

Fair Fares Calgary Celebrates Reduced Fare Transit Passes

• Challenge •

Since 1999, members of Calgary's disability community had been lobbying City Council and the provincial government to establish a low-income transit pass program. Originally, they worked on behalf of residents who were receiving Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) benefits – an amount which recently was increased from \$855 to \$950 per month. Interested organizations, municipal employees and community residents had banded together under the umbrella of the Calgary Committee for Discounted Transit Passes. Though they had won the sympathy and support of several city aldermen, their efforts had yet to bear fruit. By the time the provincial government scheduled a review the AISH program in 2004, the committee had expanded its concern and was asking the provincial government to extend reduced fare transit passes to all low-income Albertans.

• Strategy •

Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) had established good relationships with several members of the transit pass committee through its work in preparing a submission on the AISH program to the provincial government – a process that was initiated in 2003 and ended in December 2005. In 2004, VCC offered to lend its support to the transit pass committee's work, and was immediately welcomed aboard.

Seen as representing a wider spectrum of interests and community sectors, VCC also brought fresh ideas, an excellent reputation and communications expertise to the initiative. VCC first suggested re-branding the committee "Fair Fares Calgary" – a name which neatly summarized the group's message and goal.

In order to keep the group's message in front of decision-makers, VCC also encouraged committee members to shift from their grassroots approach and adopt a more traditional structure. Two co-chairs now act as primary spokespeople for the initiative. To demonstrate the level of public support for the establishment of low-income transit passes among the general population, VCC helped organize a successful letter- and postcard-writing campaign. Two thousand postcards were distributed through VCC's membership, and many high profile VCC participants wrote letters to their local aldermen in support of the initiative.



• *Impact* •

In the spring of 2005, members of City Council made reference to the hundreds of requests for low-income transit passes they had received before they voted to pursue establishing such a program, even in the absence of financial support from the province. In June, City Council voted to move forward with low-income transit passes for AISH recipients, and in September, they voted to extend the program to 35,000 low-income adult Calgarians under age 65. On August 1, 2005, reduced fare transit passes were issued to 2,000 AISH recipients for the first time. In January 2006, such passes were made available to all low-income Calgarians with incomes of less than 75 percent of Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off.

The issue of how the \$2.5 million required to pay for the reduced fare transit passes will be covered is still up for discussion. For 2006, the City of Calgary has agreed to use its Fiscal Stability Reserve Fund to meet program expenses. VCC has already headed off one suggestion that, beginning in 2007, the passes be paid for from a joint provincial/municipal fund which supports local social programs. Within one week of the suggestion's unveiling, VCC members had made enough phone calls and written enough letters and e-mails to City Council and local media to convince decision-makers that the idea would effectively rob one poverty reduction program to serve another. VCC members are optimistic that continued discussions with the province will result in a sustainable funding solution.

