

Visually Impaired Safe Travel Advocates Committee

Mr. Tom Boyd
Halifax Regional Municipality Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities
April 19, 2010

Dear Mr. Boyd:

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak to the HRM Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities at your meeting on May 17, 2010. In preparation for that meeting, we would like to provide you with some background information about our Committee, to summarize our concerns with respect to the lack of responsiveness of our current transit system to the needs of travellers who are blind or visually impaired, and to propose some solutions for discussion with the Advisory Committee.

The purpose of the Visually Impaired Safe Travel Advocates Committee (VISTA) is to advocate for the removal of barriers which impede the ability of blind and low vision citizens of the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) to travel safely, confidently and without restriction throughout the Municipality. It consists of blind and visually impaired consumers and their advocates including representatives of organizations such as the CNIB and the Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority (APSEA). A copy of the Committees Terms of Reference has been provided for your information.

The VISTA Committee was actively involved in lobbying to members of City Council for the reinstatement of complimentary passes to visually impaired transit users as well as for the introduction of measures such as announcements of bus stops to make the existing system more accessible for these passengers. In May of 2009 we wrote to Mayor Peter Kelly and to City Council voicing our concerns. This letter was widely distributed both to city officials and to the press. I also had the privilege of presenting it to the Advisory Committee last spring. The letter identified deficiencies in the current transit system which create barriers for blind and visually impaired travellers and included the following recommendations for improvement:

Scheduling

- Bus schedules, GoTimes and the Rider's Guide should be offered in large print, Braille, and audio formats.
- Any and all online information should be made accessible using recognized accessibility standards.
- Kiosks at bus terminals should have a large screen and provide spoken information.

Bus Stop Signage, Announcements and Information

- Bus stops should contain large print and Braille signage identifying the buses that stop there and the appropriate GoTimes number.

- For those waiting at the bus stop, the number of the bus along with its destination should be announced upon its arrival. The numbers on the buses should be large and easily seen.
- While on the bus, passengers should be informed of every stop, e.g. “North and Robie.” These announcements would benefit other passengers who may be reading or otherwise distracted.

It concluded with a request to City Council as stated below:

“In recognition of the unique circumstances that are faced by visually impaired transit users, the VISTA committee requests your support in our bid to have any decisions regarding fares for visually impaired transit users deferred until the barriers to equality of service for visually impaired Metro Transit riders have been significantly reduced or removed...”

In August, 2009 City Council voted to continue the complimentary passes. This was an inspiring decision for us because it demonstrated that people with disabilities were ready to speak out for themselves as taxpaying citizens of HRM and that city government was willing to listen. However it was also our understanding that the decision to retain the passes was intended to be an interim step to allow time for the development of a more comprehensive and effective approach to making the transit system accessible.

Unfortunately this does not appear to have been the case. Almost a year after the passes were reinstated there appears to have been little progress in addressing the deficiencies which have been identified by the VISTA Committee and by the Advisory Committee itself. Metro Transit's recently published five-year plan contains no reference to persons with visual impairments. Visually impaired transit users are left to wonder whether there is a five-year plan for us, or a ten-year plan or even any plan at all. The VISTA Committee strongly believes that in order for the Metro Transit system to become truly accessible to blind and visually impaired travellers, consideration of the requirements for equal access for persons with disabilities must be included as an integral part of the planning process from the outset instead of being simply an inconvenient afterthought. The Committee also believes that that the participation of visually impaired and blind individuals and their representatives at all stages of the process is fundamental.

We are seeking the support of the Advisory Committee to set in motion a process of planning and cooperation which will result in a transit system that is responsive to the requirements for equality of access of blind and visually impaired citizens.

The members of VISTA would like to put forward the following recommendations to the Advisory Committee:

1. That the Advisory Committee, through HRM City Council, request that Metro Transit establish a plan including well-defined objectives and timetables which will result in the implementation of a transit system which is truly accessible to blind and visually impaired travellers.
2. The Advisory Committee should convene a sub-committee or a special committee which will include blind and visually impaired transit users and their representatives as well as

members of Metro Transit staff in order to ensure that consumers continue to be involved in the development, implantation and monitoring of this planning process.

With respect to specific projects which are currently under way or are scheduled for the near future, Metro Transit should take immediate steps to ensure that the concerns of visual impaired and blind consumers are incorporated into the initial design of these projects.

We are looking forward to the opportunity to share our thoughts with your Committee members on the 17th.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Barbara LeGay
Chair
Visually-Impaired Safe Travel Advocates
3876 Newbery Street
Halifax, Nova Scotia
Canada
B3K 3L8

Visually Impaired Safe Travel Advocates – Terms of Reference

December 10, 2009

1. TITLE

The Committee shall be called the Visually-Impaired Safe Travel Advocates Committee (VISTA).

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of the VISTA Committee is to advocate for the removal of barriers which impede the ability of blind and low vision citizens of the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) to travel safely, confidently and without restriction throughout the Municipality by:

- 2.1 promoting awareness regarding issues and concerns affecting blind and low vision travelers throughout HRM
- 2.2 assessing intersections for accessible pedestrian signals & advocating for their proper installation
- 2.3 promoting proper design and placement of curb ramps
- 2.4 identifying travel hazards & advocating for their removal
- 2.5 working in cooperation with municipal officials as well as organizations of and for persons who are visually-impaired to facilitate active and effective elimination of obstacles to safe travel.

3. MEMBERSHIP

The membership of the committee shall not exceed 15 persons and shall be open to citizens of HRM who are:

- 3.1 blind or low vision residents of HRM who travel independently;
- 3.2 persons who have knowledge and interest in issues pertaining to blind and low vision pedestrians;
- 3.3 representatives from organizations of and for blind or low vision persons;
or
- 3.4 Interested representatives of the Halifax Regional Municipality.

4. COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

All motions passed by the Committee will require the approval of the majority of the membership.

- 4.1 Each individual member will be entitled to one vote, regardless of organizational affiliation.

- 4.2 No voting will take place without a quorum present. A quorum consists of 50 per cent plus 1 of all active members.
- 4.3 The Committee may establish sub-committees to deal with specific issues.

5. OFFICERS

The Committee shall hold an election of officers biannually, at the June meeting of the applicable year. It shall elect from among its members a Chair, a Vice-Chair and a Secretary to serve for a period of two years from the date of election.

- 5.1 The Chair will be responsible for providing general leadership and direction to the Committee, convening and chairing Committee meetings and representing the Committee through contacts and correspondence with other organizations including HIM staff and elected representatives.
- 5.2 The Vice-Chair is responsible for providing assistance in carrying out the duties of the Chair as required or in acting in the absence of the Chair.
- 5.3 The Secretary is responsible for preparing committee records including minutes and agendas, preparing producing and/or distributing correspondence on behalf of the Committee and maintaining Committee membership records.

6. TERMINATION OF MEMBERSHIP

- 6.1 Any member may resign by providing notice in writing to the Secretary of the Committee.
- 6.2 Any member who is unable to attend a meeting should advise the Secretary. A member who misses two consecutive meetings without explanation will be contacted to determine whether he or she still wishes to be a part of the Committee.
- 6.3 Any member who fails to attend three consecutive meetings will be deemed to have resigned from the Committee.

7. MEETINGS

- 7.1 No fewer than four meetings shall be held per year.
- 7.2 Meetings shall be held quarterly in March, June, September and December on the 2nd Thursday of the month.
- 7.3 VENUE

8. AMENDMENTS

- 8.1 These Terms of Reference may be amended from time to time as the Committee sees fit provided that the proposed amendment has been approved by a vote of the majority of the membership.