the regular service. While some of these programs might be expensive, they will end up saving Winnipeg Transit money in the long run.

**Conclusion/Recommendations for Winnipeg**

Stats Canada 2001 Census

Facts and figures in the Edmonton section come from data provided by Dennis Nowicki, a planner at ETS.

Percentage estimates of intellectually disabled individuals in Winnipeg come from Tim Gadsby, Director of Community Development at Special Olympics Manitoba.