



PARTICIPATE **WOOD BUFFALO**

WHAT WE HEARD ABOUT VEHICLES FOR HIRE IN 2022: TAXIS, SHUTTLES & LIMOS

Bylaw Services

May 4 – June 3, 2022

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We humbly acknowledge that the land on which we live, learn, work and play is Treaty 8 Territory, the traditional and ancestral lands of the Cree, Dene, and unceded territory of the Métis.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The vehicle for hire industry includes services such as taxis, shuttles, limos, and ridesharing, which impacts the daily routine of many people who call this region home. From time to time, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) reviews various services including vehicles for hire.

Council motions passed in March 2022 requested a review of taxi rates and further public engagement on the Vehicle for Hire (VFH) Bylaw. In response, Administration conducted a month-long re-engagement campaign to speak with Indigenous partners and stakeholders through various engagement tactics as described in the following report.

This engagement was intended to reaffirm that engagement previously carried out accurately captured – and still reflects – public sentiment on the issue. The proposed bylaw changes were shared with the public and other important stakeholders with an opportunity to participate in virtual or in-person engagements including one-on-one discussions, an online survey, or by joining an in-person open house.

In the following report, you'll learn more about key themes emerging from conversation with urban and rural industry professionals and brokerages, members of the general public, Council Appointed Committees, customers of vehicles for hire, and Indigenous partners.

These engagements took place between May 4 – June 3, 2022. Gathered feedback in this report will be shared with Council for consideration.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In addition to the following stakeholder list, residents of Wood Buffalo were invited to participate by joining an open house, or by completing a brief survey validating previous engagement and reviewing highlights within the proposed bylaw. One Indigenous partner chose to participate in a one-on-one discussion as well.

STAKEHOLDERS

1. Advisory Committee on Aging
2. Beth Taxi
3. Diversified Transportation
4. Driverseat Fort McMurray
5. Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo Economic Development & Tourism
6. Fort McMurray International Airport
7. Fort McMurray Public School District
8. Fort McMurray Chamber of Commerce
9. Hanks Taxi
10. Kid Drop Inc.
11. Owner-Operators
12. Regional Advisory Committee on Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity
13. Regional Inclusive Committee
14. Smart Cab/Taxi
15. St. Aidan's Society
16. Sun Taxi, Son Taxi
17. UBER
18. United Class Cabs
19. Taxi Drivers of local Brokerages
20. Tuccaro's Taxi Service (Fort Chipewyan)
21. Wood Buffalo Co-op Taxi

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

This project was promoted on RMWB's social media accounts and through traditional media advertising including:

- ✓ Radio
- ✓ Digital billboards
- ✓ Digital screens in urban and rural recreation centres
- ✓ McMurray Matters podcast interview
- ✓ Rural newsletter (April & May 2022)
- ✓ Support from Indigenous & Rural Relations to share engagement opportunities with all Indigenous Partners
- ✓ Direct contact with stakeholders
- ✓ Driver canvassing sessions in urban Fort McMurray
- ✓ Open house posters delivered to taxi brokerages for all staff

ENGAGEMENT TACTICS



- In-Person Open House
- One-on-One In-Person and Virtual Engagement Sessions
- Online Survey (available in print or through Pulse phone support)
- Vehicle for Hire Driver Canvassing



55,167

Social Media Reach

2,000

Online Visits to RMWB Engagement Portal

252

Survey Submissions

173

Quick Poll Responses

50

Open house participants

28

Taxi drivers approached during canvassing

60

Virtual & In-Person One-on-One Participants

563

Total Engagement Touchpoints

KEY FINDINGS

Results from engagement confirmed what was heard in 2019 regarding a strong desire for safety with all vehicle for hire options, better enforcement for both driver and passenger safety, having options as a consumer, and more. Following are the key themes further explored within in this report, based on feedback from the May 2022 validation survey.



CONSUMER
OPTIONS



CUSTOMER
SERVICE



TRUST & SAFETY



FARES & FINES



ENFORCEMENT



ACCESSIBILITY

Note: 2019 engagement results revealed communication, trust and safety, ridesharing, training and education, fares and fees, enforcement, and reporting systems as key findings.





INTRODUCTION

Following a month-long engagement regarding the proposed Vehicle for Hire Bylaw 22.006, engagement findings have been gathered and are reviewed below in detail. This information includes feedback from an in-person open house held on May 18, 2022, a validation survey, one-on-one discussions, and vehicle for hire driver canvassing.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The survey for this project was intentionally designed to allow for participants to share what was most important to them regarding the report and proposed changes. Developed to better understand if the engagement completed in 2019 was captured accurately and to understand how individuals feel about the proposed bylaw changes, open-ended questions allowed respondents to talk about that which was most important to their experience. In total, 252 submissions were received with nearly 85 percent of respondents confirming they had read the What We Heard Report.

The initial *What We Heard Report* was downloaded 405 times.

Only 13 percent of respondents indicated that they had participated in the 2019 engagement, which shows the importance of having re-engaged the community. Of the 13 percent who had previously engaged, 81 percent felt the initial What We Heard Report accurately represented the feedback they had provided.

Eighty-one percent of previously engaged participants felt their feedback was accurately represented in the report.

ABOUT THE OPEN HOUSE

Industry stakeholders and residents of Wood Buffalo were invited to join an all-day open house on May 18, 2022 to learn more about the proposed changes and previous community engagement results, ask their questions to Bylaw Services, and share their feedback. Over 50 attendees participated throughout the day, with a majority of those in attendance being drivers for taxi brokerages, managers and/or owners of brokerages operating in the region. RMWB staff stopped in to share their thoughts as well.

Most drivers at the open house were relieved to see a fare maximum once the concept was explained, where the business could take ownership of charging what would keep companies viable and support drivers in keeping up with costs.

The open house presented an opportunity to walk through each of the highlighted changes, where Bylaw Services and Public Engagement staff took the time to break down the changes in palatable ways. This was an important feature as many drivers indicated English as their second language. Topics of interest at the open house included changes to fare structure, enforcement, and ridesharing.

RMWB's Chief Taxi Inspector also took the time during the open house to spend one-on-one time with any individual, driver, manager, or owner-operator of taxi services. This resulted in valuable conversations where the Chief Taxi Inspector could learn what matters most to participants, while helping to explain the details of changes within the bylaw.

ABOUT ONE-ON-ONE DISCUSSIONS

All identified stakeholders were invited to schedule an in-person or virtual discussion with the Vehicle for Hire Bylaw project team. Nineteen groups chose to meet, including local committees, Council Appointed Committees, owners and managers of rural and urban brokerages (taxi and shuttle), for-profit stakeholders, an Indigenous partner, residents, and drivers of local brokerages.

CONSUMER OPTIONS



Feedback on ridesharing and designated driver services is well received by participants who would like to see modernized services and options in the region. Ridesharing concerns include aligning requirements with those of taxis, not requiring local offices for TNCs, and the potential of threatening taxi companies.

Ridesharing dominated survey responses, specifically regarding the importance of transportation options being available to consumers. These options can be identified as taxis, ridesharing, and designated driver services. Of the 237 responses received regarding the proposed bylaw changes, 80 percent of comments indicated support of allowing ridesharing options. Less than one percent clearly stated that they opposed ridesharing being allowed in Wood Buffalo.

Comments supporting the change were very enthusiastic, with exclamations such as “great that other rideshare options are being considered!” And “these [changes] are where it should have been two years ago. Perfect!” Often cited throughout survey comments is a sense that taxi brokerages unfairly have a monopoly on the for-hire vehicle industry, and hope that the introduction of ridesharing would create healthy competition to “raise the bar” for service within the industry, and to keep rates competitive. As was shown in the 2019 report, feedback from the current survey expressed a preference for the modernized service — knowing who the driver would be, paying in advance for the service, and having GPS tracking through the ridesharing app. These comments often included feeling safer, paying less, and more feeling in control of their experience.

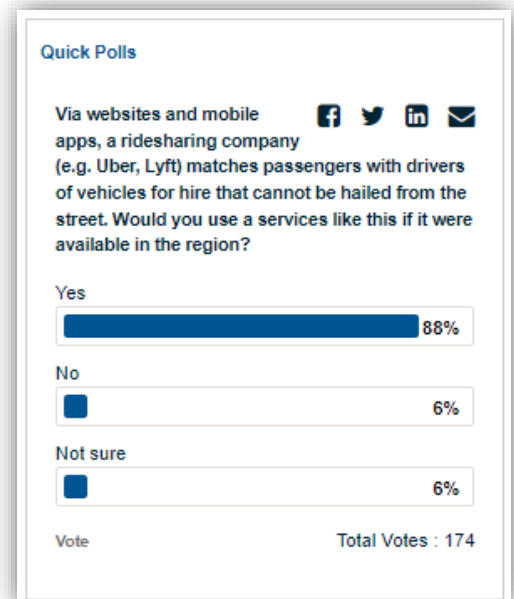
Drunk driving in rural and urban areas was mentioned as another reason for adding ridesharing and designated driver services to the bylaw, hoping these additional services would support the reduction of intoxicated people choosing to drive themselves home. Designated driver services received only positive feedback and support through the survey, one-on-one sessions, and the open house.

Of those who opposed ridesharing being allowed in the region, survey comments included fear that bringing in this service would put existing taxi companies in jeopardy, or that it may be unsafe in comparison to taxis which are required to operate with cameras.

During one-on-one discussions and at the open house, negative comments surrounding ridesharing mainly focused on safety and fare regulation. If ridesharing were to have the same safety and licensing requirements as taxis, also requiring a local office, participants felt more secure about the possibility of ridesharing being introduced. Ridesharing fares are not regulated by the Municipality.

An industry professional commented that access to participate as a TNC or Transportation Network Vehicle (TNV) may be limited as the proposed bylaw is currently drafted. Costs and regulations to the driver may prevent the industry from taking off in the region.

While taxis are permitted within the existing bylaw, proposed changes include the allowance of Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) – more commonly referred to as ridesharing companies, as well as designated driver services for a fee which are not included in the current bylaw.



TRUST AND SAFETY



Safety remains a priority for participants, many of whom agreed with enhancing already required criminal record checks. Passengers confirmed previous engagement sentiment of distrust towards taxi companies in the region.

Brokerages, drivers, and passengers of vehicles for hire talked about the importance of prioritizing safety for all parties involved. Drivers feel a lack of trust with law enforcement, which has sometimes led to safety issues while working. This is described within the *Enforcement* section below. Passengers shared their distrust of brokerages and drivers, sharing examples of when they felt unsafe or taken advantage of.

Most brokerages and drivers felt that ridesharing vehicles should have the same camera requirements as taxis. As drafted, the proposed bylaw would not require ridesharing vehicles to have cameras.

Participating brokerages and drivers voiced their concerns for taxis and ridesharing vehicles having the same requirements including mechanical inspections, winter tires, licensing, and permit fees. After learning more from Bylaw Services that – aside from a top light, meter, and camera – all other requirements are the same for taxis and ridesharing vehicles. This information alleviated concerns, though recommendations often still included camera requirements for ridesharing vehicles and taxis.

Survey participants agreed with enhancing the current criminal record check requirements with a vulnerable sector check for crimes within the last 10 years before approving driver permits. Drivers and brokerages understood and appreciated the efforts to keep the industry safe and professional, as did survey participants. One survey respondent felt the ten-year background check was too harsh.

CUSTOMER SERVICE



Many respondents would like to experience a heightened sense of professionalism in the vehicle for hire industry. Engagement results show interest in training and education opportunities for drivers and passengers.

Like engagement conducted in 2019, many of the survey responses regarding customer service in the taxi industry focused on a lack of professionalism, taking personal calls during fares, lack of cleanliness and vehicles in need of repair. Survey participants felt that allowing ridesharing companies may force taxis to become more competitive and increase their standards of customer service.

During the open house and in group discussions, participants suggested more training and education for both the drivers and passengers to improve vehicle for hire customer service understanding. If ridesharing companies are allowable in the proposed bylaw, training and education sessions were suggested in partnership with Indigenous and rural communities to promote TNCs throughout the region. One group spoke about senior interest in ridesharing services as they often feel unsafe in taxis and may become vulnerable if negotiating flat rates is required. Examples of safety concerns include not waiting for seniors to buckle their seatbelts before driving, assisting seniors in or out of the vehicle, and being insensitive to hearing problems. This group offered to provide training to brokerages and/or drivers to improve customer service.

“I believe these changes help promote a better living for people in the transportation business.”
- Survey Participant

Important to note, shuttles currently operating within the Vehicle for Hire definition had been mentioned by stakeholders as having very good customer service and being easy to work with.

Although not a part of the bylaw changes, a Vehicle for Hire Council Appointed Committee will be recommended

by Administration. This information was shared with participants, who felt very positively about a committee that could review topics such as customer service training, education, branding requirements, and more.

FARES AND FINES



Many drivers and brokerages are in favour of having more control over their rates, within the maximum allowable rate defined by the Municipality to keep their business sustainable. Drivers and brokerages agreed with the proposed increase for the cleanup charge and fare non-payment fines if there was more support from enforcement. Brokerages and drivers would like to see a fare increase immediately to stay viable.

The proposed bylaw recommends that fares would be determined by the companies, up to a maximum metered rate set by the Municipality to protect the public from potential price gouging. The Municipality has suggested a maximum of \$5.00 for the first 52 metres, and 15 cents for every 52 metres afterwards. The existing bylaw set the rate at \$3.80 for the first 52 metres, and 10 cents for every 52 metres afterwards. The new structure is intended to empower businesses to make decisions for themselves to keep their company viable and keep their drivers safe from overworking, while understanding the complexities of increasing living costs that residents, drivers, and brokerages are facing.

Fifteen percent of 2022 survey respondents felt that the proposed \$5.00 maximum metered rate was too expensive and disagreed with the new structure in fear of being taken advantage of. However, some of these comments show that the concept is still misunderstood as participants assumed drivers could change their rate any time they wanted when in fact any meter rate change must be vetted and approved through a meter accuracy process with Bylaw Services. Other respondents felt the fares should remain as they are to ensure this service is affordable.

Drivers and brokerages continued to share an urgency for fare increases to stay viable in their business and work. Brokerages stressed that this increase would help to keep their drivers safe, as they often work 16-hour days to make enough money to live.

During one-on-one discussions, the new fare structure was both well-received and questioned. Those in favour of the model appreciate that the decision-making power would be back in the hands of business owners, would require less administrative process and approval for changing rates in the future. Those who questioned the model felt that using a Consumer Price Index, setting the cap to inflation, or even deregulating fares entirely would better suite the updated bylaw. Two others felt that a set metered rate increase at 20 percent would suffice, making it less difficult for brokerages to determine metered rates or compete with other brokerages.

Most drivers shared their support for the increased clean-up surcharge and fare evasion fine if enforcement is improved. Many felt that enforcement by Bylaw Services and R.C.M.P. has been greatly lacking which can lead to uncertain or even dangerous situations.

The option to move away from metered rates to use a flat fee system received positive responses in the one-on-one discussions and during the open house, especially for long distances where the metered rate may cause barriers to use taxi services. During the open house and in a few one-on-one discussions, some participants questioned how this would work if implemented, concerned about different brokerages offering different flat fee rates. Drivers and brokerages felt they could work together outside of the bylaw to set a flat fee schedule that could be made visible on the vehicle.



The increased cleanup surcharge proposed at \$250 was acceptable and even encouraged by survey participants. Attendees of the open house and one-on-one discussions were also in favour of the cleanup charge, though many felt that this surcharge wouldn't be upheld as enforcement can be difficult to manage.

This sentiment carried over to the \$500 fare evasion fine, which could be chargeable by R.C.M.P. or Bylaw Officers. While participants of the open house were grateful for this inclusion, many felt doubtful that they would receive the support required to charge and uphold the fees. Drivers shared many examples of passengers not paying their fees – even getting aggressive with the driver, and not receiving support from R.C.M.P. in these cases. Some survey responses included concern about the “hefty” bill and wondered what happens in the cases where drivers do not have non-cash payment systems working properly, or do not take the passenger to the agreed upon drop-off location.

Drivers and brokerages shared how most of the licensing, inspection, upkeep, permit, cleaning, insurance, and branding costs fall to the driver, unless the driver rents the vehicle from the brokerage. This is in addition to paying weekly dispatch fees to the brokerage. Drivers and brokerages say a meter rate increase will help offset these costs along with the rising costs of insurance and gas.

ENFORCEMENT



Support from law enforcement continues to be a concern for drivers and brokerages who feel it is either selective or unavailable to them. Requests to increase weekend patrolling to reduce non-compliant brokerages, drivers, and passengers were received during engagement.

Enforcement was brought up by many drivers at the open house and during driver canvassing. Much like the 2019 engagement results, there is still a great deal of doubt that law enforcement would support drivers when they are in unsafe situations or where passengers have damaged the vehicle or fled without paying the fare owing.

Participants indicated that most of their experiences calling R.C.M.P. for assistance results in 30- to 90-minute response times. At this point the passenger has left or the driver has forfeited additional opportunities to earn wages. These situations typically happen when Bylaw Services is not on the roads (late evening to early morning). Suggestions from multiple drivers and brokerages included reinstating Bylaw Officer patrolling during the late hours of the night to help reduce these situations.

Resident and brokerage concerns included examples of passengers entering vehicles for hire where the chauffer's license photo doesn't match the driver in the vehicle, vehicles not being in good repair, swearing or being on the phone during fares, or smelling smoke once entering a cab.

Another concern included fleet vehicles that age out of the ten-year maximum allowable by the VFH bylaw, even though they hadn't been used for two years due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

ACCESSIBILITY



Participants shared their support for waiving the accessible vehicle licensing fee. Rural communities experience barriers to accessing vehicle for hire services and agree with the option to negotiate flat rates.

The proposed bylaw includes waiving the accessible vehicle licensing fee, which is \$500 per year. This has been positively received by participants, some of whom have shared the need for more accessible vehicles in the region. Concerns for the lack of accessible and affordable vehicles for hire was mentioned during one-on-one sessions, where participants with lived experiences shared how they and their friends cannot go out for a late dinner

because public transportation isn't available.

Drivers of taxi and shuttle services were very accepting of the waived fee as these specialized vehicles carry larger purchasing and repair costs, even though they would like to be able to provide this service in the region.

Accessibility barriers were also mentioned regarding rural communities. The service is too costly and can be difficult to get the service far from urban Fort McMurray. The flat rate proposed in the updated bylaw was welcomed in these conversations.

VEHICLE FOR HIRE COMMITTEE

Conversations throughout engagement included many notable comments that often led to further discussions about the recommendation for a Vehicle for Hire Council Appointed Committee comprised of residents, drivers, brokerages (taxi, shuttle, TNC), law enforcement and Councillors. When this recommendation was mentioned in conversation with stakeholders, very positive response was received from drivers, brokerages, and other industry professionals.

Following is a list of topics mentioned that could be included for review and recommendation in the Council Appointed Committee's scope of work.

- Training and education for drivers
- Brand standards that make sense for independent drivers and brokerages
- Fare structure and support for rural communities
- Support to reduce accessibility issues and barriers to service
- Ongoing operational concerns and issues

NEXT STEPS

Engagement findings will be reviewed and considered by Council in conjunction with other determining factors. Bylaw Services is scheduled to go before Council for a second reading and public hearing on June 14, 2022. Encouraged to participate in the public hearing, individuals could register with Legislative Services before noon on June 8, 2022 to speak or submit a written comment. Otherwise, individuals can sign up to speak prior to the start of the Public Hearing in the Council Chamber.

Once the bylaw has passed second reading, a third reading will proceed before the final draft is approved by Council.

Stay up to date on the progress of this bylaw by subscribing to participate.rmwb.ca/VFH.



We encourage you to continue using your voice to make our region even better by learning about all current projects. Visit participate.rmwb.ca to stay connected!



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