

# Backgrounder on Renewal of the U-PassBC Program

Student Caucus of the U-PassBC Advisory  
Committee

July 13, 2016

## Background

The U-Pass BC is a partnership of the provincial government, TransLink, post secondary institutions and Student Associations. Since the introduction of U-Pass BC in September 2010, approximately 128,000 students annually have enjoyed affordable and sustainable modes of transportation, where all three travel zones in Metro Vancouver are included in the cost of the U-Pass BC. The U-Pass BC encourages lifelong transit use and reduces traffic congestion, greenhouse gases and the use of single occupancy vehicles.

Since 2010 the BC government has invested 82.5 million to align the program with the Premier's commitment to "a common U-Pass program for all post-secondary students ... for a flat fee that is the same for students throughout Metro Vancouver."<sup>1</sup> Metro Vancouver was the first region in North America to successfully establish a standardised U-Pass program.

## The Problem

Over the years the U-Pass BC has grown in popularity, making it one of the most important services for students. Since 2010 students have experienced six increases to their monthly price, amounting to a 27% fee increase by May 1, 2017. As the monthly rate increases continues to outpace other fare increases there has been a growing conversation in government about completely divesting from the program. Without the BC government's sustained financial partnership the burden to fund the U-Pass BC would undoubtedly be shifted onto students. Once worse, it is conceivable that TransLink would attempt to revert to it's old U-Pass model (prior to 2011) in which institutions with high ridership rates are excluded from the program while institutions with lower ridership rates maintain their participation as a means of revenue generation for TransLink.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote taken from the 2009 BC Liberal platform

## **The Opportunity**

The current U-Pass BC contract will expire April 30, 2018 thus affording students an opportunity to begin negotiations for renewal directly prior to the 2017 provincial election. Historically government has been keen to resolve the financial terms of contract renewal directly preceding an election because of the possible negative optics of not maintaining the program.

In all past contract renewals Metro Vancouver student associations have exercised our political economies of scale by negotiating together. Because of our teamwork we enjoyed significant success including securing an additional 8 million dollars funding in 2010 to include ESL and ABE students onto the program and 6 million in additional funding in 2013 to reduce monthly fee increases. If student associations work together again we are far more likely to successfully apply political pressure to secure a favourable monthly rate.

## **Our Recommendation**

The U-PassBC is an invaluable program and needs to remain affordable. It's time to recognize that the program has moved beyond its initial introductory stage and is now overwhelmingly considered by students to be a staple service of their post-secondary experience. Beginning in May 2018, the U-Pass BC fee should be frozen at \$41 per month with a mandatory annual price increase indexed to inflation for a term not short than ten years. This would not only stabilize and reduce the annual fee increases but also recognize the overwhelming consensus of post-secondary students to maintain this service. It is prudent to expect that the government may propose an alternative proposal and in that case the student caucus will continue to meet regularly to discuss how to move forward together in the best interest of students.

## Next Steps

The student caucus of the U-PassBC Advisory Committee recommends that each student association request a meeting with their MLA(s) and city council in late summer in order to communicate Metro Vancouver students' shared desire to end cyclical contract expiry and replace it with a long term, standardized and affordable U-Pass BC program. Additionally, common language on the topic ought to be used for Metro Vancouver student associations' submissions to the BC Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services in early Fall. Finally, a joint meeting request ought to be sent to the TransLink Board, Mayors' Council, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure as well as the Minister of Community, Sport & Cultural Development Responsible for TransLink in early Fall to communicate the work of the U-Pass BC Student Caucus. Student Associations will continue to meet regularly to assess the effectiveness of these lobbying actions.