

Report on U-Pass Implementation at the University of Regina

Commissioned by the Regina Public Interest Research Group

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September 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Regina's forecasted population growth will increase the need for an improved public transit system in the city. The University of Regina Students' Union (URSU) has put forward a proposal to partner with the City of Regina and offer students at the university the U-Pass.

All full-time undergraduate and graduate students would be charged a fee per semester or year, and in return receive unlimited access to the public transportation system. Currently, a student bus pass costs \$53 per month, adding up to \$212 for four months (City of Regina, 2014). The U-Pass will allow students to access the same service for a fee that ranges between \$70-\$90 for the same period. This scheme would bring students who use public transit savings of up to 67%, and is expected to increase ridership in this group by 30-50%.

Due to increased ridership, a number of changes would occur in the transit system. New routes would be added, and the frequency of service increased. These new routes would include express routes to the university. The increase in the number of students who use public transit would likely justify expanding the operation hours of such routes, and possibly including weekend buses. The routes that will likely be affected by the implementation of the U-Pass are 4, 30, 9, and 5.

The U-Pass is beneficial for a diverse group of stakeholders. Students, city transit, the University of Regina, and the community as a whole, all experience the direct and indirect effects of increased public transit ridership.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the next 21 years, Regina's population is expected to grow by up to 57% (City of Regina, 2010). According to the City of Regina (2010), the high growth estimate of the population is 302,621 residents by 2035. This considers population growth of 1.7% per annum (City of Regina, 2010). Between 2013 and 2014, Regina's population grew by more than 76% of the forecasted increase under the high growth estimate. In other words, the city experienced an influx of 5,500 individuals, leading to a population growth of 3% (Statistics Canada, 2014b). If similar trends continue, the population growth experienced by the city within the next two decades will surpass official growth estimates of 57%. These demographic changes will impose fiscal, structural, and transitional challenges for the public transit system in Regina. Furthermore, such population growth also signifies an increase in the university student body.

Currently, the majority of travel within the city is less than 15 minutes in duration (City of Regina, 2011). This is one of the lowest commute times in Canada. However, as the city expands, travel times are likely to escalate (City of Regina, 2011). This will increase the need for an improved public transit system in Regina. In the university context, demand for parking spots will increase. Supply, on the other hand, is not likely to accompany demand, as parking spots represent a less profitable use of land than classroom buildings and residences.

Given the current challenges related to public transit in the city of Regina, the Regina Public Interest Research Group (RPIRG) has commissioned this report into the benefits and implications of implementing the U-Pass at the University of Regina. The U-Pass is a compulsory bus pass that has been implemented in universities across North America. It generally requires that all students members of a group (full-time undergraduate and/or graduate)

purchase a bus pass at a discounted rate. As the University of Regina Students' Union (URSU) considers bringing another ballot on the implementation of such a program, it is important to examine the key areas related to it.

The Benefits of Increased Ridership

Public transit has both direct and indirect effects and affects on the city and its residents in more ways than commute times alone. Indirect effects are related to the externalities of public transit on the city's competitiveness and economic activity. Competitiveness in the city is encouraged through lower transportation costs and increased ridership. This carries over to the university: as transportation becomes more accessible and less car-reliant, the University of Regina becomes more appealing to new students. As can be seen in Table 1, according to a 2007 survey conducted by Statistics Canada, Saskatchewan ranked highest amongst provinces in citing speed of travel as a barrier to public transit use. It also ranked amongst the highest for citing that service is too infrequent. The U-Pass thus has the potential to address these issues and substantially increase ridership.

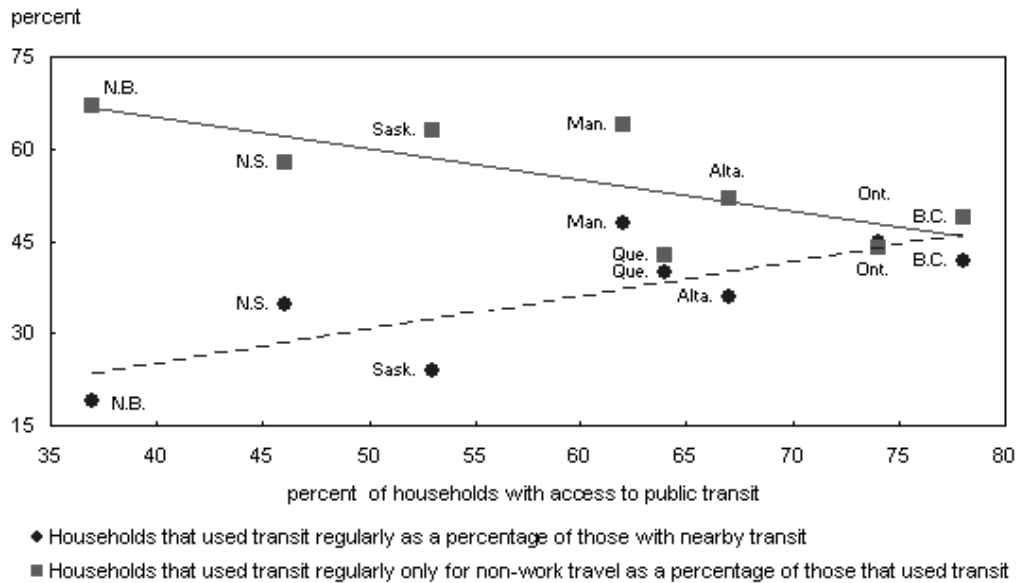
Table 1. Barriers to public transit use by province

| Location | Have access to a car | Transit schedule | Live too close to need transit | Transit too slow | Service too infrequent | Other reasons |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| | % | | | | | |
| Canada | 73 | 27 | 23 | 21 | 21 | 22 |
| NL | 73 | 26 | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| PEI | 69 | 44 | 29 | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| NS | 72 | 23 | 17 | N/A | 14 | 23 |
| NB | 78 | 31 | 17 | N/A | 26 | 19 |
| QC | 63 | 24 | 22 | 17 | 16 | 24 |
| ON | 75 | 23 | 20 | 21 | 21 | 22 |
| MB | 81 | 33 | 27 | 26 | 24 | 14 |
| SK | 80 | 38 | 28 | 29 | 23 | 14 |
| AB | 82 | 35 | 26 | 26 | 23 | 21 |
| BC | 72 | 32 | 28 | 21 | 29 | 23 |

Source(s): Statistics Canada, Public Transit in Canada, 2007.

Increasing access to public transportation is key to increasing ridership. Data show a clear relationship between access to public transit and the percentage of households that use public transit regularly. This is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Public transit usage and access to public transit



Source(s): Statistics Canada, Public Transit in Canada, 2007.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the more accessible public transportation is, the more households rely on it. By increasing public transit usage, the city will benefit from economies of scale. In other words, as ridership increases, the average cost per passenger decreases. This enables the city to operate its fleet closer to full capacity. In contrast, when there are high costs of transportation, in addition to traffic congestion and lack of an adequate public transit network, location choices¹ for employers are restricted and production costs rise. Consequently, employment and income are affected.

¹ When public transit is not widely available and commute costs are higher, it becomes more costly for employers to hire employees, as the latter incur in more expenses to commute to work. This consequently leads to higher production costs, which are passed on to the consumer in the form of higher prices for goods and services.

An example of direct effects is access to services and basic social activities for individuals who are reliant on the public transit system. Students are especially susceptible to this, as their income is often below average. The absence of adequate supply of public transit restricts the ability of such individuals to pursue employment and educational opportunities. It also constrains their residential choices and hinders their access to health care, public services, and leisure activities.

It is important that the city's public transit system be made as attractive as possible. Increasing ridership among students is a key way to do this. Not only does this increase current usage of the public system, it acts as a catalyst for changing the mentality of future bus users: as students spend their undergraduate and graduate years using public transportation, they are more likely to continue to do so once they join the labour market. This is imperative given the direct and indirect effects of public transit, as well as the expected population growth.

2. BACKGROUND

This section presents a brief history of the most recent referendum regarding the implementation of the U-Pass at the University of Regina, the current situation, and the forthcoming proposal for the introduction of the U-Pass.

2.1 Past Referendum

The universal bus pass (U-Pass), a proposal that would have extended bus services to all University of Regina students for \$69 per semester, was voted down in 2009. Although the number of voters was relatively small in comparison to the total number of students (2,666 of approximately 13,000), the proposal was opposed by an overwhelming 71% of voters.

The proposal contained an exemption for out-of-town students. Nevertheless, opposition was centered on three main issues. First, some students felt that bus services should be provided at no extra cost by the city, being completely funded by taxpayer money. Second, students who drive to the university did not find the proposal to be beneficial, as they would be forced to pay for a service, which they do not use. Lastly, the past proposal did not include an exemption for students living close to the university, who already pay a rent premium for proximity and would thus be double charged.

2.2. Current Situation

Five years after the previous referendum, the U-Pass is being considered once more. Increasing parking costs, a booming population, and environmental concerns have brought increased awareness of the importance of public transportation. Such change has led the city of Regina to include transportation among the priorities listed in its Official Community Plan published in November of 2013. More specifically, goal two of section D3 (Transportation) concerns public transit specifically. In it, the city states five directives for elevating the role of public transit. These include: planning and protecting express transit corridors to improve rapid transit (5.9), promote intensification and mixed-use development (5.10), enhance transit service in existing neighbourhoods (5.11), increase ridership by improving the connection of transportation choices to transit services and enhanced passenger amenities (5.12), and maximize accessibility of the conventional transit system while improving the paratransit system to ensure the needs to passengers with disabilities are met (5.13).

The implementation of a universal bus pass for University of Regina students is a key tool in achieving the city's public transportation goals. As experience has shown, cities that implement the U-Pass experience a substantial increase in ridership, which is the aim of goal 5.12. Increased ridership leads to higher service frequency and expanded bus routes. This, in turn, acts to enhance transit service in existing neighbourhoods (goal 5.11), and, as the bus system is used by more passengers, the costs of implementing accessibility measures in the conventional transit system is spread more thinly – thus, it becomes cheaper for the city to make the necessary adaptations.

Furthermore, the university also has a stake in implementing the U-Pass. As the population in the city of Regina is expected to grow, so is the student body. This inevitably means higher demand for parking spots. Although the university receives revenues from the sale of parking permits, it is more profitable for it to use its available space to build more classroom and residences. As such, the university benefits from encouraging students to use public transportation rather than drive to campus.

Lastly, the students themselves also benefit greatly from the implementation of the U-Pass. Students at the University of Regina face some of the highest tuition fees in the country, and this, in addition to above average rental prices in the city, translate into high costs of living. Through the U-Pass, students gain affordable access to public transit. This reduces transportation costs for a group that faces high costs of living and receives below-average earnings. In addition to the financial benefits, the increase in ridership caused by the U-Pass translates into expanded routes and increased frequency of service across the city. For students who might continue to opt to drive to campus, increased bus ridership also has benefits, as it frees up parking spaces. As

well, students living on campus would gain increased access to the downtown area. Finally, the U-Pass is also beneficial to international students, who make up around 12% of the student body: through the U-Pass, they gain increased access to public transit during the nine-month probation period required prior to applying for a regular driver's license (University of Regina, 2014a).

Given the benefits of the U-Pass, the Regina Public Interest Research Group (RPIRG) commissioned this report to analyze the viability of implementing the U-Pass, as well as implementation guidelines and a proposed program for post-implementation evaluation and monitoring.

2.3 New U-Pass Proposal

The University of Regina Students' Union (URSU) has put forward a proposal to partner with the City of Regina and offer students at the university the U-Pass. Although specific details differ across universities, the U-Pass generally works the same everywhere. All students or members of a student group (full-time undergraduate and/or graduate students) are charged a fee per semester or year, and in return receive unlimited access to the public transportation system. This is similar to the scheme the University of Regina has in place for its fitness and wellness facilities, where students pay \$62-\$84 per year for unlimited access to the facilities (University of Regina, 2014b).

A U-Pass fee that is universal and compulsory allows lower fares to be charged than the actual cost of purchasing regular tickets. This occurs because the costs are spread out over a larger group of individuals, and not all those paying will make use of the system – thus, effectively lowering costs for users. Nevertheless, non-users experience the positive externalities

that arise from lower demand for parking spots, decreased congestion on campus, and reduced carbon emissions. Such universal and compulsory schemes are not unfamiliar in the public sphere: this is how health and pension plans operate.

From the city's perspective, the U-Pass can be net revenue neutral, depending on whether the city chooses to invest in the services. For neutrality to occur, the revenues resulting from the U-Pass must match the costs the city will incur with the purchase of new fleet, the expansion routes and increase in service frequency. This means that if x% of students are users of the public transit system, the U-Pass will be priced so that it equals at least x% of the fees paid by such users. However, increased ridership typically requires that the City incur expenses to purchase new fleet, add new routes and extend schedules. As such, the U-Pass fee is usually set higher, and the additional revenue used to finance such expenses.

3. BENEFITS AND CONSIDERATIONS

The U-Pass is beneficial for a diverse group of stakeholders. Students, city transit, the University of Regina, and the community as a whole, all experience positive impacts from increased public transit ridership. The main benefits and considerations are listed in the following subsections.

3.1 Benefits

Implementing the U-Pass works to create cultural change. Currently, 83% of citizens in Regina rely on private vehicles to commute to work (City of Regina, 2011). In the short run, the U-Pass promotes increased public transit ridership among students. However, in the long run, this translates into graduates who, used to relying on public transit during their university years,

continue to do so once they enter the labour market. The U-Pass thus has the potential to increase ridership in the short and long run, and amongst students and professionals. Given the population growth the City of Regina is expected to experience in the next years, promoting such a cultural shift is key to ensuring that commute times remain low in the city. As can be seen in Figure 2, in the downtown core, which sees higher frequency of service and more bus routes than other areas of the city, individuals rely more heavily on alternative modes of transportation than elsewhere.

Figure 2. Use of alternative mode of transportation for work commutes in downtown Regina



Source: City of Regina (2011)

Sustainability is also a major point: more use of public transit translates into reduced carbon emissions. This is a point that should be addressed prior to the city experiencing a substantial increase in its population.

Due to increased ridership, a number of changes would occur in the transit system. New routes would be added, and the frequency of service increased. These new routes would include express routes to the university. Currently, express buses stop at 5:30pm. The increase in the number of students who use public transit would likely justify expanding the operation hours of such routes, and possibly including weekend buses. The routes that will likely be affected by the implementation of the U-Pass are 4, 30, 9, and 5.

A wide group of stakeholders benefit from the implementation of the U-Pass, and subsequent increase in public transit ridership. The main benefits accrued by these stakeholders are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Benefits for main stakeholders

| Students | City Transit |
|--|--|
| Cheaper travel option than monthly student pass | Increased ridership during non-business peak hours |
| Increased ridership translates into more routes and service frequency | Buses operate at or closer to full capacity – average cost decreases |
| Improved transit services better fit student needs | Public transit gains a more prominent role with the public and politicians |
| On-campus students gain increased access to the downtown area | Instills cultural changes that increase ridership now and in the future |
| Safe and reliable transportation option for students who consume alcoholic beverages | Helps to achieve the public transportation goals set out in the city’s Official Community Plan |
| University | Community |
| Decreased demand for on-campus parking | Drunk driving occurrences are expected to decrease |
| Increased land available for more profitable ventures | Less traffic congestion and more parking availability downtown |
| Reduced air pollution on campus | Reduced environmental footprint |
| Reduced congestion on campus during peak hours | Less illegal parking in residential areas close to the university campus |
| Better public transit leads to increased attractiveness of the university to potential students | Positive externalities to non-student bus riders |
| Businesses | |
| Every \$1 invested in public transit yields up to \$3 in increased business sales ² . | Extends the workforce for employers, as employees can commute to work more easily. |

Source: Created by the author.

² According to the American Public Transportation Association, “Every \$10 million in capital investment in public transportation yields \$30 million in increased business sales, and that every \$10 million in operating investment in public transportation yields \$32 million in increased business sales” (2007).

Although it has a net positive impact, the implementation of the U-Pass requires some considerations on the part of the city as well as the university. These considerations are explored in section 3.2.

3.2 Considerations

While there are substantial potential benefits associated with the U-Pass, there are also some considerations, mainly for the city and the university.

One consideration is that the implementation of a transit pass program does not guarantee the transit system will benefit. While the transit system receives the guaranteed revenue from the employer, a successful transit pass program may require the transit system to provide additional service. This additional service may be necessary due to increased ridership, which results in higher operating costs for the transit system. A certain amount of service expansion should be built into the fee schedule of the U-Pass to cover these costs. Fee levels should be carefully set to allow for some service expansion.

Historically the U-Pass has increased ridership among students by 30% to 50%, which requires additional fleet to be purchased (Canadian Federation of Students - Manitoba, 2013). This in turn translates into higher operating costs. Increased ridership will also likely result in a need for improved bus schedules and the addition of new express routes. As such, a certain amount of service expansion should be built into the U-Pass fee schedule to cover these costs.

Other considerations for the city include:

- Will there be increased subsidies for public transit?
- Administrative complexity
- Political considerations – is there public support for investment in public transit?

From the university's perspective, there are issues to be considered as well, such as:

- How will the fees for the U-Pass be collected?
- Who will be allowed to opt-out?
- Is there a need to hire a full-time employee to administer the U-Pass?

Last, there are equity concerns that arise from the implementation of the U-Pass. If the university does implement the U-Pass, not all students will be able or willing to participate in the program. While non-users benefit from positive externalities, a student may still not want to support the U-Pass. This thus raises concerns regarding the compulsoriness of the program. Under the normal U-Pass scheme, enrolment is compulsory, save some exceptions (such as out-of-town students). Given that universality no longer occurs under a non-compulsory option, under such a scheme the individual cost per person for the pass is not kept to a minimum. As one would expect, non-users tend to feel that the program should be optional. Nevertheless, for costs to be kept to a minimum and economies of scale to exist, compulsoriness and universality are required. It is also important to note that as cultural change occurs, perceptions towards the U-Pass are likely to change. As such, future support is expected to be higher than current support, thus minimizing equity concerns.

3.3 Cost of the U-Pass vs. Value Received

Currently, a student bus pass costs \$53 per month, adding up to \$212 for four months (City of Regina, 2014). The U-Pass will allow students to access the same service for a fee that ranges between \$70-\$90 for the same period. Thus, implementation brings students savings of up to 67%.

The students' union, the university administration, and city transit should engage in active dialogue as to the advantages and disadvantages of implementing the U-Pass. While a specific program might work for other universities, it does not necessarily mean that it is the best solution for the University of Regina. The cost of operating the program should guarantee that the university receives adequate transit service, while also guaranteeing enough revenue for city transit to cover the additional expenses.

4. IMPLEMENTATION GUIDELINES

This section outlines the main guidelines for implementing the U-Pass, based on the experiences of other universities.

Defining objectives

The students' union, the transit system and the university's administration must all make their interests and limitations known. In other words, the main stakeholders must clearly define their expectations with regards to the U-Pass.

Gaining student support

In order to successfully implement the U-Pass, gaining support among students who do not use public transit is key. Those who live out of town, on campus residents, and those who choose to drive, often do not gain direct benefits in exchange for the additional fees they will pay. As such, these are groups that tend to oppose the U-Pass. Nevertheless, they benefit from the positive externalities associated with increased reliance on public transit. It is important to create awareness of such externalities and to garner support among these groups.

Gaining the administration's support

The university's administration might be concerned about the impact of implementing the U-Pass on student enrollment. Implementation requires higher student fees, and these might disincentivize students from applying to the school. The administration might also be concerned about collecting fees for a third party.

Gaining the transit system's support

The transit system might be reluctant to implement the U-Pass given all the work involved in such a move. The expected growth in ridership might also cause concern to the transit system, as it requires expanding fleet and service frequency. This latter point needs to be addressed in a way that balances U-Pass revenues and costs.

Timing a referendum

A referendum can be held at the same time as student elections which take place in March every year. This allows for lower costs while maximizing turnout. Since this is a once in a

year opportunity, it is key that as many details on the U-Pass proposal be worked out prior to that as possible. It is also important to gain administrative approval prior to the referendum.

U-Pass Format

The students' union and the transit system must identify the best format for the U-Pass. For example, students might be allowed to use the university ID in lieu of a bus pass. Should it be identified that a bus pass is still needed, the details and the costs involved in issuing such passes must be worked out prior to establishing a fee schedule. While it might be needed for the students' union to hire a full time staff member to issue passes, other alternatives also exist. The University of British Columbia, for example, uses vending machines to issue its monthly U-Pass (University of British Columbia, 2014).




Fee collection

The students' union, the university administration and the transit system must work out the details of how fees will be collected. In most cases, U-Pass fees are paid along with other student fees at the time of registration. This is similar to the wellness centre fees charged by the University of Regina. Once the receipts are reconciled, the university administration would forward the U-Pass fees to the students' union, who would then transfer them to the transit system. This can be done in one installment or in scheduled payments, depending on the agreement reached by the parties.

4.1 Timeframe

U-Pass implementation typically involves three phases: planning, buy-in, and implementation. Figure 3 presents the details of each phase. The process can take anywhere from 11 to 21 or more months.

Figure 3. U-Pass Implementation Phases

| Phases | Main tasks | Typical duration & timing |
|--|--|--|
|  <p>Phase 1</p> <p>Planning</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Initial discussion between student association and transit system ▪ Survey of student travel patterns and preferences ▪ Negotiation of key terms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 6 to 12 months ▪ Fall is a good time for a student survey ▪ Discussions may last years before agreement is reached on key terms |
|  <p>Phase 2</p> <p>Buy-in</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Awareness and momentum building ▪ Student referendum ▪ Administrative approval (if needed) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 2 to 3 months per task ▪ Referendum is usually concurrent with student elections (February/March) |
|  <p>Phase 3</p> <p>Implementation</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Detailed development ▪ Contract signing ▪ Program launch ▪ Monitoring ▪ Review and renewal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 3 to 6 months from buy-in to launch ▪ September is the best time for program launch ▪ Monitoring, review and renewal are ongoing |

Source: BC Transit (2004)

4.2 Determining the terms and conditions

Before a referendum on the U-Pass, it is key to define the main terms of that proposal. Deal breakers should be addressed as much as possible. These are elements that are essential to gaining support among key groups, such as student voter sub-groups and the transit system.

U-Pass fee schedule

A range, maximum, or specific value should be identified for the U-Pass fee. Frequency of payment is to be considered as well. The students' union and the transit system must also identify the cost recovery ratio and the expected expenses the latter will incur due to increased ridership.

Eligibility

It is important to clearly set out who is eligible for the U-Pass and who is exempted. Generally, the U-Pass applies to full time students. As the University of Regina Students' Union encompasses both undergraduate and graduate students, it is expected that the pass will apply to both groups.

Opt-out

Similarly to pension and health care schemes, the U-Pass requires universality and compulsoriness. As such, it is not feasible to allow students to voluntarily and unrestrictively opt-out of the program. However, due to equity concerns and feasibility of approval, some exemptions should be allowed. These might include students with disabilities and students living outside of Regina. A provision should also be in place to allow discretion in specific cases.

Duration of the agreement

The main stakeholders must define the duration of the U-Pass agreement. Typically, the U-Pass applies from September until April, in accordance to the academic year. Nevertheless, it may also apply over two separate semesters (September through December and January through April). If graduate students are included in the target group, it might prove useful to extend the U-Pass to the summer term as well.

Service improvements

In order to appropriately set a fee schedule for the U-Pass, it is necessary to stipulate what services are included in the proposal. Given the expected increase in ridership, this encompasses likely increased service frequency and the need for fleet expansion. It might also include new routes and modified routes, express busses, extended service hours, additional stops, better passenger information, and new and improved shelters. Given the severity of winters in Regina, this latter point is of special importance to gaining support and increasing ridership.

Changes and renewals

It is key to establish the term duration of the proposed U-Pass program. The following are some, but by no means all, of the details that must be established in advance: what the duration of the commitment is, when the fee is subject to change, what magnitude of change is allowed, and how the change will be decided upon. The U-Pass contract should also include clauses on cost recovery. These can enable additional fee increases to be directed at providing new and/or expanded services for students.

5. PROGRAM MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Once the U-Pass has been implemented, it is important to monitor and evaluate it. Program evaluation is a valuable tool to strengthen the quality of the U-Pass program, leading to improved outcomes for students as well as the transit system. As such, a person in the students' association should be appointed to monitor the U-Pass after implementation. This would entail communicating with the transit system and keep track of data on new ridership and service changes. It would also require monitoring student satisfaction and conducting surveys to identify points in need of improvement.

6. CONCLUSION

Regina's forecasted population growth will increase the need for an improved public transit system in the city. The University of Regina Students' Union (URSU) has put forward a proposal to partner with the City of Regina and offer students at the university the U-Pass. All full-time undergraduate and graduate students would be charged a fee per semester or year, and in return receive unlimited access to the public transportation system. This scheme would bring students who use public transit savings of up to 67%.

Aside from students, a wide group of stakeholders benefit from the implementation of the U-Pass, and subsequent increase in public transit ridership. These include city transit, which gains an additional source of guaranteed revenue, the university, as it becomes more attractive to potential students who do not own vehicles, and businesses and the community at large, as positive externalities spill over into other sectors of society.

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