

Fair Fares Calgary Celebrates Reduced Fare Transit Passes

For the first time ever, some 2,000 Calgary residents whose income is derived from Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) benefits were issued reduced rate monthly transit passes on August 1, 2005.² This ground-breaking action was followed by Calgary's City Council's September 2005 decision to issue such passes to

the city's low-income residents, beginning in January 2006. During 2006, the estimated \$2 million it will cost to provide these \$35 passes will be drawn from the city's Fiscal Stability Reserve Fund. Vibrant Communities Calgary organizers are optimistic that efforts to bring the City Council and provincial government representatives together to work out a long-term funding solution will be successful.

Established in 2002, Vibrant Communities is a pan-Canadian initiative that explores promising local solutions to reduce poverty. Fifteen communities from across Canada have formed a learning partnership through which they share ideas, resources and strategies related to poverty reduction. Each of the participating communities already had done considerable work to alleviate poverty and saw Vibrant Communities as a way to extend and enrich their efforts. This story is the seventh in a series which highlights successful strategies for reducing poverty and building caring communities.¹ For more information, visit: <http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca>

Background

For Canadians who earn an income sufficient to own and operate a car, it can be difficult to imagine what it must be like to live on \$950 a month (the amount currently paid to AISH recipients). Having to make choices between eating, paying rent and buying a transit pass is a stark reality for those living on low incomes.

When the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped program was being reviewed by the Alberta government in 2003, members of the Calgary Committee for Discounted Transit Passes made submissions to the review committee. They

asked not only for an increase to AISH benefits (then at \$855 per month), but also to have the province consider splitting the costs with municipalities for reduced fare transit passes for all low-income Albertans. “For us,” says Bonnie Pacaud, a committee member, “a transit pass was part of the larger issue of allowing people the means to make a positive contribution to their society. When people with low incomes or who have a disability cannot get to work or volunteer opportunities, we rob both them and ourselves of the gifts and talents they have to share.”

The Calgary Committee for Discounted Transit Passes was started in 1998 by Bonnie Pacaud and (now) Calgary Transit Manager Stephen Hansen. Bonnie had served on a provincial committee which studied transportation issues that affected people with developmental disabilities. Stephen had worked with the City of Calgary’s Social Services Department from 1983 to 1999, providing transportation services for persons with disabilities. The Special Needs Taxi, a user subsidy program for people with disabilities who were also living on low incomes, had taught him a great deal about the hardships associated with paying for transportation. In 1999, special transportation was joined with Calgary Transit and Stephen moved with it.

Between 1998 and 2001, the Calgary Committee for Discounted Transit Passes continued to add new members from both the disability community and employees of The City of Calgary. Leanne Squair, an Issues Strategist with The City of Calgary’s Committee on Access and Disability, helped to bring information and issues forward to Calgary City Council. Colleen Huston, a member of the Disability Action Hall – a grass-roots support organization for people with disabilities – collected front-line stories from individuals who were struggling to overcome transportation barriers. She scheduled regular meetings with City Council and individual aldermen to maintain

focus on the transit pass issue. The committee’s real goal – with the help and support of City Council – was to convince the provincial government of its responsibility to help pay the costs of reduced transit for those in need.

Says Colleen: “By now, the working group in Calgary felt that reduced fare transit passes should be available to all low-income residents, not just those who were receiving AISH benefits. We worked with city councils in Edmonton and Red Deer to try to build support for a province-wide transit program for low-income Albertans, but over time, it became clear that the province saw this as an AISH-only initiative. We were offered assistance for a pilot program for AISH recipients, but by the middle of 2005, Calgary City Council members had reached a point where they would no longer wait for provincial involvement – this was an issue whose time had come.”

Responding positively to change

The City of Calgary has undergone massive growth since 2000. Its suburbs are expanding rapidly and its population is nearing the one million mark. Road and transit systems, sewer and other municipal services are straining to keep up with development. Residents and City Council have recognized that their city’s social fabric needs more attention to absorb the strains created by a city with both great wealth and great poverty.

Says Leanne Squair: “Throughout municipal government, departments are adopting a triple bottom line filter for their operations – economic, environmental and social. For the first time, for example, our transit plan has a chapter which deals with the social issues of transportation. In 2004, our Community Services department initiated Fair Calgary – a lens which looks at city services to make sure they are equitable and fair. When City Council and provincial elections were

held simultaneously in October 2004, the time was right for the low-income transit issue to finally get the green light.” Leanne’s position as an issues strategist for access and disability issues – a job she has held for four years – is another indicator of The City of Calgary’s level of commitment to social issues.

Remarks made by Alberta’s Premier on the issue of funding for AISH in the lead-up to the fall 2004 provincial elections had the effect of focusing considerable attention on benefits levels and the barriers faced by persons with disabilities. Television coverage was effective in conveying the problems that arise as a result of these barriers. Disability and low-income support organizations capitalized on the transit issue’s higher profile and began to work together to develop a solution for their members.

New name, new energy

United Way of Calgary and Area, a co-convenor of Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC), had conducted an AISH public policy roundtable – a two-year initiative which had helped influence the Alberta government’s changes to the AISH program in April 2005 [Makhoul 2005]. From their first days as a working group in 2003, roundtable members had earned the respect of many Calgary disability organizations and municipal and provincial government representatives for their professionalism and inclusive approach. Ramona Johnston, VCC’s current Manager who was then a United Way representative on the AISH roundtable, approached the Calgary Committee for Discounted Transit Passes in 2004 to offer them support and assistance with moving the issue forward. There was immediate interest.

Says Leanne Squair: “Vibrant Communities Calgary’s standing in the community was held in good stead by City Council, and its involvement

helped to round out the transit pass committee’s membership. In the past, there had been concern that the group did not bring as broad a perspective from disability organizations as City officials would have liked, but the addition of VCC laid that concern to rest.”

VCC’s first suggestion was to rename the committee “Fair Fares Calgary” – a move which, though cosmetic, had the effect of succinctly communicating the group’s message. A second suggestion was to select two committee members to act as co-chairs and spokespeople. “We would have preferred to maintain our inclusive way of operating,” says Colleen Huston, who now co-chairs Fair Fares Calgary with Bonnie Pacaud. “However, we recognized that the moment had come where we would either adopt a traditional structure and be part of the discussion, or remain in the background. We felt that it was more important for city staff to continue to hear our input.”

Despite the more positive City Council attitude toward the provision of low-income transit passes (LITPs), the Council voted in December 2004 to increase transit pass fares by \$5 for adults and \$7 for youth, bringing their monthly cost to \$70 and \$47, respectively. Aldermen Ray Jones and Bob Hawkesworth requested that a report be prepared for council by March 2005 which would spell out the cost of providing LITPs. Fair Fares representatives increased the frequency of their meetings with City Hall staff and aldermen.

VCC offered to help Fair Fares Calgary launch a letter- and postcard-writing campaign. Anadarko Canada Corporation, a VCC corporate partner, lent Fair Fares their graphic design team and United Way of Calgary and Area paid for the production and printing of 2,000 postcards which summarized the reduced fare transit pass issue. VCC asked its members to distribute the postcards

and encouraged them to write to their individual aldermen. Says Colleen Huston: “VCC was effective at helping broaden the base of support and interest for the issue, particularly among Calgary’s middle-income population. By bringing different groups together around the issue – funders, donors, socially conscious politicians, social service organizations, people living in poverty – VCC helped us to engage people in a positive way. The letters they submitted demonstrated to City aldermen that public opinion favoured the creation of reduced fare passes for low-income residents.”

At Council meetings in the spring of 2005, a number of aldermen reported receiving several hundred postcards and many letters in support of Fair Fares. In June, a second set of financial reports was reviewed and Council voted

to move forward with LITPs for AISH recipients. In September, Council voted to extend the program to all Calgary’s low-income residents.

Commit now, pay later

The successful effort to establish the reduced fare transit pass program was not an overnight success story. Years of collecting information and stories, and preparing the ground for a new way of looking at the problems facing people living on low incomes came first. Fair Fares committee members appreciate the hard work carried out by Calgary’s transit department. Key players were involved and committed to the idea of providing support for AISH recipients as far back as the late 1990s.



Anardako Canada Corporation – a VCC partner – designed the Fair Fares Calgary postcard. Pictured are Ruth Kohut, past co-chair of VCC's Steering Committee, and her two daughters.

City Council took the brave step of making the passes a reality after a decade of negotiating with the province to contribute funds in support of low-income residents. Says Stephen Hansen: “The city is responsible for transit and the province is responsible for providing income security measures for low-income Albertans. After the new City Council was elected in late 2004, there was a greater commitment to the reduced transit pass issue. That, combined with several failed attempts to engage the province and the lobbying efforts of Fair Fares, tipped the balance and we decided to go it alone. We are still negotiating with the province to share the responsibility for funding the transit passes, but our city and council have committed their support and we will work out the financing as best we can.”

City Transit Manager of Business Strategies, Koji Miyaji, was given the task of working out the costs and logistics of offering half-price transit passes to the 35,000 low-income Calgarians under age 65 (seniors have a reduced rate pass already) who use public transportation. His earlier reports in March and June 2005 detailed the costs of issuing passes for the AISH population. The City is working out the logistics of providing a one-time administration card that will identify people who qualify for the passes, an efficient way of distributing them and, most importantly, how the roughly \$2 million annual cost of providing the passes will be raised.

The true cost of operating the low-income transit pass program is still unclear. Though the City projects a loss of revenue for riders who pay \$35 instead of the current \$70 monthly charge, more people can now afford to purchase passes – overall ridership and revenues actually may increase as a result of the program.

Says Alderman Joe Ceci: “Council members who opposed the LITPs repeatedly pointed

to transit revenue losses and omitted any consideration of the fact that if more people actually ride transit for employment, enjoyment and volunteer responsibilities, it is a really good thing that will pay off in the long run. Increased ridership is good for the fare box, the environment, and individual and community productivity.”

Though some 8,000 Calgary residents receive AISH benefits, only about 5,000 of them use public transportation. Estimates of the numbers of people living on low incomes who may take advantage of the lower fare passes in January are difficult to forecast. Even at a lower rate, many low-income Calgarians will be unable to pay for a pass outright and will continue to pay as they go.

Turning up the heat

After the many years of research and discussion, Vibrant Communities Calgary acted as a catalyst to the process of establishing low-income transit passes: It offered key ingredients that helped engage citizens in the issue. Says Fair Fares co-chair Bonnie Pacaud: “We began working at the low-income transit pass issue seven years ago, and it had begun to feel like it might never be resolved. Even though our committee tried to maintain a grassroots approach, when we joined with VCC, the campaign took off. They gave us access to good administrative support when we needed it and they brought in fresh people and fresh ideas. We had all the right puzzle pieces, but they needed to be maneuvered into place and that’s where VCC’s enthusiasm and commitment came into play.”

Bonnie continues: “Fair Fares still sees the issue of providing a low-income transit pass as a provincial responsibility. Shortly after the elections, one of Calgary’s MLAs held out a glimmer of hope by telling us that if Calgary City Council

supported the issue, she would too. We will continue to work with the provincial government to get the financing sorted out. This is not an issue about which groups receive benefits and which ones don't. It's about getting people to where they need to be so they can contribute positively to our society. Right now, the province has a department that builds roads, but its structures are not set up to assist the people who actually use the roads. That has to change.”

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul coordinates the 'community stories' series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

Endnotes

1. Other stories in this Vibrant Communities series include:
 - *Waterloo Region's Guaranteed Income Supplement Campaign* (January 2005)
 - *Quality of Life CHALLENGE in Victoria Invites Low-income Canadians to Speak for Themselves* (April 2005)
 - *Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Public Policy Initiative* (May 2005)
 - *Community Action in Saint John: Making a Difference in the Lives of Young People* (May 2005)
 - *The Living Wage Learning Initiative* (May 2005)
 - *Local Heroes: CAW 199 and Community Partners* (September 2005)
 - *Victoria's Regional Housing Trust Fund: So Far, So Good* (November 2005)

2. Statistics Canada estimates that 132,000 Calgarians were below its after-tax low income cutoffs in 2005. City records estimate that 35,000 low-income Calgarians use public transport – 5,000 of whom are AISH recipients.

Reference

Makhoul, A. (2005). *Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Public Policy Initiative*. Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy, May.

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