

Fair Fares 2008: Roadblocks and Opportunities

This story provides an update of an initiative documented earlier by the Caledon ‘community stories’ series. Please visit www.caledoninst.org to learn more about Fair Fares.

Introduction

Transportation is not just about getting from one place to another. When people can move around their community easily and affordably, they come to know it better and are free to participate in whatever activities they choose.

People who cannot afford a vehicle generally rely on public transportation to get to work or school, but in Calgary, even that option is too expensive for many residents. Fortunately, Calgarians who live on low incomes – including those who receive the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped benefit (AISH) – have been able to apply for a Universal Low Income Transit (ULIT) pass since January 2006. The ULIT service allows low-income riders to buy passes at half the regular rate, a savings of \$37.50 per month. Figures from Calgary Transit report that 10,000 out of 35,000 eligible residents have applied for the passes; roughly 5,000 people per month buy the ULIT pass. The cost of the program is estimated at \$2 million annually, and during 2006 and 2007, expenses were covered by Calgary Transit’s surplus revenues.

Joining together in 2004 under the name “Fair Fares,” Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) and the Calgary Committee for Discounted Transit Passes launched a concerted effort to convince City staff, aldermen and Calgary Transit officials of the importance of reduced fare passes [Makhoul 2005]. The City of Calgary decided to establish the passes for AISH recipients in 2005 and then extended the program in 2006 to low-income residents. Says Interim VCC Director Connie Johnson: “Though the City and community groups had long tried to get the province to provide more support for such a program, the City decided to go it alone and we are grateful for that commitment.”

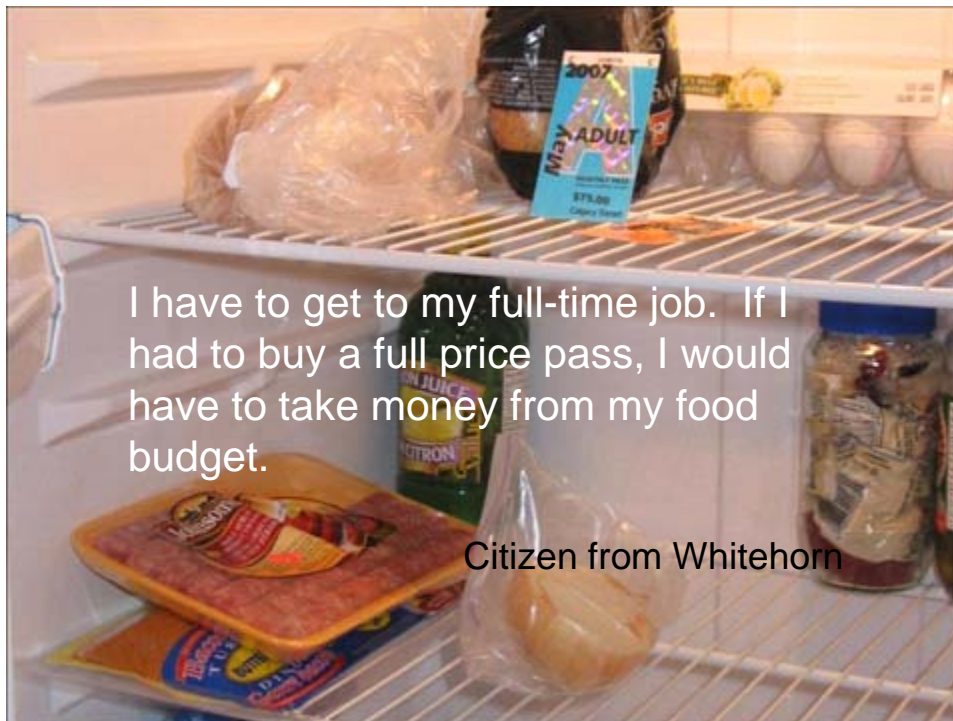
The Fair Fares Action Team continues to meet monthly. Members now include City of Calgary and Calgary Transit employees, representatives from VCC and other nonprofit organizations, the disability community and people living in poverty.

In addition to the work being done to assist people in financial difficulty, a group of Calgary employers began meeting with VCC and Calgary Transit to establish corporate passes as a means of attracting and retaining new staff. Since learning more about transportation issues, however, this group has chosen to lend its support to making ULIT passes a permanent service and is educating its own staff members about pass eligibility requirements.

Changes in the landscape

Fair Fares presentations to Calgary’s Standing Policy Committee on Land Use, Planning and Transportation in September 2006 helped secure funding for ULIT passes for 2007. But the program’s longevity is by no means a sure thing.

Over the summer of 2007, the Fair Fares Action Team spent time preparing for the City’s upcoming decision to continue the pilot program, make it a permanent expenditure or shelve it altogether. Instead, Calgary Transit decided to fund the ULIT passes through to the end of 2008 using surplus funds from 2007.



Reflection on the importance of the ULIT pass from a Calgary resident.

In June, VCC and Calgary Transit jointly commissioned a study to evaluate the social and economic impact of the ULIT service on pass purchasers. Researchers were heartened to learn that, among the survey's 401 respondents, affordable transportation has had the effect of increasing volunteerism, social engagement, learning and participation in the labour force. Respondents also said that the less expensive passes made it a little easier for them to meet their monthly expenses.

City staff have reported that the ULIT passes account for only \$2 million of the City's \$26 million user fee revenue fund. VCC members take this as a positive indication that the relatively low cost and reported community benefits of the passes will convince newly-elected and returning aldermen to continue funding the program.

Another reason for optimism is the proposed adoption of a municipal fairness filter. Passed in 2006, the "Fair Calgary" policy is meant to reduce inequalities among citizens – including eliminating income as a barrier to City services. Council will vote on several amendments to the policy in February 2008. ULIT promoters are hopeful that one in particular will pass: the establishment of a single-entry eligibility screen for City services and programs, which would replace the current patchwork.

Says VCC Project Coordinator Nicole Neve: "Some City employers are concerned that the single-entry eligibility screen could have an impact on the popular Seniors Transit Pass [STP]." Though it established these passes in 1973 as a protection for seniors living in poverty, Calgary Transit has frozen STP rates at \$35 per year. Single seniors with incomes under \$18,745 and senior couples with earnings less than \$28,530 pay \$15 for an annual pass. The Fair Calgary policy would ensure that seniors living on a low income would have continued access to affordable transportation. Fair Fares hopes that a revised fee schedule for seniors could help offset the costs of the ULIT pass program.

Areas for work

Efforts to engage the provincial government in discussions about funding low-income transit options have been part of the Calgary scene for more than a decade. After a presentation by Fair Fares members to the provincial Standing Policy Committee on Education and Employment in September 2006, Calgary-Shaw MLA Cindy Ady agreed to follow up a request to establish a cross-ministerial committee to explore the issue of affordable transportation. A letter to VCC in early April 2007 from Alberta's Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing made it clear, however, that the province's funding interest was limited to the Unconditional Municipal Grant Program. VCC hopes to keep open future discussion within the Ministry of Education and Employment since transportation affects access to the workplace for people living in both urban and rural settings.

Says VCC Interim Director Connie Johnson: "Our position has been to continue asking the province to reconsider the transportation issue as a province-wide priority for low-income earners, whether they live in rural or urban communities. If we can help open up new areas of dialogue

between the municipality and the province, we are hopeful that ULIT passes can be seen as a sustainable and necessary part of a supportive work environment for all Albertans.”

More effort must be put into promoting the ULIT pass program. Of the 35,000 eligible low-income Calgaryans, only 10,000 are currently registered to buy them. The Action Team has used several grassroots communication tools to get the word out about the passes. They also continue to remind community and business organizations that work with low-income groups of the program’s existence and eligibility requirements.

The Fair Fares Action Team has been successful in keeping Calgary residents and politicians informed about the realities of poverty in their city and how small savings in transportation can help people improve their lives. VCC will continue its efforts at the local and provincial levels to ensure that low-income Albertans have access to affordable transit.

Anne Makhoul

Reference

Makhoul, A. (2005). *Fair Fares Calgary Celebrates Reduced Fare Transit Passes*. Ottawa, Caledon Institute of Social Policy, November.

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