

Success for Fair Fares

This story provides an update of an initiative documented in 2007 and 2008 by the Caledon 'community stories' series. Please visit www.caledoninst.org to learn more about Fair Fares.

Time to celebrate

When Calgary City Council voted in November 2008 to make its Low-Income Monthly Transit Pass (LITP) pilot project a permanent program, a lot of people applauded. Established in 2005 and funded temporarily on a year-to-year basis by Calgary Transit, this \$2 million-a-year service helps thousands of low-income Calgarians participate more fully in the social, political and economic life of their community.

In order to build a case for funding the passes on a permanent basis, LITP advocates reviewed some key pilot project statistics in 2007. They found that more than 10,000 residents applied for and were qualified to purchase LITPs and that, on average, 5,000 were sold each month. An independent survey of LITP users reported that 59 percent of respondents said the passes allowed them to keep a job; 49 percent said they found new or better employment because they could now access public transit.

In a municipality where transit use is estimated to range from 250,000 to 300,000 users each month, a few thousand LITPs may seem modest. Small but significant, the City's decision to make the LITP a permanent program was the culmination of many people's efforts: Calgary Transit employees, supportive City aldermen, City administrators and members of Vibrant Communities Calgary's Fair Fares Action Team.

Formed in 2004, Fair Fares built on the work started in 1998 by community groups and Calgary Transit officials. Early activists were concerned that low-income residents and people with disabilities were unable to participate fully in the life of their city because they had no access to affordable transportation.

The wandering route to success

A major success was achieved when City aldermen voted to establish the LITP pilot program in 2005. Calgary Transit officials initially agreed to pay for the passes. Two years later, municipal support for permanent funding seemed uncertain, so Fair Fares members decided to approach provincial officials to talk about issues affecting rural and urban affordable transportation. Social support funding and related matters are a provincial responsibility in Alberta and this was a second attempt by Fair Fares to engage the province in discussions regarding transportation. The province had other priorities, however, and Calgary's LITP program seemed destined to remain in a pilot phase.

Says VCC Project Coordinator, Nicole Neve: "We believed that approaching aldermen directly would be the most straightforward way to create support for LITPs. The strategy had worked well during the lead-up to the LITP decision in 2006. However, as the City's 2008 Budget process got under way, our partners at Calgary Transit counselled us to sit tight and trust their plan to submit a permanent funding proposal for LITP under the Budget's transportation section. At the time, it seemed like a risky way to go. It felt as if we were abandoning the project at the exact moment where we should be pushing it with all our might. In the end, we trusted our relationships and the LITP funding submission passed without any opposition."

Aldermen Joe Ceci and Gord Lowe were instrumental in leading and supporting the political drive to keep the pilot program running and then encouraging City Council to fund the passes on a permanent basis. As one of Fair Fares' early supporters, Alderman Joe Ceci agrees that the committee was right to follow the advice of their Calgary Transit members. Says Joe: "Administration can be trusted to have a really good read on timing. There comes a moment when government needs to acknowledge that a pilot project has operated long enough. Everyone knows what works, what the upsides and downsides are and that it's no longer right to continue as a pilot. At that point, the project either gets tossed overboard or is seen to uphold an organization's ideals and receives proper funding."

Adds Calgary Transit's Manager of Business Strategies, Koji Miyaji: "It's helpful to have a citizen or external group raise interest in an issue among the community and at city hall, but a lot of things have to be in place for funding decisions to end well. Over the years, a relationship of mutual respect had grown up among the various groups working on the LITP. Fair Fares' work to involve the province, though unsuccessful, was noted and became part of the decision-making environment. When City Council asked Calgary Transit for information about the passes, knowing what and how to introduce it required the right combination of knowledge and experience. Calgary Transit's relationship with Council has been built carefully and respectfully, and Fair Fares members came to understand the importance of letting things unfold according to that dynamic."

Alderman Ceci was an early supporter of Fair Fares and believes that the committee has learned a great deal about social justice and advocacy. He applauds its leadership for their clarity of purpose and goals. "Bonnie Pacaud and Colleen Huston of the Fair Fares Action Team, Calgary



By way of a thank you, LITP user and artist Katie Gerke painted this Calgary landscape which will shortly be unveiled at City Hall. Katie, who lives with Multiple Sclerosis and completes her canvasses with a brush held in her mouth, has been a member of Fair Fares since 2007.

Transit’s Koji Miyaji and Vibrant Calgary’s Ramona Johnson and Connie Johnston were excellent advocates. Calgary’s social justice community has been lucky to have had such strong leadership.”

Though the Low-Income Transit Pass program still has some kinks to work out, supporters can now advocate for change knowing that the program’s funding is secure.

The City’s willingness to put resources and time into establishing the LITPs – for 5,000 of 300,000 monthly transit riders – demonstrates a commitment to citizen groups small and large. Fair Fares, Calgary Transit and the City of Calgary each played a distinctive, critical role in helping low-income residents get access to affordable transit passes. Applause for the LITP is the sound of many hands clapping.

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