

Added Item 8.1 - Tory Nauffts - Visually-Impaired Safe Travel Advocates (VISTA) Committee re: Request to Participate in a Meeting of Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities

Hello Troy,

This letter is a followup to our meeting of the Visually-Impaired Safe Travel Advocates Committee (VISTA) of last Thursday, March 11th. The Committee is concerned that the issues regarding safe transit for visually-impaired and blind residents of HRM be considered as an integral part of Metro Transit's planning process and not be pushed aside now that the bus passes have been allowed to continue. As you are a member of the HRM Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities we would appreciate your assistance in requesting that this item be put on the Committee's agenda and that a VISTA Committee representative be allowed to speak to it.

As you know, 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 and I had the privilege of presenting it to the Advisory Committee last spring. It concluded with the following request to Council: "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 City Council voted not to cancel 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 only a first step and even a stopgap to allow time for a more comprehensive and effective approach to making the transit system accessible.

Unfortunately this does not appear to be the case. Metro Transit's recently published five-year plan contains no reference to persons with visual impairments. Visually-impaired transit users are left to wonder, is there a five-year plan for us, or a ten-year plan or any plan at all? The needs of people with disabilities must be part of the planning process from the outset, not just an inconvenient afterthought.

We would like the opportunity to bring this concern to the attention of the Advisory Committee and to seek the Committee's support in helping us to ensure that the decision to retain the complimentary bus passes does not become simply a brush off but rather that it represents the beginning of 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.

Thank you for help in bringing VISTA's concerns forward and for your ongoing advocacy for blind and visually-impaired people. Unfortunately the final version of the VISTA Terms of Reference is not completed for circulation but we will have it available for inclusion in the members' packages prior to any meeting in which we participate.

Please feel free to contact me if you or the Committee require further information.

Barbara LeGay

(Submitted by way of Email March 16, 2010)