

A Deliberative Workshop: Addressing Accessibility in Auckland's Transportation System

URBPLAN221

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Word Count: 2062

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Introduction: A citizen's assembly deliberated on the best way to address accessibility to transport services for physically impaired individuals in Auckland. A short presentation was given to the citizens, educating them on the issue's importance and relevant statistics. A shortened version of the presentation, shedding light on the background of the topic, will also be included in this report. Proceeding the literature review presentation, citizens discussed their views, potential solutions, decision criteria, and a final preferred option.

Literature Review

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities identifies accessibility as an essential issue. To meet existing human rights, the "parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to ... transportation. (United Nations, 2007, p. 9)" New Zealand signed the treaty (New Zealand Ministry of Justice, 2024).

Barriers to accessibility concerning transportation are a vital issue, as independent transport enables a person to partake fully in all aspects of life, including accessing education, healthcare, and housing, therefore, inequitable access to transport services can entrench existing inequalities (Ministry of Transport & MRCagney, 2020).

The social model of disability has reframed accessibility issues as not an issue of a person's abilities but instead arising from structured exclusion and lack of provisions (Ministry of Transport & MRCagney, 2020). In Auckland, accessibility to transport services remains inequitable and a vital issue. Concerns include the lack of services, including proximity to residence and destinations; safety, harassment by fellow passengers, inaccessible stops, services, or paths; affordability; and attitudes leading to undignified use of services (Ministry of Transport & MRCagney, 2020). This is highly concerning as about 20% of Auckland's population is disabled, and many are unable to operate a car on their own (Ministry of Transport & MRCagney, 2020). Even though disabled individuals are more likely to rely on public transport, due to the concerns outlined, individuals make fewer trips overall due to these factors (Ministry of Transport & MRCagney, 2020).

An example of this is how at Henderson Train Station, the lifts required to allow access to train services for disabled individuals were out 167 days last year, at times going for months at a time out of service, making the station effectively inaccessible for half of the year (L, 2024).

Accessibility needs in transportation systems in the United States of America are addressed through the Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires *paratransit services* in areas where mass transit exists, providing a specially designed accessible service for disabled individuals (American Association of People with Disabilities, n.d.). One of the many ways accessibility in transportation systems can be addressed is by providing door-to-door paratransit services.

In New Zealand, the Total Mobility Scheme provides subsidies for taxi services for individuals with disabilities; though functional, this system has a cap on the subsidies provided and does not fully cover costs, which may be a challenge for low-income individuals (Auckland Transport, n.d.).

Identities of Participants

Three participants were chosen for the deliberative workshop. The identity of the participants varied largely and provided a representative sample of everyday Aucklanders.

The first participant was a forty-five-year-old businessman. He owned multiple rental properties throughout Auckland in highly desirable locations. When asked what his primary mode of travel was, he revealed that he drives his private car for transportation. The second participant was an eighty-three-year-old retired man; he struggled with walking due to old age. However, he lived alone and had no take-carer. Furthermore, his primary mode of transportation was public, and he lived far from the nearest bus stop, making any trip quite tricky. The third participant was a sole parent, caring for three school-age children. Her residence was in Mangere; the poor public transportation service in Mangere made it difficult to use public transportation, and she was saving up to buy a car.

Citizens Views

Citizens were invited to discuss their views on accessibility issues for disabled individuals in Auckland following the presentation of the literature review. The participants collectively had various perceptions of public transport and accessibility issues.

The businessman believed that whilst public transport is an essential service, cars are a preferred mode of transportation for their ease and convenience and because the barriers to access are so high for public transportation, including the lack of accessible entrances. He believed sincerely that accessibility should no doubt be improved; he was incredibly moved by the story of Henderson train station and expanded with his knowledge that the interior of train carriages is also inaccessible due to steps; therefore, train services should be a priority for improving accessibility.

The older man living alone viewed accessibility to transport services as a critical issue. He believed that accessibility must be urgently addressed due to the high population of individuals with accessibility concerns in Auckland. He elaborated that the elderly population, projected to grow singularly in the future, often faces accessibility challenges. He was particularly fond of paratransit services due to their convenience.

The sole working mom believed that whilst accessibility concerns are essential, any fee increase to fund accessibility improvements would not be ideal. Many low-income individuals already need help affording fares, which would remove access to public transport services for a new and larger population. She favoured solutions that improved the larger population, such as increasing the coverage and frequency of services.

The consensus among individuals was that any potential solution should be low-cost enough to be funded through reprioritising existing funding for local government. Residents also acknowledged that any other services that are defunded could lead to more inequitable outcomes in other issues and that reprioritisation should be a thorough and carefully considered process to ensure an ideal outcome.

Citizens Experiences

Citizens also had many personal experiences with public transport and inaccessibility. The businessman had minimal experience with public transportation or inaccessibility. However, he believed the issue should be addressed as increasing public transportation utilisation and accessibility could lead to more individuals reaching his business.

The 83-year-old man used public transportation as his primary mode of transport, and due to difficulties walking, he had many personal experiences regarding inaccessibility. He lived far from the nearest bus station, making it challenging to access bus services. He also shared stories about how drivers would start driving the bus before he could get to his seat, having suffered falls multiple times. The worst, however, was that services often had standing-room-only, which made the service inaccessible to him as people often do not get up from their seats.

The sole-working mom did use public transportation as her primary mode of transport; however, due to lack of coverage and frequency of routes, she wanted to one day afford to own and operate her car. She highlighted how public transport can be challenging for a mom, especially with a pram. She shares many of the same issues with the older man, including long walks to stops, driver attitudes and services being inaccessible due to overcrowding.

Ideal Outcome

Citizens agreed that an ideal outcome would be to provide accessible services to those who need them whilst not reducing services for the general population due to the need for funding reprioritisation.

Criteria for Decision-making

Citizens agreed that the most important criterion was cost-effectiveness, as funding would be challenging. Citizens also believed that hand-in was the need for the solution to be easily and quickly implementable. A consideration of accessibility needs led to citizens deciding that proximity between the start and stop of services provided by solutions was essential as services being located far from residences and destinations would still lead to inaccessibility. This was completed by assessing whether the proposed solution would be equitable. To ensure the solution is implementable, citizens agreed that the solution should be socially acceptable, as public outrage would kill the initiative.

Potential solutions

Citizens brainstormed various solutions to address accessibility. Some solutions were derived from the literature review and policy recommendations. These included procuring paratransit services and expanding the existing total mobility scheme. Most citizens favoured a paratransit service due to its door-to-door nature and unlimited coverage. Citizens were less favourable towards expanding the total mobility scheme as they believed a door-to-door service should be provided by the transit agency rather than taxis, leading to lower costs as there is no need to account for the profits of taxi companies. Citizens, however, also came up with unique proposed solutions, drawing on personal experiences shared to help shape them. These potential solutions include a training programme for transport staff to address attitudes and help provide a more dignified service for users. A second solution, a more comprehensive campaign aimed at both the public and staff, was also proposed as passengers' attitudes, such as not having priority seats, also pose challenges to accessibility. The retired man, living on superannuation, and the low-income single women proposed making public transport free for disabled users, drawing on personal experiences of fees making up a significant barrier to public transport, as currently, the subsidiary stands at only 20% of fares. A proposal to increase overall frequencies to reduce overcrowding was also proposed, and residents were highly favourable due to this providing better services for disabled and non-disabled users. The businessman, moved by the literature review of Henderson Station, proposed a priority maintenance programme to retrofit and maintain existing station facilities and buses to make them accessible.

Deliberation

Citizens graded all seven proposed solutions utilising the decision criteria chosen. Each solution was given a 1-5 grade for each criterion, and the total was used to help choose the final preferred solution.

Paratransit services were given a 3 for cost-effectiveness, as this would be a cheaper intervention than expanding the total mobility scheme or investing in infrastructure; however, it was more expensive than training or advertising campaigns and making public transport free for disabled users. It was given a 5 for being equitable and proximity between residences, destinations, and stops, as it provides a zero-barrier service to a needy group. The intervention was, however, given a three-point score for social acceptability and time to implement as it takes time to create a new paratransit system, and some of the public may criticise an expensive program, excluding the general population. The total grade was 19.

Expanding the total mobility scheme was given a 2 for being cost-effective, as costs would not directly go to providing services but also towards the profits of private companies. The system was given a five for proximity between stops and destinations, quickness to implement, and social acceptability as the system already exists; however, it received a 4 for equitability. The total grade was 21.

A training programme aimed at staff and a combined campaign aimed at the public and drivers received the exact grade, a 5 for cost-effectiveness, social acceptability, and quickness. However, a three was given for equitability as the intervention might not appreciably improve outcomes, and a zero was given for proximity between stops and destinations as these would not be improved. The total grade was 18.

Making public transport free for disabled users was given a five for social acceptability, quickness to implement and equitability, a three for cost-effectiveness and zero for proximity between stops and destinations as services would not be improved. The total grade was 18.

A proposal to reduce overcrowding was given a five for social acceptability, a four for cost-effectiveness and quickness to implement, but only a three for equitability and a zero for proximity between stop and destination. 16

A proposal to prioritise maintenance and retention of stations and vehicles to make them accessible was given a five for social acceptability and equitability; however, only a three for cost-effectiveness and quickness to implement, and a zero for proximity between stop and destinations, for a total grade of 16.

Final preferred solution

The intervention with the highest grade was expanding the total mobility scheme, followed by paratransit services. Though the total mobility scheme proposal had a higher grade, residents were less favourable due to potentially higher costs and negative externalities like attitudes of taxi drivers, choosing to go with the provision of paratransit services as the final solution for its equitable and accessible nature, even though it would be expensive and timely to implement.

Conclusion

Overall, transit services in Auckland are currently inaccessible. A group of citizens decided the best way to address this is by implementing a paratransit service that provides a door-to-door pick-up drop-off service for disabled users, free of charge.

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