

Halifax Regional Council
July 7, 2009
August 11, 2009

TO: Mayor Kelly and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY:



Helen McFadyen, Chair
Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities

DATE: June 25, 2009

SUBJECT: Metro Transit Free Passes for the Blind

ORIGIN

June 15, 2009 Meeting of the Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Regional Council request Metro Transit not discontinue the bus passes to the blind until accessibility has been reached for the visually impaired.

BACKGROUND

The Advisory Committee for Persons With Disabilities has met with members of Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians and VISTA (Visually Impaired Safe Travel Advisory) and has reviewed correspondence that highlights serious concerns with regard to Metro Transit's ability to provide accessible transit for blind and partially sighted individuals.

DISCUSSION

Since November 2008, ACPWD has had lengthy discussions with staff, Metro Transit, and advocacy groups for the blind (Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians and VISTA for example). At the June 15th meeting of ACPD, the Advisory Committee concluded that Metro Transit's services are not accessible for blind users. The ACPD recommend that Council direct Metro Transit to continue issuing free transit passes for the blind until Metro Transit's services are deemed accessible for blind and partially sighted clients.

The ACPD can draft recommendations to assist Metro Transit in solving shortcomings for clients who are blind or partially sighted.

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. Correspondence dated May 19, 2009 from Patrick Harrington, Chair, VISTA (Visually Impaired Safe Travel Advisory) Committee

A 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

RE: 4.1

Patrick Harrington, Chair
Visually Impaired Safe Travel Advocates (VISTA)
3761 Robie St.
Halifax, NS
B3K 4T3

19 May 2009

Mayor Peter Kelly and Members of the Halifax Regional Municipality City Council
1841 Argyle Street
P.O. Box 1749
Halifax, NS
B3J 3A5

Dear Mayor Kelly and Members of Council:

Re: Cancellation of Complimentary Bus Passes for Visually Impaired Metro Transit Users

The Visually Impaired Safe Travel Advocates Committee (VISTA) was formed several years ago by blind and low vision consumers to explore and promote safe travel and accessible practices throughout the Halifax Regional Municipality. Our committee is composed of visually-impaired and sighted individuals as well as representatives from the Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority and The Canadian National Institute for the Blind. Over the years the VISTA committee has worked in cooperation with the staff of the Halifax Regional Municipality to foster a safe and positive experience for visually impaired pedestrians as they travel throughout HRM. We are extremely proud of the success that has been achieved for both visually impaired pedestrians and the Halifax Regional Municipality because of this working relationship. For example, it has resulted in direct consultation with regard to the implementation of Audible Pedestrian Signals, and sensitivity training for HRM staff.

This cooperation would not have been possible without the support of our elected municipal representatives who have endorsed the allocation of funds for the installation of audible pedestrian signals throughout HRM.

We were extremely disappointed to learn of the unilateral decision of Metro Transit to rescind the complimentary bus passes which have been provided to visually impaired transit users.

As of July 1, 2009, persons who are visually impaired will pay exactly the same fare as the majority of the users of transit with the exception of seniors and children. It stands to reason that if they are expected to pay the same fare as other passengers, visually impaired persons have a right to expect equal service. Sadly, this will not be the case.

Metro Transit is alleging that they have received complaints from other disability groups that the provision of complimentary passes discriminates against their members in that it confers an unequal benefit on visually impaired transit users. On the contrary, on July 1, visually impaired riders will themselves be subjected to discrimination if they are required to pay the full transit fare for benefits and services which are not accessible to them.

For example, it is difficult or impossible to:

1. Locate the actual bus stop;
2. Read GoTime and/or route information on the signs;
3. Know which bus has arrived;
4. Locate a specific bus at a bus terminal;
5. Know when a specific stop has been reached;
6. Read the Riders Guide and/or route maps or bus schedules;
7. Use online information about schedules or go times ;

Visually impaired riders must rely on the charity of strangers to inform them when their bus is coming and often when they have arrived at their stop as well. Bus operators may easily forget to remind a passenger that a stop has arrived as they respond to other distractions such as heavy traffic and the needs of other passengers.

Many if not all of these issues are capable of resolution with a combination of consultation, innovative thinking and advanced technology. What can be done to provide equal service? The following are some examples:

- Bus schedules, GoTime and the Riders 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 stops should contain large print and Braille signage identifying the buses that stop there and the appropriate GoTime 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.

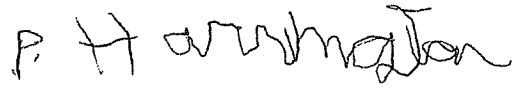
To the best of our knowledge Metro Transit has made no commitment to visually impaired riders that it intends to address these problems at any time soon. In its recent report to the Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities, Metro Transit offers the following vague promise: "We still hope to maintain our long-time working relationship with CNIB and plan to continue to work towards providing accessible transportation to as many people as possible, and continue to make upgrades as budget dollars can be allocated." This is cold comfort to visually impaired transit users who are being expected to pay full fare now for services they may never receive.

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 and until Metro Transit has carried out a

thorough and objective review of the issues surrounding fare concessions for persons with disabilities.

Please accept my sincere thanks for your consideration of our submission.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "P. Harrington". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P" and a long, sweeping underline.

Patrick Harrington

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