

Specialized Transportation Service: Have we made progress?

To the credit of the Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC) it appears that we now have approval to proceed with an RFP (Request for Proposals) to establish a contract for specialized transportation service or Para transit in the County. "Option 1" was approved by the AAC earlier this week.

However, in going to the meetings and agendas web site, none of the options put to the AAC appear to be in the agenda. In fact the only item in the agenda for the meeting is the approval of the last meeting's minutes. It is not clear why the options and details are missing from the agenda. Usually all of this type of content is there so that members and the public can view items to be discussed ahead of a meeting.

There will be a special meeting of the AAC on April 23 at 1PM at the Fire Administration Building in Paris to discuss further details of the specific items for the RFP.

These would include whether there would be a single service provider, the budget for each year of the contract, eligibility criteria (the eligibility criteria from the IASR not the WSIB forms) and the establishment of a website with all information and forms needed for the Para transit service. A contract would also include all sections of the Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulations that apply to specialized transportation services and the deadline for implementing each one.

A potential service provider must know if the County is going to administer the service, what parts of the service will be administered by the County and how the relationship between the County and the service provider will function and be maintained.

One of the key elements of any RFP or contract is going to be the budget for Para transit over the life of the contract.

As we know from the previous contract, not having a budget that is realistic and increases each year as the demand increases will put us back to where we've been for the last year.

The cost of Para transit last year was around \$175,000. The total budget for 2013 (including the found funds of January 2013) is \$200,000. There is an increase in use of Para transit at about the rate of 100 new users a year. However, Para transit has been a "best kept secret" and not everyone with a disability knows it exists. The County must provide more realistic projections on ridership and expected costs over the next five years (as per the IASR) for any potential service provider to bid realistically for the contract.

If there had been an original budget for the existing contract, that budget would have increased to over \$300,000 for 2012 as the ridership increased using a 25% increase per year. This is a more realistic budget. However, we have \$200,000 which is a good place to start.

The budget for the contract should include an increase to the budget of \$200,000 of at least 20 to 25% for each year of the contract. Potential service providers should include a budget that is not to exceed that \$200,000 for the first year of service and budgets for subsequent years of the contract that include and do not exceed the 25% budget increase per year. A condition of the contract is that service will not stop if the budget is reached. This is where a more positive and collaborative relationship between the county and the service provider MUST be established and continued. It is also why we need a more realistic budget.

In addition, the County must be searching for alternate funding opportunities such as the infrastructure funds that are supposed to be available through the federal budget of last month.

Investigating the funding for infrastructure projects may also allow for the creation of a conventional transportation service connecting the towns in the County to Brantford and Paris.

Any organization submitting a proposal must have accessible vehicles and be prepared to start service on the day the contract is signed. Staff of a potential service provider must also provide proof that they have completed both the Customer Service Standards training and the additional accessibility training as detailed in the IASR.

If more than one service provider is to be considered, a method of determining a standard fare system among the service providers must be established. Each service provider cannot charge a different rate. There must be fare parity as per the IASR.

If more than one service provider is to be considered, the accessible vehicle readiness and training outlined above must be in place on the start date of the contract as well.

There should be no difference in experience between service providers for those of us with disabilities.

Those of us with disabilities must be treated with dignity and respect. We need to know what supports our community has in place so that we can remain independent. A contract must identify and make public a process for complaints, appeals and requests for information. The County must have this information on its website where we can find it.

A decision also needs to be made about how much or what percentage of the \$200,000 is to be spent by the service provider or providers on administering the service. This “small detail” was neglected in the current contract yet time is taken to manage the service and provide reports to the County. Without a clear mandate that only X percent of the budget is to be spent on administration the result may be a “top heavy, service light” para transit service. This is also an issue that arose from the discussions throughout the past year when the County wanted to use \$75,000 of the then total budget of \$100,000 to manage the remaining \$25,000 left for the actual service.

As stated before, the County, we the taxpayers, can’t simply say “hey, anyone want to do this” and leave it at that. Transit organizations have clear and detailed criteria for successfully getting a contract and we have to hold our Para transit service to a high standard to ensure that we don’t find ourselves in this same position next year. Once again, we can look at other towns and cities such as Brantford and hopefully collaborate and learn from what is happening in the industry of public transportation.

If you are interested in commenting or have ideas for items in a request for proposals you can send comments to the Accessibility Advisory Committee through the County offices.

We have an opportunity to learn from the past and create something positive out of this embarrassment to our community, let’s take advantage of it!