

## Fair Fares Strategy Update: January 2007



### A) The Challenge Being Addressed:

Calgary Transit is a primary means of transportation for Calgarians living on low-incomes. According to a Calgary Transit survey, of the over 100,000 Calgarians living on low-income, 55% use transit regularly (more than three times per week). However, the cost of public transportation is a barrier for many individuals and families living on low-incomes. For example, someone receiving the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) benefit would have to spend 8 to 10 percent of their monthly income to purchase an adult transit pass (\$75.00/month). Similarly, someone working for the minimum wage of \$7.00 per hour would have to work over 10 hours to afford that same transit pass. The Fair Fares initiative seeks to increase access to transportation by removing income as a barrier, and thereby facilitate greater participation in our community for low-income Calgarians.

Formerly known as the Calgary Committee for Discounted Transit Passes, Fair Fares began its work in 1999, and joined Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) in 2004. Early efforts involved mobilizing the disability and low income communities to participate in the committee and to document their experiences with transportation barriers. These front-line stories were shared with Calgary City Council through letters and meetings in order to raise their awareness of the transportation barriers facing low income constituents. However, jurisdictional barriers were encountered early on with the realization that while The City of Calgary is responsible for municipal transportation issues, it is primarily the Government of Alberta that is responsible for income security programs. At this point the committee attempted to engage the provincial government, through meetings with MLAs and presentations to Calgary Caucus, to support the costs of the low income transit pass program. In 2005, after many years of attempting, unsuccessfully, to gain the support of the Government of Alberta, Calgary City Council decided to embark on a low income transit pass program without provincial support.

### B) The Strategy Employed:

The Fair Fares Action Team has taken a collaborative approach to working with The City of Calgary and the Government of Alberta towards the establishment of a Universal Low Income Transit Pass (ULITP) program. The vision of Fair Fares is affordable transportation for all Albertans and the primary goal of the Fair Fares initiative is to ensure that Calgary's ULITP program is successfully expanded and sustained in the future. The Action Team has identified the following key strategies:

- Work to maintain City Council support for the ULITP;
- Convince the Government of Alberta to partner with all urban and rural Alberta municipalities to provide affordable transportation;
- Ensure that the ULITP is accessible and affordable for all; and
- Support other municipalities in using the Fair Fares initiative as a model for public policy change.

### **C) The Role Played by the Collaboration:**

The Fair Fares Action Team is a multi-sectoral collaboration with representatives from government, non-profit organizations, the disabilities community and people living in poverty. Through monthly meetings, partners have had an opportunity to participate in the planning and implementation of the Fair Fares initiative. The City of Calgary and Calgary Transit have been very active partners in the Fair Fares Action Team, as have members from the low income community. This collaborative approach has enabled the group not only to support the establishment of the ULITP Program, but also to have input into how the program is designed and administered. This has resulted in many strong partnerships, and in laying the foundation for a significant community movement around affordable transportation and other issues of access to public services.

The following are the key activities of the Fair Fares initiative in 2006:

- In January, VCC's monthly Street Talk column focused on raising awareness about the ULITP program.
- In January, Alderman Joe Ceci and Alderman Gord Lowe joined the Fair Fares Action Team in an effort to secure provincial funding.
- In February, Fair Fares launched a provincial letter-writing campaign asking the Government of Alberta to allocate \$2.25 per capita, province-wide, to urban and rural communities as a conditional grant to provide affordable transportation for all low income Albertans. Over 50 letters of support were mailed to MLAs from organizations including the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, Alberta Disabilities Forum, Family and Community Support Services Association of Alberta, Inter-City Forum on Social Policy, Public Interest Alberta, United Way of Calgary and Area, as well as many social agencies, labour groups, community members and municipal councils from across Alberta.
- In February, VCC's Director met with Premier Klein to discuss provincial support for affordable transportation; a response to a follow-up letter indicated that Alberta Human Resources and Employment was the responsible department.
- In February, Fair Fares representatives supported the Family and Community Support Services impact report to the municipal Standing Policy Committee on Land Use Planning and Transportation.
- In March, Calgary Street Talk newspaper published an information poster on the ULITP.
- In March, Fair Fares presented to Calgary Caucus, where it was recommended that Fair Fares take their request to a provincial Standing Policy Committee.
- In April, Aldermen Ceci met with the Honourable Mike Cardinal, Minister of Human Resources and Employment, to discuss the Government of Alberta's responsibility for providing affordable transportation to all Albertans living on low incomes. Media responded positively to Fair Fares' news release about this meeting, resulting in coverage on Global Television, City TV, Shaw TV, The Calgary Sun and CHQR 770 Radio.
- In May, Fair Fares sent a letter updating City Council on its efforts to secure support from the Government of Alberta.
- In May, Fair Fares met separately with Calgary Liberal MLA and opposition Infrastructure and Transportation Critic Harry Chase and Calgary Conservative MLA Wayne Cao, to discuss their support for affordable transportation. MLA Chase responded by sending a letter in support of affordable transportation to Infrastructure and Transportation Minister Ty Lund, Finance Minister Shirley McClellan, and Community Development Minister Denis Ducharme. MLA Cao suggested establishing an affordable transportation trust fund to solicit and administer donations from corporations and the public.
- From May to August, Fair Fares led a successful postcard campaign, where close to 16,000 postcards to Alberta MLAs were distributed throughout Alberta, demonstrating broad community support from urban and rural municipalities for the issue of affordable transportation.
- In June, VCC disseminated information (through emails and posters) about the annual ULITP application process. Due to the new tax year and new eligibility criteria based on the 2005 Low

Income Cut-Offs, all registrants had to reapply using the new 2005 application form and 2005 Notice of Assessment.

- In June, Fair Fares received the 2006 Community Spirit of Collaboration Award from the Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre of Calgary. This award highlights the way in which organizations can come together to create approaches to community development and inclusion that none could have accomplished alone.
- In September, Fair Fares emailed all Alberta MLAs requesting their support for affordable transportation and met with Calgary Conservative MLA Harvey Cenaiko who expressed concern about how municipalities were spending provincial funds.
- In September, Fair Fares presented to the provincial Standing Policy Committee on Education and Employment. A media release resulted in interviews with CKUA Edmonton and CHQR Calgary.
- In September, Fair Fares representatives supported Calgary Transit's report and recommendations to the municipal Standing Policy Committee on Land Use Planning and Transportation. A media release resulted in interviews with the Calgary Sun, Calgary Herald and CHQR Calgary.
- In October, an article about Fair Fares was published in the Calgary Dollars newsletter insert in Fast Forward Weekly Magazine.
- In October, VCC's monthly Street Talk column focused on the Conservative leadership candidates' responses to a question about support for affordable transportation.
- In October and November, Fair Fares sent follow-up letters to MLA Cindy Ady, Chair of the Standing Policy Committee on Education and Employment, regarding the establishment of a provincial affordable transportation committee.
- In November, Fair Fares representatives supported Fair Calgary's report and recommendations to the municipal Standing Policy Committee on Community and Protective Services.
- In November, Fair Fares met with Aldermen Ceci, Hawkesworth and Lowe to discuss ongoing strategy for securing Government of Alberta support for affordable transportation.
- In November, Fair Fares received the 2006 Maureen Allen Social Action Award from the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada, Alberta Division. This award is presented to an individual or organization who has demonstrated outstanding commitment and/or achievement in the area of social action.
- In November, Fair Fares requested resolutions urging provincial support for affordable transportation from the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association and Family and Community Support Services Association of Alberta.
- Throughout 2006, Fair Fares representatives have given numerous presentations to hundreds of clients and staff of Calgary social agencies to increase awareness about the ULITP program, solicit feedback on the program and encourage people to support our efforts to secure sustainable funding for the program.

#### **D) The Impact Achieved or Anticipated:**

VCC believes that affordable public transportation facilitates access to employment and training opportunities, recreation and social participation, volunteer work and medical appointments, assists in meeting basic needs, increases self-sufficiency, improves mobility, and enhances the quality of life for people living on low incomes. The economic benefits of affordable transportation include an increase in the labour pool and reduced employee turnover by removing one of the barriers to work for low income earners. Individuals who are able to work because they have access to affordable transportation contribute back to society through the payment of income taxes. In addition, increasing the number of people who are working leads to savings in employment insurance and social assistance payments.

Following an initial pilot program for Calgarians in receipt of the AISH benefit, in January 2006, The City of Calgary implemented a ULITP program. Adult Calgary residents whose individual or family income falls below 75% of Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Off line are eligible for a monthly transit pass of \$37.50, rather than paying the full fare of \$75. This is savings of \$450 per year for people previously

paying the full fare, and has enabled many people who previously could not afford transit or could only afford to purchase individual tickets, to purchase monthly passes.

Eligibility for the passes is based on the applicant's current Revenue Canada Notice of Assessment. So far, over 10,000 Calgarians have applied for this program, 8,000 have been approved and each month approximately 5,200 registrants purchase a monthly pass. Calgary is also the only city in Alberta that has made affordable transportation available to customers who use reduced mobility services known as Access Calgary.

In 2005, the ULITP program was funded through Calgary Transit's budget and in 2006 the program was funded from The City's Fiscal Stability Reserve Fund. It was proposed in late 2005 that the ULITP be funded by diverting up to 5% of The City's contribution to Family and Community Support Services (FCSS). However, this was rejected after concerns expressed by FCSS staff and funded agencies prompted a report that described the negative impact of funding the ULITP earlier this year. Funding for 2007 has now been approved and will come from Calgary Transit's revenues.

During Fair Fares' presentation to the Government of Alberta in September, MLA's were impressed by the approximately 16,000 postcards and letters of support sent from across Alberta. MLA's pounded the board room table and commended Fair Fares for its dedication, strong research, provincial advocacy and heart felt efforts to help Albertans in need. A commitment was made to follow up Fair Fares' recommendation that a cross-departmental provincial committee be established to further explore the issue of affordable transportation.

In response to a request from Fair Fares, representatives from The City of Calgary moved for a resolution in support of affordable transportation at the November annual general meeting of Family and Community Support Services Association of Alberta (FCSSAA). An amendment to the FCSSAA Strategic Plan to specifically address transportation issues within the advocacy strategy was approved, with specific reference to the pursuit of a provincial cross-ministerial response. As the FCSSAA develops its advocacy plans for 2007, affordable transportation will be included as a priority.

Fair Fares has also contributed to the continual improvement of the ULITP program, by providing feedback to Calgary Transit on the need to: develop a plain language application, multiple language application forms, increase public awareness about the program and the annual reapplication process, simplify the application process and make the application forms more widely available, accept proxies for income eligibility, consider a sliding scale for eligibility and cost to accommodate different levels of low income, and increase the number of locations to purchase the monthly pass. A plain language application form was developed in May of 2006. Previously, the single location to apply for the program was Calgary Housing Company, north of the downtown core and accessible by bus, but not LRT or on foot. Beginning this fall, Calgary Housing is no longer administering the applications, and has been replaced with two new and more accessible locations – the downtown Calgary Transit office and a recreation centre in the northeast quadrant of the city. Calgary Transit has shared with VCC a map of the 23 districts where ULITP participants live, illustrating that the majority live in central and northeast Calgary.

## **E) Lessons Learned:**

Because Alberta's legislature is divided between urban and rural MLAs, with the majority being rural, in order to secure Provincial support for an issue such as affordable transportation, it is necessary to make the issue relevant to rural municipalities as well as large urban centres. Fair Fares addressed this issue in 2006 by shifting from a focus on public transit (which only exists in Alberta's eight largest cities), to transportation more broadly. This was accomplished by proposing creative ways in which communities without public transit systems could address the issues of transportation availability and affordability.

VCC had planned to issue a media advisory in advance of the Fair Fares presentation to Calgary Caucus and gave advance notice to the Caucus Chair, but were instructed that alerting the media would result in the cancellation of current and future opportunities to present to Caucus. VCC was frustrated by this

response, given that the intention was to use the media to raise awareness about the issue by publicly thanking Caucus for the opportunity to present, but decided to avoid conflict and instead issued a community advisory through agency networks.

VCC has learned that policy change efforts such as Fair Fares are expansive in nature with one change leading to many unanticipated issues requiring resources. In the case of Fair Fares, public awareness raising about the ULITP program and collecting and forwarding feedback on the eligibility criteria and application process were unanticipated issues, which necessitated VCC dedicate significant additional human and financial resources to the initiative. Similarly, it was not anticipated that Calgary City Council would consider redirecting funds from FCSS to the ULITP, the result of which would have negatively impacted social service agencies that assist many people living in poverty.

#### **F) Next Steps:**

Fair Calgary is a City of Calgary initiative to ensure that The City's policies, programs, services and facilities are fair and inclusive for all Calgarians. This initiative seeks to reduce inequalities, including eliminating income as a barrier to City services. Fair Fares is supporting Fair Calgary's "fairness filter", which was approved in November by the Standing Policy Committee on Community and Protective Services. Because Fair Calgary is early in the implementation process, Fair Fares' role is still being defined. However, with the ULITP being considered as one of nine programs under the Fair Calgary policy, Fair Fares' role and involvement with The City of Calgary will no doubt evolve and may in fact expand its focus beyond affordable transportation if Fair Calgary takes on administration of the ULITP.

Moving forward, Fair Fares has already committed to assisting Calgary Transit and Fair Calgary with the continuous improvement of the ULITP program, including further development of eligibility criteria and the streamlining of the application process to ensure the interests of all people who qualify for the ULITP program are met.

Since 2005, VCC has solicited feedback on the ULITP program through a number of channels including a broadly distributed feedback form to which approximately 60 people have responded, a request to submit stories to VCC through VCC's January 2006 Calgary Street Talk column, and a notice to front-line staff at service-delivery agencies. VCC has now initiated a process to work with Calgary Transit to formally evaluate the economic and social impact of the ULITP program. We hope that through this evaluation we will be able to build a stronger case for Provincial support. Our timeline for this evaluation is the first quarter of 2007.

VCC plans to continue its provincial advocacy efforts in the hope that the Government of Alberta will partner with The City of Calgary and other urban and rural municipalities across Alberta to provide funding for affordable transportation. In order to do so, VCC will be contacting rural communities (via FCSS contacts and the network we established during the provincial postcard campaign), to identify their interest and resources in convening locally-led affordable transportation initiatives. Initially, some of the questions we will ask these communities are:

- What are the transportation barriers experienced by low income individuals in your community?
- Provided there was adequate funding, what are some ways in which these barriers could be addressed?
- Would your community accept grants from the Government of Alberta on the condition that they be used to fund affordable transportation initiatives in your area? Why or why not?
- Are there currently initiatives on affordable transportation that exist in your community?
- Are there individuals or coalitions with an interest in affordable transportation issues that we might be able to talk to?

VCC is also working with Ipsos Reid to develop a survey for low income people on transportation barriers, which will be conducted in communities that respond to the above questions and express interest in convening local affordable transportation initiatives.