

## County of Brant Poised to Eliminate Para Transit

By Karen McCall. (Member of AAC for County of Brant)

There have been a few articles on the Para transit service in the County of Brant that focus on contractor over billing

There have been accusations of “numerous abuses” of the service by people with disabilities who were using the Para transit or public transit service as anyone would use any public transit service.

There has been little reported on the apparent lightning speed at which a new para transit scheme is being approved and implemented. A scheme that appears to be designed to be unaffordable to people with disabilities and seniors.

When an ad hoc specialized transportation service committee was established by the Community Services Committee (approved by County Council), members representing the community (including two of us from the AAC) were added to the ad hoc committee. The task of the ad hoc committee was to “And Whereas Committee should give consideration to alternative methods that are available to provide transportation services to persons with disabilities that may be more cost effective;” (from the August 13 Community Services agenda)

Only one alternative was ever presented for approval: a taxi-script based staff recommendation. Members of the ad hoc committee were told we could only consider the staff recommended scheme.

Community members asked accountability questions and provided legislation and data to challenge the proposed scheme. The result has been that the ad hoc committee was dissolved at the August 13 Community Services meeting.

It is not clear why one small piece of the Hamilton model, which is used by other municipalities creating non-profit Para transit services and provides a leadership role in the establishment of non-profit Para transit organizations, was chosen as the “best” service delivery method for the County...without the “non-profit organization” part of the service delivery model. Perhaps sustainability is not a goal for the new scheme?

There appear to be more problems with the new scheme. Apparently the County is bypassing its own purchasing bylaw and contracting with services policies to avoid implementing the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

From the Community Services agenda for August 13, 2012: “Based on the legislation, if the County directly operates vehicles that provide transportation to persons with disabilities for a fare or enters into an agreement with any person, firm, corporation, or transit authority, (i.e. with a taxi company, the Canadian Red Cross, Operation Lift, Brantford Transit) to provide transportation to persons with disabilities for a fare, it is deemed to be a Specialized Transportation Provider and must therefore comply with all the requirements of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, and the regulations that apply to “Specialized Transportation Service.”

“And whereas, if the County issues an RFP and enters into an agreement for the successful proponent to provide Specialized Transportation Services, the County of Brant is required to ensure that any Specialized Transportation Provider is in compliance with all requirements under the Ontarians with Disabilities Act, Integrated Accessibility Standards, Part IV- Transportation, which imposes a number of administrative requirements which would add costs to providing the service;”

Although the County states that the AODA is “too onerous and expensive” there is no documentation to support this claim.

It appears that the County will make its taxi bylaw a “contract for services by default” in an effort to avoid legal responsibilities for implementing a provincial law.

From the August 13 Community Services Committee agenda: “DEFINITIONS would require some additions such as defining terms such as “eligible person” and “coupon”, along with any other terms that would need to be incorporated into the by-law.”

The implications to the taxi industry as a whole are precedence setting. If the changes to the taxi bylaw are approved, every taxi company in the County will be a Para transit service provider. How does this affect non-Para transit riders?

With the County controlling eligibility, photo ID, coupons and subsidies, how will taxi companies be able to comply with the sections of the provincial law that state there has to be tiers of eligibility, there can be no trip restrictions, and there has to be a way for visitors to access para transit? This would be out of the direct control of the taxi companies. It will be the taxi companies who will be legally responsible and face possible \$100,000 per day fines for not complying with the provincial law...a provincial law they can't comply with because the County controls the eligibility and administration of the Para transit service.

The County appears to be hinging its actions on a play on words. By claiming that it is not “signing an agreement” with taxi companies, it can avoid responsibility for the provincial law. However, by controlling the eligibility, photo ID, coupons and subsidies as well as adding those items to the taxi bylaw, the taxi bylaw has the appearance of being the “agreement” to provide Para transit services.

Another problem with this scheme is the budget. “Based on current users we subsidize approximately 900 trips per month, with the average trip cost being \$22.74.” (From the Community Services Committee meeting August 13 agenda)

There are approximately 543 people currently eligible for the Para transit service. Even if only 100 people purchase the maximum amount of \$400 per month, the County portion of that is \$16,000 per month or \$192,000 per year, well over the budget of \$100,000.

If all 543 people registered with the current service purchase the limit the monthly County subsidy would be \$86,880 and the yearly subsidy would be \$1,042,560.

At the August 13 Community Services Committee meeting, staff stated that “it is not anticipated that many will purchase the total amount each month.” Apparently to stay within the \$100,000 per year budget for Para transit, this scheme has been designed to be unaffordable to people with disabilities and seniors.

The County assures people that it will not exceed the budgeted amount. It is not clear whether this means that once the budgeted amount is close at hand, people with disabilities and seniors will no longer be able to use the Para transit service. This is one of the many questions we do not have answers to.

Statistics Canada estimates that approximately 14% of the population has a disability. Conservatively speaking, based on the population figures for the County, approximately 3,500 people could be eligible for the Para transit service. Taking that number times the amount the County will subsidize the monthly cost will be \$560,000 per month or \$7,280,000 per year.

Another problem with this scheme is that community members have asked how much the administration of this scheme will cost and will that money be taken from the Para transit subsidy. To date the only response we have is that “staff assures the community services Committee that they can do this.” How much is this in dollars?

Isn't this the lack of management and oversight that has resulted in this scheme?

My point is not to eliminate Para transit in the County of Brant. On the contrary, what is needed is a stop to the blaming of the contractor, the blaming of people with disabilities (and seniors) for the mess the para transit is in, and a stop to a punitive public/Para transit scheme bound for fiscal failure.

In other words we need to move forward with a viable responsible and sustainable Para transit service for the County.

The County of Brant is building a seniors residence with a potential 700 new people with disabilities moving into the County. How will these people be able to travel within their community and be independent if they can't afford para transit?

What are our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters and sons with disabilities going to do without the ability to travel independently in the County for medical, employment, religious, social and recreational activities on an affordable Para transit service?

What we need is a sustainable Para transit service that meets the needs of the people it should be serving. If we take the Hamilton Ontario model as well as other non-profit Para transit services around the world (many of which serve rural areas), I am sure we could come up with something better than the scheme that is being proposed.

The big question is why aren't we?