

## **MEMORANDUM**

**Subject: Update on NRT OnDemand Improvements**

**Date: October 12, 2021**

**To: Pelham Town Council**

**From: Matt Robinson, Director – GO Implementation Office**

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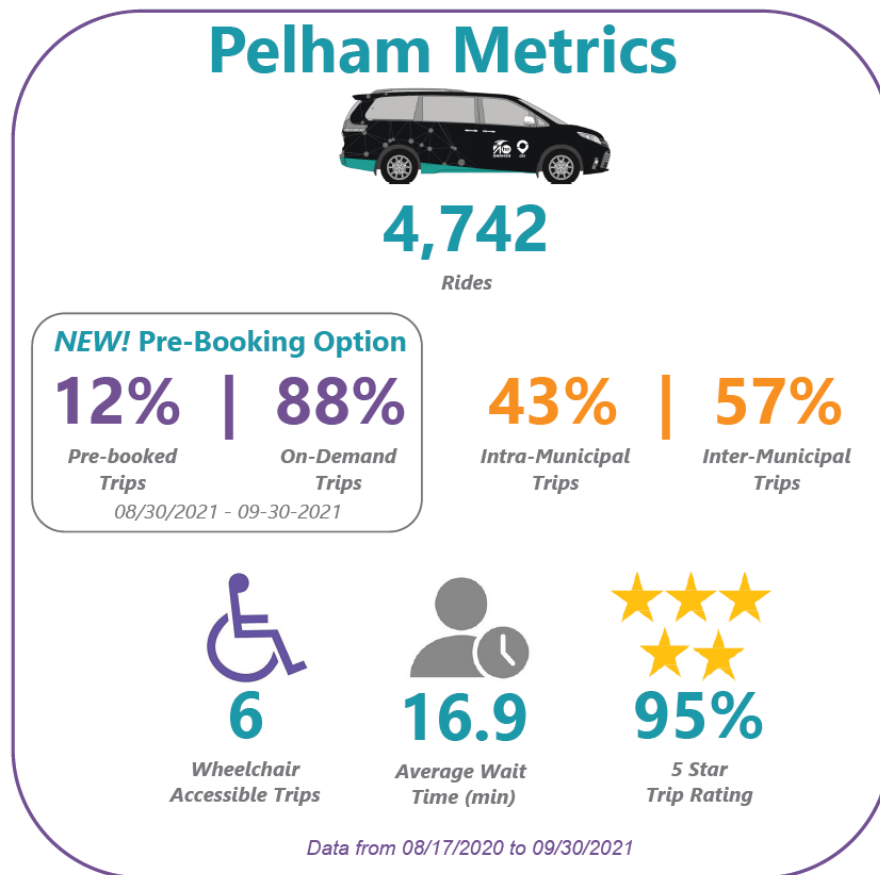
Further to the presentation provided at Pelham Town Council by Regional Staff at its meeting of August 23, 2021, this memo serves to provide further operational and customer service improvements both implemented and planned as part of the second year of the NRT OnDemand pilot program.

Concerns were raised by Councillors and Town staff related to the NRT OnDemand service and this shall serve to summarize those concerns and address each one in turn: either with a solution already in place, planned resolution, or indicate next steps.

### ***Current NRT OnDemand Service***

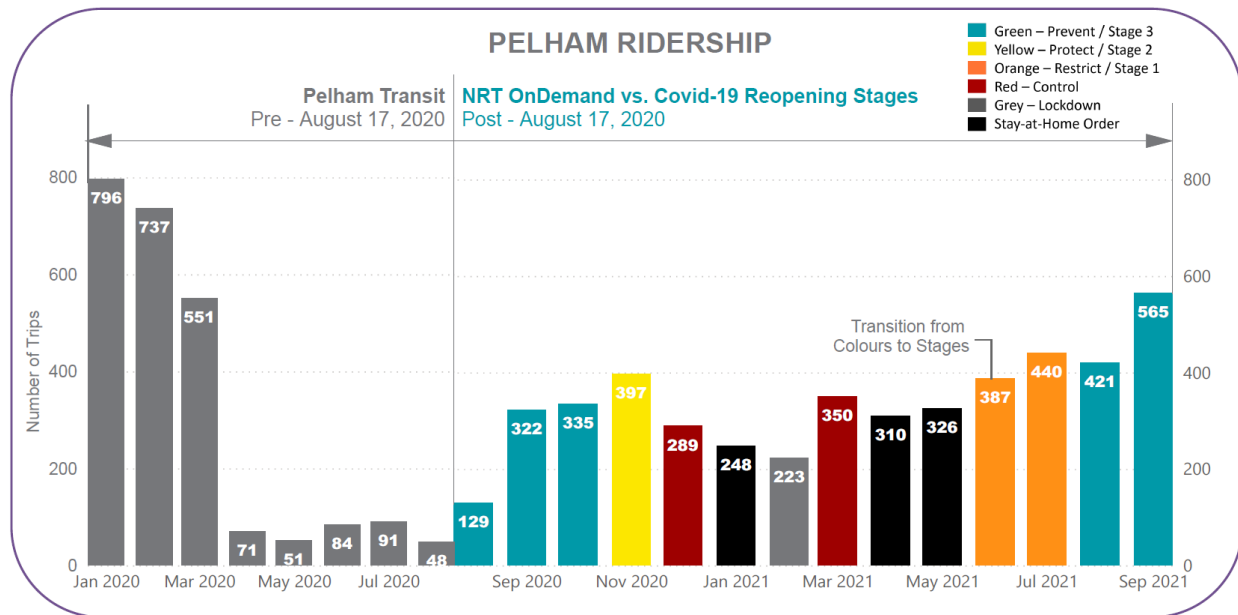
Launched August 2020 during the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic to replace the fixed route Pelham Transit system, NRT OnDemand has seen significant growth month over month during the first year of the pilot program. Figure 1 below outlines the key metrics associated with the NRT OnDemand service in Pelham. These include: utilization of the new prebooking feature; distribution of intra- versus inter-municipal trips; number of wheelchair accessible trips; an average wait time of 16.9 minutes; and a 95% 5-star trip rating from riders. When reviewing the metrics, it is important to note that not only does Pelham have the highest response rate, but it also has the highest satisfaction rate with the service – as Pelham has the greatest share of 5-star ratings than any other West Niagara municipality.

Figure 1: Pelham Service Metrics



In Pelham, NRT OnDemand provides full coverage of the entire municipality, allowing access to every resident. Although COVID-19 has brought significant challenges to transit service delivery, Figure 2 shows continuous growth in ridership within Pelham to almost pre-pandemic levels; with the greatest increase thus far between August 2021 and September 2021. With the fourth wave of COVID-19 flattening, the positive ridership trend will continue to increase, optimally reaching (or exceeding) pre-pandemic ridership sometime in 2022.

**Figure 2: Pelham Ridership**



The Town's annual investment of roughly \$178,000 (~\$78,000 levy + \$100,000 MTO Community Transportation Grant) has helped to provide roughly 3,500 of 36,000 hours worth of combined NRT OnDemand service annually. The annual cost to deliver NRT OnDemand services in the west Niagara service area is approximately \$2.6M.

### ***Continuous Operational Improvement***

As the service enters the second year of the two year pilot program, a number of operational and customer-focused improvements are planned as a result of feedback received by staff. Working alongside the service provider, NRT staff are continuously working to make the service better. The following table examines the largest concerns raised by Council and/or Town staff regarding operational improvements for NRT OnDemand and their subsequent solution:

Concern	Solution
Residents without cell phones unable to book return rides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Now enabling trip pre-booking (effective Sept. 7, 2021)</li><li>✓ Planned trips to and from destinations can now be pre-booked the day before departure (up to 3 days in advance)</li></ul>
Early morning (7am) wait times are increasing, negatively affecting pick-ups first thing as service starts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Implemented earlier deployment of vehicles (6:30 a.m. drivers now in-vehicle to arrive at pick up by 7:00 a.m.)</li><li>✓ New trip pre-booking should also improve availability and provide confidence that your trip is secured</li></ul>
Direct connections to Welland (Niagara College and Seaway Mall)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Medium-term - Barriers eliminated under consolidation</li></ul>

The implementation of pre-booking is a direct result of customer and councillor feedback in Pelham and Niagara-on-the-Lake. The core objective of the NRT OnDemand pilot is to determine if the on-demand public transit model is the most effective way to serve the large geographic areas of rural municipalities with low population densities. Niagara Region continues to operate Niagara Specialized Transit (NST) concurrently during the NRT OnDemand pilot. NST solely uses a pre-booking system, however it should be noted that during a 2019 NST operational review, the elimination of the pre-booking requirement in favour of same day bookings (i.e. on-demand) was one of the most requested improvements of rider feedback. It is also worth noting that the overwhelming majority of NST trips are taken by seniors.

NRT OnDemand was launched in year one with exclusively on-demand ride requests (i.e. requests are immediately dispatched to the first available vehicle). In year two of the pilot, the program has combined the features and now delivers both on-demand and pre-booked trips. This is a major new feature that will increase the reliability of the service for some residents throughout the day. Trips can continue to be booked either on the phone or via the app. With the launch of the pre-booking feature at the beginning of September, staff saw a total of 211 prebooked trips for the month. Pelham residents accounted for 21.3% of those prebookings, the highest utilization of the new feature of any other service area. As such, this feature should eliminate some frustrations around bookings needed first thing in the morning or late at night. Additionally, it will benefit any riders not using a smartphone by allowing them to ensure there is a trip booked to get them back home.

Regional staff are aware of (and want to highlight) a number of risks and challenges associated with pre-booked trips. The first is that that pre-booked trips significantly reduce the ability to provide services on-demand. This is due to the fact that blocks of time need to be set aside where the pre-booked vehicle cannot be sent to deliver other

on-demand trips because it needs to remain close enough to deliver the pre-booked trip. Moreover, as pre-booking becomes more popular, there is a substantial risk that on-demand becomes wholly unreliable (without drastic changes or a significant investment to add more fleet) due to the vehicles being assigned to pre-booked trips. This could result in a significant increase in the number of passengers seeing the “No vehicle available” warning message, and their not being able to book a trip when they need it.

Another issue with pre-booked trips is the effect that canceled trips will have. Every canceled trip further exacerbates the issue listed previously and while staff will monitor the number of incidents, it is worth noting that despite internal efforts, canceled trips have remained an issue on NST since 2017-2018 when the ridership grew substantially. Additionally, pre-booking requires a 30 minute pickup window to ensure that riders are ready and available so as to help the service remain on time. The 30 minute window is actually made up of two 15 minute periods: one before and one after the requested pickup time. The 30 minute window is typical average for pre-booking services and exists on NST. While it can be reduced, it again comes at a cost of on-demand availability or additional funds to create a larger fleet of vehicles and/or vehicles with more seating.

Another factor that NST clients (who exclusively use pre-booking) have indicated is a challenge for them is trying to “time” their return trip. If they are going to a doctor’s appointment, it can be exceptionally challenging for seniors to properly identify, in advance, what time they need to be picked up. This results in a number of trips being missed by riders. While attempts will be made to dispatch another vehicle using the on-demand booking feature, it is not always possible due to the impacts of pre-booking identified above.

While it may seem from the aforementioned concerns that pre-booking causes more challenges than it solves, Regional staff wanted to ensure that it was implementing solutions to the feedback from residents and councillors while the service is still in a pilot and under evaluation. In all likelihood, providing both options for trip bookings will create a negative trend in the overall value of the service in terms of total trips delivered for money spent. It will be important for all Councils to consider the value that the service brings to its constituents of all demographics when and if a renewal is sought.

The second area of concern relates to availability of vehicles for the early morning start times. NRT OnDemand service runs from 7:00 a.m.-10:00 p.m. Users needing to be picked up at 7:00 a.m. were finding it difficult to book rides prior to that time for a 7:00 a.m. pickup. To address this, earlier deployment of vehicles has been implemented with the service provider to ensure that more 7:00 a.m. pickups are able to be accommodated. It should be noted that the number of 7:00 a.m. trips that can be picked up is a function of the number of vehicles deployed, as any one vehicle can only be at a single location at a given time. This adjustment has been done at the Region’s cost, as driver’s need to now arrive earlier for their shifts. Unfortunately with NRT On-Demand

vehicles no longer able use the Meridian Community Centre as its vehicle depot, the new location at the Grimsby Peach King Centre is much less centrally located. While this change has improved the wait times in Grimsby, it has somewhat offset the improvements in Pelham as vehicles now need to travel further to make their pickups. Although concerns have been raised about passengers receiving the *vehicle unavailable* message, Pelham ride requests only make up 10%, (28 out of 287) which is the lowest among the West Niagara municipalities partnering in NRT OnDemand.

Finally, we know that direct connections to key Welland destinations such as Niagara College, the Seaway Mall and the Welland Hospital remain a priority. Unfortunately, Niagara Region staff have been advised by transit partners that under the current multi-agency governance structure, making these inter-municipal connections is not desirable due to potential labour relations implications (unionized vs. private sector operators). Under a single, consolidated transit system as is being proposed by the new governance model, these types of geographic or jurisdictional issues (e.g. putting riders first, removing municipal barriers, ensuring seamless connections to key destinations across municipal boundaries) will not exist in a transit environment operated by a single Commission. Should the triple majority be achieved and the move to a single Transit Commission approved, it is possible to establish these connections almost immediately.

Should the aforementioned operational context require any further examination or an additional subsequent presentation to Council for insights which have not been addressed through previous presentations or this memo, please advise and staff will make further arrangements accordingly.

We recognize, value and appreciate the partnership with the Town of Pelham in delivering the NRT OnDemand service and for the ongoing collaboration in efforts to make this service grow and effectively serve the residents of Pelham.

Respectfully submitted and signed by,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Robinson', with a horizontal line drawn underneath it.

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Matt Robinson  
Director | GO Implementation Office