

County of Brant “Finds” Additional \$100,000 for Para Transit! Now What?

Seconds before the gavel to start the January 22, 2013 meeting of County Council, with dramatic flourish (lacking only a drum roll), to an audience packed with parents and caregivers of adult children with disabilities and their children and relatives with disabilities, the Mayor announced that after meeting for several hours that afternoon that they had “found” an additional \$100,000 to add to the existing \$100,000 budget for the 2013 Para transit service.

According to the Paris Star for the following week, the County announced a balanced budget. Anyone else shaking their head at this point?

This “tempest in a teapot” over Para transit began when the County “discovered” that it had not been managing or overseeing its contract for specialized transportation services and, because the budget had not been adjusted each year to allow for increased participants, those of us with disabilities were accused of “abusing” Para transit by using it.

We have spent the better part of the year with the County making Para transit unaffordable, trying to restrict where we can go, trying to eliminate specialized transportation service/para transit all together and refusing to implement the Integrated Accessibility Standards, Part IV – Transportation accompanied by statements that do not treat us with dignity and respect such as “...people with disabilities need to learn how to budget their money just like everyone else. If they can’t afford the luxuries then they should consider moving and changing their lifestyle...” and “if you can’t afford a taxi, take an ambulance.”

Those of us from the community who worked on the dissolved then resurrected ad hoc specialized transportation service committee tried to help the County realize that the transportation standards ARE provincial law, That the Ontario Human Rights Commission Duty to accommodate is part of our human rights, that we were NOT abusing public transportation by using it, and there is nothing in Ontario Regulation 191/11 that says you have to have a conventional transportation service in order to have a specialized one.

Several parents and caregivers of adult children with disabilities made presentations to Council at the January 22, 2013 County Council meeting. They confirmed what those of us on the ad hoc committee had been telling the County since May of 2012: people with disabilities are living at or below the poverty level, and while they can barely afford the current specialized transportation service, they CANNOT afford the approved transportation scheme.

The parents and caregivers of adult children with disabilities raised the issue of transparency of this entire process, which one community member of the ad hoc specialized transportation service attempted to raise with the community Services committee at the August 13, 2012 meeting but was denied speaking as a delegation.

Community members suggested that people with disabilities be invited to the November 19, 2012 meeting of the resurrected ad hoc specialized transportation service but the County denied this request as well. (All meetings are open unless they are identified as in camera which the ad hoc meetings were not. But you have to know the meetings are taking place in order to attend.)

The first piece of information about this entire catastrophe that those of us with disabilities received was two weeks ago when a letter arrived telling you that the new unaffordable and unsustainable transportation scheme would take effect March 1, 2013 and that information sessions would be held when accessible vehicles were not available and those of us who are fortunate to be employed were at work.

It is clear that the County knew what the projected spending of the program for 2012 was as early as September 2012 but chose to identify a budget amount well under what the current needs of the specialized transportation service are and to make the approved transportation scheme unaffordable while accusing those of us with disabilities of “abusing” the service.

Now we have a total budget for 2013 of \$200,000 which allows for a modest increase in participation by those of us with disabilities in 2013 with the current rate of \$7.00 per trip.

We need leadership from our elected officials to plan for the inclusion of those of us with disabilities in our community as we move forward! I stated this back in June of 2012 to Council, and parents and caregivers of children with disabilities echoed the statement to Council Tuesday night: the County has the opportunity to be a leader in inclusive community and should claim that leadership role in collaboration with those of us with disabilities and the Accessibility Advisory Committee.

The question now is whether the County will demonstrate dignity and respect for those of us with disabilities, make the changes to the RFP/contract for specialized transportation that include the transportation standards and ensure that specialized transportation services/para transit are affordable and sustainable for those of us with disabilities by not increasing the amount we pay **AND** developing funding strategies for the future.

Update February 2013: Apparently not ready for leadership in implementing the Integrated Accessibility Standards, affordable and sustainable para transit, the County is holding two, yes only 2, public meetings to gather more information on what to do.