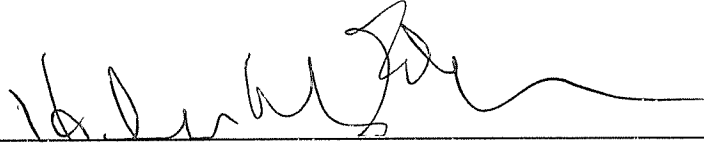


**Halifax Regional Council**  
**August 11, 2009**

**TO:** Mayor Kelly and Members of Halifax Regional Council

**SUBMITTED BY:**



Helen McFadyen, Chair  
Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities

**DATE:** July 21, 2009

**SUBJECT:** Metro Transit Accessibility

**ORIGIN**

June 15<sup>th</sup> and July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009 meetings of the Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities

**RECOMMENDATION**

The Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities suggested that the Committee ask Council to request Metro Transit to provide a report to the Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities with detail of the services that are missing to the blind.

## **BACKGROUND**

Currently, blind and partially sighted individuals encounter serious travel barriers when they use Metro Transit's services. The Advisory Committee has had thorough discussions on the issue of free passes since March 2009. The Committee discussed Metro Transit being asked to carry out a planning process that would include public engagement to work on issues of inaccessible transit system and to come back with a plan that would address the points in the VISTA letter and a timeline on implementation.

## **DISCUSSION**

Correspondence and discussion with Visually Impaired Safe Travel Advisory (VISTA) along with correspondence from Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians demonstrates that Metro Transit's services are not accessible for blind and sight impaired users of transit in HRM. The attached documents discuss deficiencies in Metro Transit's for persons who are blind or visually impaired.

## **BUDGET IMPLICATIONS**

Implications to any Financial Management Policies or Business Plans associated with the recommendations have not been identified. Any associated implications would need to be determined by HRM staff and disclosed to Regional Council in a subsequent report.

## **FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT POLICIES / BUSINESS PLAN**

This report complies with the Municipality's Multi-Year Financial Strategy, the approved Operating, Capital and Reserve budgets, policies and procedures regarding withdrawals from the utilization of Capital and Operating reserves, as well as any relevant legislation.

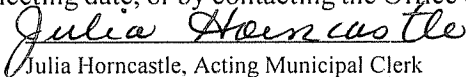
## **ALTERNATIVES**

None

## **ATTACHMENTS**

1. Information Report RE: Deficiencies in Metro Transit System dated July 21, 2009
2. Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians Correspondence date April 20, 2009

A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/agenda.html> then choose the appropriate meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 490-4210, or Fax 490-4208.

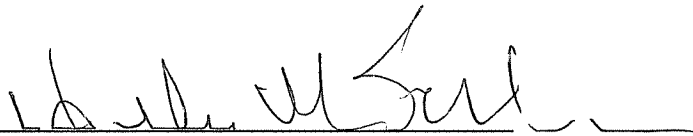
Report Prepared by:  Julia Horncastle, Acting Municipal Clerk



PO Box 1749  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
B3J 3A5 Canada

**Halifax Regional Council**  
**August 11, 2009**

**TO:** Mayor Kelly and Members of Halifax Regional Council

**SUBMITTED BY:**   
Helen McFadyen, Chair  
Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities

**DATE:** July 21, 2009

**SUBJECT:** **Deficiencies in Metro Transit System which Impact on People who are Blind or Partially Sighted and a Suggested Course of Action to Remedy**

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**INFORMATION REPORT**

**ORIGIN**

June 15<sup>th</sup> and July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009 meetings of the Advisory Committee for Persons With Disabilities.

**DISCUSSION**

The following report has been created to identify some of the deficiencies which impact persons who are blind or partially sighted in regard to the transit system. There has been input from numerous Focus Groups, Committees and individuals who are concerned with issues of the blind. The information contained herein will identify some possible solutions.

There are several areas where Metro Transit Services are not accessible for people who are blind or partially sighted.

**BUS STOPS CANNOT BE LOCATED EASILY/ROUTE NUMBERS ARE DIFFICULT TO READ**

Bus stops have no specific or identifiable markings so Blind or partially sighted persons can distinguish if they are standing at a bus stop or a parking pole. Route numbers on the stop indicators

cannot be determined by many people with vision loss; go-time numbers required to access schedule information are problematic for individuals with vision problems.

**Solution:**

**Indicators at each bus stop must be provided to 1) distinguish that these are bus stops, 2) Large print and Braille numbers at each bus stop must be provided to indicate the bus route numbers and the stop's Go-Time number.**

**BUS SCHEDULE INFORMATION IS INACCESSIBLE**

There are no bus schedules or route maps available in large print, Braille, audio CD or computer CD Rom formats. There is no audio function for schedule information at terminals. On the HRM website, blind people cannot access Metro Transit bus information even if they use the most advanced screen reading software. It should be noted that this is a problem with the design of the web site and not a software problem. Presently, web site accessibility is being challenged by advocacy groups of the blind in the USA (American Federation of the Blind Versus Target retail stores in USA)

The HRM call centre is often the only way blind people can attain bus schedule information. The HRM call centre is inadequate for the following reasons: 1) blind individuals are not always near a phone when they need bus schedule information, 2) the call centre is not always open, and 3) there is often a holding period before an operator in the call centre can be reached. If bus schedules and route information were available in alternate formats (Large Print, Braille, Audio CD, computer CD ROM) and audio function was available at terminal kiosk, this would vastly improve transit services for Blind and sight-impaired individuals. Once the web site for HRM's services meets Canadian web accessibility guidelines, all people in HRM will benefit equally from this improvement.

**Solution:**

**(In consultation with consumer advocacy groups, example VISTA, AEBC - See also Addendum A**

- **Provide bus schedule information and route information in Large Print, Braille, audio CD MP3, computer CD Rom.**
- **Provide and maintain kiosks at bus terminals which have large screens and clear audio announcement of schedule information.**
- **The HRM web site must be made more accessible for blind patrons who use screen reading software (HRM should implement Canadian web accessibility guidelines and test the web site with consumers).**

**BUSES ARE DIFFICULT TO FIND**

Blind people often rely on strangers to tell them which buses are coming, and where buses are going

to pull into a terminal (buses often can't stop at their designated stop location because of bus overcrowding and schedules). Frequently, Blind people miss their bus especially if there is no one nearby to help locate the bus in question. Regardless of the weather, Blind people often must stand outside bus shelters next to the bus stop in order to be sure the right bus stops to pick them up (if Blind people wait inside the shelter, buses often pass them by). When buses arrive, some drivers announce the bus number if the driver notices someone is "obviously" blind (white cane or guide dog). However, usually a blind person must ask each bus driver who stops, which number bus he/she is driving, Metro Transit "Hailer cards" (cards with bus numbers for the blind person to hold) fail to be of any use.

**Solution: (see also Addendum A)**

**Bus drivers or an automated system, must announce each bus route's number upon arrival at terminals and at individual stops along the route.**

**The bus route number and route destination signs on the vehicles should be large and clear.**

**The complex traffic of buses at terminals should be better coordinated. There are safety concerns when buses pull up in areas away from the platform (this may require a blind person to cross in front of other buses or vehicles to board the bus). This often occurs at the bridge and Mumford terminals.**

## **BUS STOP ANNOUNCEMENT**

The most difficult problem for Blind or sight-impaired individuals who use Metro Transit, is that bus drivers do not automatically announce stops on bus routes. Currently, blind people must rely on well-intentioned drivers to remember to announce a requested stop on the route. Often, drivers forget to alert Blind passengers (Blind people usually rely on other bus patrons to help them know where to get off the bus). A common development is for the driver or the blind person to realize that the bus has passed the requested stop; the blind person is then let off at another stop. This can be stressful, inconvenient and disorienting for Blind patrons; time spent getting back to the right stop can be enormous. Orienting and travelling in unfamiliar territory can be hazardous and dangerous for those who are blind.

In other jurisdictions in Canada (Toronto, for example) Human Rights cases have been fought and won by individuals (David Lepofsky in Toronto, Terrence Green in Ottawa, both blind lawyers). The Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) spent over \$350,000.00 in legal fees to fight the Lepofsky Human Rights case and eventually lost at the Supreme Court level. The ruling mandated that the TTC must announce all stops on buses, street cars, and subways. Voice enunciator systems are now in place to automatically announce stops - this frees drivers from the responsibility of doing this task.

In other Canadian cities, transit companies have voluntarily or arbitrarily implemented similar bus stop announcements policies by verbally calling out stops. While Metro Transit has indicated interest in adding the voice enunciator technology to its system, the commitment is not there. It

seems the basic technology exists such that the voice enunciator interface can be set up (the Real Time Go Time uses GPS system; though it remains semi-operational at this time). However, no money has been budgeted for this improvement to the system. A serious commitment by HRM and Metro Transit to develop a plan with a time line to implement a voice enunciator on the bus system is needed. Automated bus stop announcements could benefit many - tourists, new residents of HRM and anyone using an unfamiliar bus route.

**Solution:**

1. **Metro Transit commit to funding and implementing a plan with a timeline to place voice enunciators on all buses to announce all stops to the travelling public.**
2. **Until the voice enunciator system is functioning, we recommend that all bus drivers regularly and consistently announce the following stops on each bus route:**
  - **Each major intersection**
  - **Transfer points (example “North and Robie”, “Spring Garden and South Park”, “Quinpool and Oxford”)**
  - **Bus terminals**
  - **Universities**
  - **High schools**
  - **Hospitals**
  - **Manors**
  - **All major public buildings (example, Professional Centre, Museum of Natural History, Scotia Square, Historic Properties)**
  - **All stops requested by passengers**

**The challenge for bus drivers will be to announce designated stops on all the routes wherever they work. Consulting with groups such as AEBC, VISTA, CNIB, Senior’s Secretariat, could help determine a reasonable list of stops that drivers should announce until an automated system is in place.**

**The following is a list of some of the local groups and organizations who can help solve transit problems for those who are blind and sight-impaired:**

- **Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians (Halifax)**
- **Canadian Council for the Blind (Halifax)**
- **CNIB (PEI/Nova Scotia)**
- **Independent Living Resource Centre**
- **Reachability**
- **Senior’s Secretariat of Nova Scotia**
- **VISTA Committee (Visually Impaired Safe Travel Advisory)**

**ADDENDUM A: Summary of consumer focus group held at CNIB April 2009 - submitted by VISTA (Visually Impaired Safe Travel Advisory) Committee**

**Website**

**Problem:** Difficult to navigate website

**Solution:**

Redesign using TransLink (Vancouver) website as a template for the general public  
[http://tripplanning.translink.bc.ca/hiwire?.a=iTripPlanning&.s={\\$\\$SID}](http://tripplanning.translink.bc.ca/hiwire?.a=iTripPlanning&.s={$$SID})

**Problem:** Difficult to plan bus trip route

**Solution:**

- Use TransLink (Vancouver) website "Trip Planner" for route planning
- Use html format versus pdf files
- Include description of bus routes, transfer times and locations
- Have large print and Braille hardcopies of bus schedule

**Bus Stops**

**Problem:** Difficulty finding bus stops and accessing sign information

**Solution:**

- Use a small speed bump on sidewalk to define parameters of the bus stops (more durable than tactile strips for winter snow removal)
- OR replace one sidewalk pad with different tactile material (i.e. non-slip cobblestone, brick, etc.)
- Greater colour contrast on the signs (blue or yellow is not ideal), larger numbers, larger sign, - to see GoTime and the route
- Consider local company, Eye Catch Signs, to provide accessible signage  
<http://www.eyecatchsigns.com/en/home/default.aspx>
- Incorporate "info tubes" on the ID pole at bus stop which will contain visual timetable information
- Investigate Braille "info tubes" for ID poles

**Problem:** Inconsistency in the distance between bus stop signs, benches, sidewalks

**Solution:**

Implement a standardized bus stop arrangement (i.e. constant distance from sidewalk to bus sign, from bus sign to curb, from bench to bus sign, etc.)

**Problem:** Difficulty identifying approaching buses

**Solution:**

- Use better colour contrast for bus number/route display on buses
- From the bus use GPS system to automatically announce bus number/route when bus doors open

**Problem:** Snow

**Solution:**

Remove snow more consistently and effectively

**Bus Terminals**

**Problem:** Cannot consistently find desired bus due to inconsistent parking bays and multiple lanes of buses.

**Solution:**

- **Announce over loud speaker bus arrival by number and route name as well as the bay where bus will stop**
- **Have buses pull into bay for loading versus parking in a lane - this poses a danger to users trying to pass through the lanes**

**On the Bus**

**Problem:** Cannot independently identify where to disembark

**Solution:**

Use GPS system to announce upcoming bus stops

**Problem:** Difficulty identifying location/bus stops through painted advertisements on bus windows

**Solution:**

Limit advertisements to bus panels

**General Discussion:**

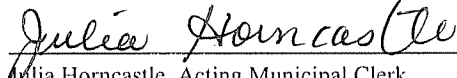
- GPS benefits low-vision users as well as drivers by decreasing distractions while driving; the driver can focus on navigating the road safely, GPS announcements are also beneficial for new riders and tourists
- Hybrid buses are a potential concern as low-vision users have difficulty hearing them



- approaching bus stops and when crossing the street
- Invite HRM Metro Transit representatives to participate in impact training at the CNIB to gain a better understanding for the need for accessibility

Copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/cagenda.html> then choose the appropriate meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 490-4210, or Fax 490-4208.

Report Prepared by:

  
Julia Horncastle, Acting Municipal Clerk

April 20, 2009

To Whom It May Concern-

On behalf of the Halifax Chapter of the Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians I writing to appeal for your support to correct what we consider a poorly thought out decision made recently by Metro Transit. As you are likely aware in late December our municipal transit authority announced it would discontinue its policy of providing complimentary yearly bus access passes to registered clients of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind effective July 1st, 2009.

Given that the membership of the A.E.B.C. and the C.N.I.B. overlaps to some extent this matter concerns our membership a great deal. The decision to end this long-standing policy came as a shock to the many blind transit riders who have relied upon Metro Transit as their primary means of transportation throughout the HRM. The "free pass" policy enabled our members to gain the mobility required to participate in our local society. For many blind residents of Halifax this recent announcement will drastically affect their quality of life.

An unemployment rate among people who are blind in Halifax of more than 70% is a dramatic reality faced by our membership. While it is true that there are people working who are blind or visually impaired in the city and throughout Nova Scotia there remain many barriers to employment for the majority. These barriers are gradually being addressed and eroded thanks to the good work of concerned and committed Nova Scotians. In the past a contribution toward this change had indeed been made by Metro Transit. This should have been a point of pride for the HRM. But this contribution will soon be forgotten as the transit authority forces our community to take a step backwards in an ongoing effort for equality and equal access to services.

These blind residents of Halifax that are not working are on a limited income often barely enough to meet the financial demands that fall upon them to subsidize. Costs such as rent, heat, food, clothing and medication consume the majority if not all of the social assistance or disability benefits or meager wages earned by this underemployed population. In the past, the fact that these people have been able to shop, attend training, receive medical care, interview for a job, visit friends, vote or volunteer, with the assistance of Metro Transit's complimentary pass has meant that there was one less barrier standing between them and what they require to participate in the Halifax community.

The cost of a monthly transit pass will be out of reach for many people who are blind in Halifax. What will amount to a savings for Metro Transit will undoubtedly surface as residual costs through the further loss of opportunity for people who are blind in Halifax. Unemployed people contribute far less to the city than working people. Unhealthy and isolated people face a worse fate.

Residents of Halifax have been reliably vocal about the state of icy city streets and sidewalks this winter. It has been a harsh couple of months and the city is doing what it can to keep up with the season. Unclear sidewalks may be a bother and struggle for sighted residents of Halifax to navigate, but for blind pedestrians these routes are impassable. Should the snow be cleared then ice-buildup at crosswalks and unshoveled curbs at intersections create hazards that are dangerous and confusing to someone with vision impairments and could prove fatal. Without the access to transit which has previously been afforded them, people who are blind in Halifax will be far less able to get around our city.

In a letter between Duncan Williams, Director, Service and Operations CNIB Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and P.E.I., and Laurie Patterson, Manager Public Affairs with Metro Transit, I quote that Metro Transit

“Is no longer in a position to offer the free transit passes to CNIB patrons.” The main reason cited for the discontinuation of the pass is that “none of the other groups or persons has been extended the same benefit of a free pass and as a result it has made it unfair for us (Metro Transit) to continue to offer this benefit solely to CNIB patrons.”

While we do understand that Metro Transit was pressured to come to this decision by other persons and groups with other mobility challenges we - as blind, deaf-blind and visually impaired citizens of HRM - find this decision unfair. Blind, deaf-blind and visually impaired transit users wish that we could have been asked in advance for our suggestions and opinions regarding the decision to discontinue the free transit pass.

If Metro Transit wants all blind, deaf-blind and visually impaired transit users in the HRM to pay for the use of transit services, this is what they should have kept in mind before making their decision to no longer hand out free bus passes to the blind, deaf-blind and visually impaired.

1. Metro Transit drivers do not call out all bus stops, even when asked to do so. In a recent meeting between the Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians and Metro Transit, it is for the safety of drivers and passengers, as well as the “Privacy Act”. We do recognize that most times when a driver is asked to let a blind, deaf-blind or a visually impaired passenger off at a certain location, they do so without any problems but occasionally, there have been instances where blind, deaf-blind and

visually impaired transit users have been dropped off at another location unfamiliar to them which causes confusion and is stressful to the individual. There have even been instances where drivers have forgotten to let passengers off at their requested location.

2. The bus schedules are not accessible in alternate formats. For instance, it is hard to access PDF files on the website for screen reading software users. It is not printed in large print or Braille.
3. Bus transfers are not printed in large print or Braille. When asking some bus drivers, they, too, have a problem reading the small print that is on the transfers. We will have to rely upon kind citizens to read our transfers if available.
4. The blind, deaf-blind and visually impaired transit users, at times, must rely on sighted citizens to determine which bus is pulling into the bus stops. Drivers will pull up when possible to ask which number they are but on occasion, bus stops become crowded with other buses and buses will pull out around other buses that we may be waiting for.
5. Bus schedules on screens at major bus terminals are not accessible for the blind, deaf-blind or visually impaired. Again, we must rely on sighted citizens for their help.
6. Bus stops are difficult to find, especially in unfamiliar locations. We must rely upon sighted citizens to help find the stop. This is even more difficult in the winter time.
7. Metro Transit signs posted on poles, telephone poles and trees are not accessible for blind, deaf-blind and visually impaired transit users.
8. The website is not accessible.
9. Reading the "Go Time" phone number on bus stop signs are not accessible.
10. Surveys distributed to blind, deaf-blind and visually impaired transit users in HRM are not printed in alternate formats.
11. We do not have the privilege and never will to have a "Driver's permit".

It is for these reasons that the membership of the Halifax Chapter of the A.E.B.C. ask that you to take this message to our elected officials so they might move to address this issue when the time comes to approve the Capital Budget. We ask

that you put forth to Metro Transit that they retract their decision and carry-on with the existing pass agreement until a more just decision can be made.

Our organization would happily participate in any discussions that could go toward rectifying this situation or come up with alternative solutions to the current decision. We kindly ask that you pass this message on to our municipal representatives.

Sincerely -

Jeff Overmars  
Co-Chair  
A.E.B.C. Halifax Chapter

DarleneWournell  
Secretary  
A.E.B.C. Halifax Chapter