

ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

SPECIAL MEETING

MINUTES

December 22, 2003

PRESENT: Ms. Betty MacDonald, Chair
Ms. Joanne Coffey, Vice-Chair
Mr. Patrick Harrington

**ALSO IN
ATTENDANCE:** Councillor Steve Adams, Chair,
Regional Taxi and Limousine Advisory Committee
Councillor Ron Cooper, Vice-Chair,
Regional Taxi and Limousine Advisory Committee

ABSENT: Mr. Dave Steele (regrets)

STAFF: Ms. Charla Williams, Co-ordinator, Diversity Program (5:00 pm)
Two Interpreters (Sandra/Jana)
Ms. Chris Newson, Legislative Assistant

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1. CALL TO ORDER

Ms. Betty MacDonald, Chair of the Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities, called the meeting to order at 4:05 p.m. in the Trophy Room, 2nd Floor, City Hall.

Mr. Patrick Harrington requested Agenda Item 3 be deleted from the agenda. He advised it was agreed by the Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities that this meeting would only deal with the issue of Accessible Taxis. Ms. Betty MacDonald explained Item 3 includes other concerns raised by the Committee for discussion if time permitted and is to remain on the agenda.

2. ACCESSIBLE TAXIS

! An Outline for Discussion regarding Accessible Taxis was before the Committee.

2.1 Ms. Joanne Coffey reviewed the points presented in the outline. The following issues were raised during the ensuing discussion:

! There is no limit/cap on accessible vehicles.

! Accessible taxis are also permitted to pick up able bodied fares.

Councillor Adams added the issue is more likely that accessible taxi drivers are paid only \$7.00 per hour and not by the meter regardless what is collected from the meter. He explained other cab drivers collect whatever is on the meter - the driver pays the cab company \$113.00 per week and then must cover their other operating expenses.

Councillor Adams will confirm that accessible cabs are able to pick-up able bodied fares. He further added that if the accessible taxis are not able to pick-up able bodied fares then arrangements will be made so that they can.

Ms. Coffey suggested the person who drives wheelchair accessible cabs be paid the same as other cab drivers. She also suggested accessible cabs be able to operate as late as they want and work when they want as do other cab drivers.

Councillor Cooper asked if there are meters in accessible cabs. Councillor Adams advised that he believes there are and he will confirm this.

! There is no limit/cap on taxi licenses.

Councillor Adams advised anyone can get a permanent taxi license if they complete the following requirements: an English proficiency exam, Geography test and completion of the National Certification Course offered through TIANS (Tourism Industry Association of Nova Scotia). The TIANS course culminates with an evaluation of the driver which entails a “mystery shopper”, trained by TIANS, who evaluates the service given by the driver from pick-up to destination point.

Mr. Harrington suggested the “mystery shopper” be a disabled fare.

! There are approximately 150 more licensed drivers than there are vehicles.

! The English test is oral (questions asked) as some drivers may not be able to read English.

Ms. Betty MacDonald stressed the importance of drivers also having good written comprehension in English as she and others who are deaf are not able to articulate verbally with the drivers.

! Councillor Adams advised the zones (County, Dartmouth, Halifax) do not apply to accessible taxis.

! Suggestions requested on how HRM can keep the Accessible Taxi venture alive/increase incentive to operate an accessible vehicle.

Councillor Adams advised when the issue of Accessible Taxis first came to City Council (before amalgamation) it was reported that 5000 residents of HRM required an accessible (wheelchair) taxi service. He added that due to this information an accessible taxi company was started in the early 1990's but soon went out of business due to lack of demand. He further advised that Yellow Cab has accessible taxis. He added they are currently down to one accessible taxi due to lack of demand.

Ms. Coffey and Mr. Harrington advised there is a demand for the service. They explained the only accessible taxi currently operating in HRM is available from Monday to Friday until 6:00 pm. There is no evening or weekend service yet there is a demand for such service.

Mr. Harrington added he knows of one driver who operates a van and is willing to take more than two guide dogs but the van is not wheelchair accessible. He added an accessible vehicle would cost more than a non-accessible vehicle, so how do we work on offering incentives to get drivers to operate accessible cabs?

Councillor Cooper asked how many accessible cabs could be supported by the residents of HRM if the cabs were there and available? The PWD Representatives responded that four accessible vehicles could meet the demand.

Ms. Coffey advised one reason the accessible taxi issue is coming forward at this time is due to an International Congress scheduled for Halifax in 2006 for persons with Disabilities. She advised it would be good to have accessible service at the airport.

Councillor Adams advised any licensed driver can pick-up at the airport. He suggested that someone requiring a wheelchair accessible taxi at the airport to call ahead and book the accessible taxi.

! Would it be possible to have the Taxi By-Law state that in order to own and operate a taxi company you would have to have at least two accessible cabs operating from your company?

Councillor Adams asked how you would define the criteria/parameters, for example; all companies with more than 100 vehicles or companies that are 24 hours? He added you would not want to legislate someone to do something that could lose them money. Mr. Harrington commented there would not be a loss of money as the intent is to make the service viable and available.

Councillor Adams added the accessible vans are expensive, approximately \$40,000.00 each and the Federal Government did have a subsidy available of \$20,000.00. Ms. Coffey advised that Access-a-Bus uses the vans but are probably not going to go out and buy them. She added the population is aging and eventually these vans will be viable for persons who, for example, require dialysis treatments. Ms. Coffey asked how many accessible vans would service HRM. Councillor Adams responded that if there are 5,000 individuals who require accessible taxis, you would have to determine how many actually take a taxi.

Councillor Cooper advised a pilot program would establish if there is a need and then you could state numbers. Ms. MacDonald asked if this could be investigated further. Councillor Adams responded the Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities would have a better idea of the demand. Ms. Coffey added it is a bit deceptive to think 5,000 people would be using the accessible taxis but as the population ages, more people will be requiring the accessible vehicles.

Ms. MacDonald advised that we cannot look at just the 5,000 but should look more to accommodating wheelchair accessibility. Mr. Harrington agreed the number is really irrelevant and the issue is more the accessibility. He advised if someone requires a van, then a van should be available. He cited the example of the accessible traffic signal on Rainnie

Drive being turned off on Sundays. If a blind person wanted to go for a walk on Sunday, they could not cross that intersection as there is no indicator, that is not accessibility. He added it is the same for a person in a wheelchair, if they need to get somewhere, there should be an accessible taxi for their use. Mr. Harrington added that Ottawa has a London style cab and it is accessible for fold-up wheelchairs.

Ms. Coffey asked Councillor Adams what Mr. Derek Mathers plans are when the last accessible taxi is no longer road worthy. Councillor Adams responded he will speak with Mr. Derek Mathers regarding his intentions. Ms. Coffey requested that if Mr. Mathers is not interested in continuing the service that he advise the Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities and perhaps someone else could be found to provide the service.

Councillor Cooper suggested that research be done regarding Federal Government assistance for establishing such a service. He added that you would have to determine if the service was provided on a trial basis, would it be sustainable. He responded to Ms. Coffey that it would be a staff persons responsibility (Ms. Charla Williams) to do such research.

Ms. Williams commented that Mr. Darrell Robar, former Chair of the PWD Committee, obtained a grant for his van but is uncertain if the grant is available for commercial interests. She suggested speaking with Ms. Judy Hughes with the Disabled Persons Commission to determine how many people would use a van. She added perhaps a person who is interested in providing this service could go to a bank for a loan to equip the van if they can show they will make the money back. She further added that she will take a look at some of these issues. Ms. Williams commented that if vans are available they have to be advertised as many do not believe that accessible taxis/vans are available.

Ms. Coffey commented there are many people who are unable to Access-a-Bus as they have large wheelchairs or it is too uncomfortable for them and their only other option is to call an ambulance as the accessible van is never available. Ms. Williams added the Access-a-Bus and Low Floor Metro buses cannot accommodate the larger scooter style wheelchairs.

Councillor Adams advised he and Councillor Cooper will raise these concerns at the next Regional Taxi and Limousine Committee meeting on January 19, 2004.

3. OTHER CONCERNS

3.1 Guide Dogs

Taxis limit the number of guide dogs they will take in the car at one time.

Mr. Harrington explained when he and friends call a taxi the taxi will only take two persons with guide dogs in the cab at one time; the third person and dog have to take a separate cab. He further advised some drivers will not take a guide dog as they claim to have allergies. Mr. Harrington added he has been told there is a list that drivers can request to be added to where they are able to refuse to take guide dogs. He added other reasons given by drivers for not taking guide dogs in their cabs are: they have leather seats and do not want the dog's nails puncturing the seats, one driver said he could not take guide dogs as he was Muslim and would have to wash his car out seven times if he took the dog in the car. Mr. Harrington asked what is being done in regards to training for new drivers in dealing with persons with disabilities. He added he believes there was a video that was shown at one time.

Councillor Adams advised he will check into the training for the new drivers. He further advised he will confirm if there is a limit to the number of guide dogs permitted in a taxi at one time and will also confirm what the criteria is for drivers who are registered to not take guide dogs (i.e: a Dr.'s note indicating allergies).

3.2 Smoking/Chemical Sensitivities

Ms. Betty MacDonald advised persons with chemical sensitivities have concerns with taxis that have been smoked in and smell strongly of smoke. She gave a personal account of calling for a taxi only to have it arrive smelling so strongly of smoke that she was unable to travel in that cab and added she has no chemical sensitivities. She further added that chemical sensitivities are becoming more rampant and asked how to deal with this situation, is it something to be discussed at the dispatch level?

Councillor Adams advised vehicles that are in use as taxis (roof light on) are not to be smoked in. He further added that when the car is not in use as a taxi (roof light off) it may be smoked in. He suggested if a person has chemical sensitivities they should inform the dispatcher. Mr. Harrington advised that Green Cabs are scent free.

3.3 GPS System

Ms. MacDonald and Mr. Harrington both recounted issues with the GPS System.

Mr. Harrington commented taxis do not come as quickly to his address once they realize there is a guide dog.

Ms. MacDonald commented that as a deaf person, her experience with the GPS system is as follows: The dispatcher asks for her destination when she calls for a cab. She gives the destination to the dispatcher and assumes the driver who arrives will know her destination so she does not prepare a handwritten note in order to communicate the destination to the driver.

When the driver arrives and does not know her destination she is at a loss as she does not have a means to communicate. Ms. MacDonald further advised that on the occasion she does give a handwritten note to the driver, many of the drivers are not able to read or comprehend written English and again she is at a loss as to how to communicate her destination. She asked how this issue could be resolved.

Councillor Adams responded it would be best to have the note prepared as occasionally the driver dispatched to the call may pick up a “flag” and a different driver arrives. He also suggested that anytime there is a problem with a particular driver they should get the roof light number and they can contact himself or Councillor Cooper.

3.4 Sub-Committee - Regional Taxi and Limousine Committee and Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities.

Ms. Coffey asked if the Taxi Committee would be interested in forming a Sub-committee with the Persons with Disabilities Committee. Councillor Adams responded it is a possibility but suggested waiting for the result of the Taxi meeting in January once these issues are brought forward.

4. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 5:10 pm.

Chris Newson
Legislative Assistant