

July 22, 2020

## BCIT Student Association Update on Fall 2020 U-Pass BC

In response to recent questions regarding the U-Pass BC this fall, this letter has been prepared by the BCIT Student Association, with the intent of addressing the following matters:

- an overview of the program's benefits & how we approached the ongoing suspension;
- why we believe the U-Pass BC will likely be reinstated September 1st, 2020;
- how we are working to ensure the program is suited to the shift to temporary online instruction, balancing public health with the need for affordable transit access;
- our focus on preserving fairness and pursuing temporary modifications around increased exemptions for students residing outside of the Lower Mainland during their studies; and
- our goals about how students' interests should be championed when a potential "second wave" occurs in the region.

As students prepare for a return to classes this September, whether delivered online or in a mixed format, there is increased focus on how various services will adjust to "the new normal," and the U-Pass BC program is no different. Many members have been contacting the Student Association to ask about the status of the program and the recent listing of the fee with tuition.

During less uncertain times, there are usually about 9,000 BCIT full-time students eligible for the U-Pass BC between September and May. This mandatory universal program is only possible through agreements in place between the Province and TransLink, and between the participating student associations, post-secondary institutions, and TransLink.

In order to participate in the program, students at eligible publicly-funded post-secondary institutions must democratically approve of the mandatory U-Pass BC fee via referendum. This is conducted by BCIT and the Student Association, in accordance with the *College and Institute Act* and our Bylaws, and occurred most recently last October.

While not every student eligible for a U-Pass BC makes use of it, over 80% of eligible students in the Lower Mainland did regularly use their U-Pass BC in 2019. In the case of BCIT students, this amounted to just under 2 million journeys in 2019, allowing for unlimited and affordable transit across the region, a moderate decline in traffic congestion, and less pressure on available parking at our campuses.

Importantly, these 2 million trips represent not only travelling to and from campus but rather all of the various needs a transit user might have: seeing loved ones; travelling to and from work; buying groceries; caring for a sick family member; getting home from downtown on a weekend. And the related benefits have been overwhelmingly positive, in reduced costs for riders and a cleaner environment for all. It is estimated that BCIT students' U-Pass BC usage in 2019 has resulted in a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions of 9,394 tonnes (measured in CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent), when compared to not having the U-Pass BC in 2010.

Earlier this spring, our society was faced with an unprecedented situation with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. So, we acted swiftly to protect our students' interests as best we could. In the absence of complete information, we worked with BCIT and TransLink (in conjunction with partner schools and student unions) to negotiate a May through August suspension, and refunds for April and for any prepaid summer amounts. Part of this was based on the public health measures that led TransLink to cease collecting fares on buses, but this

was also informed by our values: the U-Pass BC program is a system that works, but there have to be classes and jobs to go to (i.e., demand for the U-Pass BC by the vast majority of eligible students) in order for it to truly succeed. In March and April, public health advice was keeping most people in their homes, and regional transit usage plummeted.

In hindsight, the level of uncertainty at the time absolutely justified acting quickly to protect students' interests, although a small number of students were negatively affected by the program's summer suspension. Conservatively, over \$350,000 in April refunds alone was returned to BCIT students, supplemented by thousands of refunds for May through August prepaid amounts. This was fair for students, while protecting the U-Pass BC program in the long-run by only suspending it *temporarily*.

This spring's agreed-upon suspension was set up until August 31, with the hope that both in-person instruction and the U-Pass BC program might resume in September, subject to public health guidance. However, student associations, post-secondary institutions, and TransLink also agreed to continue discussions in the summer to discuss options for this fall. These discussions are ongoing, and all parties are working to a solution. What that's meant at BCIT is that it was preferable to list and collect the fee up front, in the event that the program continues for the vast majority of users; the alternative would be not listing the fee, and then creating havoc for thousands of students by belatedly listing it later in July or August.

There's a lot about Fall 2020 which remains highly uncertain - we know this, students know this, BCIT knows this. TransLink knows this, as do all levels of government. What we're *currently* seeing is that substantial parts of society are gradually and safely reopening, based on the best public health advice provided by Dr. Bonnie Henry. In the case of transit usage in the Lower Mainland, ridership has rebounded significantly from its April low points.

In the post-secondary sector, however, large parts of "normal" don't appear to be in the forecast, as program after program temporarily shifts to online learning. This represents a very different situation compared with March 2020, but also compared to Fall 2019 when students voted to renew the U-Pass, resulting in five-year program contracts being signed.

In light of all this, we continue to weigh competing considerations for the fall. Things that we know include that far fewer courses will be delivered on campus, and that this also means less students than usual will be residing in the Lower Mainland for their studies. For those who *are*

With this in mind, it appears likely that the need for affordable and unlimited student transit passes will continue, even if we're visiting campus less often. At the same time, we are guided by our values to pursue changes that preserve the overall principles of the U-Pass program. Currently, that involves prioritizing two critical components:

- ✔ fairness for students living outside the Lower Mainland, for whom it would be impossible to benefit from the U-Pass program but who would be included by the existing contract;
- ✔ improving certainty around a "second wave" of COVID-19, so that students and post-secondary institutions and TransLink have a shared set of expectations about how further program suspensions and refunds/credits would be handled.

On balance, the best outcome for most students in the Lower Mainland continues to be access to a highly discounted universal transit pass. Generally, it pays for itself in as little as two or three round trips per week; fewer, if reduced costs for gas and parking are considered.

here, many things are returning back to normal: jobs are coming back, restaurants are opening up, and many British Columbians are now travelling throughout the region, many on transit.

In ordinary times, the vast majority of eligible BCIT students benefit from access to the U-Pass BC program for all of the reasons one would expect: it provides predictable and guaranteed access to subsidized unlimited public transit in the region. In other words, good for our wallets and good for our climate. That is why students provided a resounding endorsement in last fall's referendum to renew the program for five years - close to 90% in favour, in fact.

Going forward, we will continue to be guided by our values and by the best interests of students. We want students to benefit from the best that the U-Pass BC has to offer, but we are also working to modify the program so that it can better respond to students living out of the region, and provide greater certainty around "second wave."

We do want to hear from you. Students are encouraged to contact [upass@bcitsa.ca](mailto:upass@bcitsa.ca) to provide further feedback, whether that's preserving the program (with or without modifications), or pushing for a further BCIT-wide suspension of the program. There's no perfect solution, but we will always work to balance competing considerations and prioritize what's best for you, our fellow BCIT students.

Sincerely,



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BCIT Student Association



Hunter Sones  
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