

TransLink interim CEO defends Compass Card delays

Three-year setup plan is now five years, with no end in sight

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 2, 2015



Compass Card readers await to be put into use aboard city transit buses in Vancouver.

Photograph by: Mark van Manen, PNG

METRO VANCOUVER -- TransLink should never have promised the Compass Card would be operating in three years, especially since similar systems have taken much longer to get started in other cities around the world, the transportation authority's interim CEO says.

Doug Allen said cities like Calgary had introduced a smart card system at least twice, while there were problems associated with other systems in Chicago and Australia.

"I can't think of many examples where it was done in three years," he told The Vancouver Sun's editorial board Thursday. "It's been five years and people are saying 'get on with it.' Do we have to move quickly? Of course."

TransLink has long been criticized for the delays around its Compass Card, which along with fare gates, had been ordered by the Liberal government in a bid to reduce fare evasion on the region's rapid transit lines.

The fare gates are in place at most stations, but the Compass cards have not yet been issued to the public — even though the system was promised to be operating across the system by the summer of 2013.

TransLink has blamed a glitch with the "tap out" function at the end of a bus ride, which determines how many zones a rider would pay for any given trip. This was seen as problematic for busy Vancouver bus routes like the 99B-Line on Broadway and the No. 20 that see hundreds of boardings every hour. TransLink also acknowledged last year that its field testing has shown the card readers are taking

longer than anticipated to scan the Compass Cards, up to several seconds from the target of 0.3 seconds.

Allen, who has been in discussions with the Compass Card system provider, San Diego-based Cubic Transportation System, would not say how long it will take to fix the problem or if it will push up the price of the system, which has already risen to \$194 million from \$171.3 million.

"I'm still getting briefed," he said. "The two of us have to make this right."

The delays have prompted much criticism from the public, particularly those opposed to the transportation plebiscite, which is asking Metro Vancouver voters to support a 0.5-per-cent sales tax increase to fund transportation expansion across the region. Voters have until May 29 to mail in their ballots.

Polls have suggested the No side is leading in the plebiscite, with many people saying TransLink should not be trusted with any more public money.

Allen said he can understand the public's frustration, especially when they travel through SkyTrain systems and see the unused fare gates. But he argues TransLink is still in the midst of testing the complex system, and wants to ensure it's working properly, rather than "experimenting" with the public.

Allen said the system will also allow TransLink to get near real-time data to improve service delivery and long-term transit planning.

Cards have been issued so far to TransLink employees and those in the B.C. Bus Pass Program, while 130,000 U-Pass students will have Compass Cards by the end of this summer.

West Coast Express riders are slated to get their cards later this year. Eventually, TransLink expects to issue 800,000 cards across the system.

The Compass Card system will allow passengers to prepay fares for the day or the entire month in advance, which remains "stored value" on an electronic swipe card until the card is used. Fares are calculated and deducted when the card is scanned upon entering and leaving the transit system.

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