

Here We Go Again!

Well, my mistake. I thought that the draft guidelines for a revised specialized transportation service (still apparently branded a “subsidized transportation program to avoid provincial law) were out for comment and review.

Turns out that there was an unpublished deadline for review...we had a weekend to read through the 19 odd pages of text and provide thoughtful comments and repeated references to provincial, national and international human rights laws. I didn't meet that unpublished deadline.

I submitted my comments May 9 only to find that the Accessibility Coordinator, the Accessibility Advisory Committee and the Community Services Committee have already approved the draft guidelines and Council is poised to approve the “new scheme” at the May 21 Council meeting.

So our Accessibility Coordinator and our Accessibility Advisory Committee, charged with helping the County follow the Ontario Human Rights Code and the Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulations has approved a public transit service that has many violations of that provincial law, including the rebranding as a subsidized transportation program to avoid following the transportation standards.

Ironically, at a provincial government forum for Accessibility Advisory Committee members and those of us who are AODA Consultants (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act) held on May 8 in Burlington, the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario unveiled two new documents on collaboration with people with disabilities in ensuring an inclusive community and that the AODA and its subsequent standards are followed or exceeded. The booklets outline a step by step process for including those of us with disabilities who are not on an Accessibility Advisory Committee and people without disabilities to come together and make decisions about creating an inclusive community. There is a forum to be held in London Ontario but that is too late for the County if the “new scheme” is passed by Council May 21. Collaboration and inclusion of those of us with disabilities in each step of this process should have Occurred naturally but for some reason hasn't in the County.

To my knowledge, there have been no public meetings to provide comments or discuss these draft guidelines. The only two public meetings were held in February of this year and none of the suggestions or comments provided by people with disabilities or the parents/caregivers of people with disabilities were taken seriously by the County. There were four meetings held in January but they were only to tell us how to fill out a form.

It was quite painful to sit for a day listening to other municipalities in Ontario, including rural municipalities, who are excited about building an inclusive community and are sharing ideas, plans, lessons learned, what is working, what isn't, and innovative solutions while the County appears to be determined to go in the opposite direction and exclude us from our community.

The most glaring omission from the draft, now the “new scheme,” was any mention of the budget or how the contractor was supposed to implement the budget and provide the service. The budget has been one of the two core elements of this entire mess (the other being the avoidance of the provincial law). There is no budget plan, no plan for Para transit after 2013, there are contradictions in the document, and did I mention nothing about how the budget or fares are to be implemented?

It is not clear whether the County Solicitor has gone through the draft guidelines to lessen the opportunity for another Ontario Human Rights complaint. After reviewing the document and providing comments I believe that there are several items that would easily qualify as grounds for Ontario Human Rights complaints. There may even be a few items that would qualify for complaints based on the Canadian Charter of Rights and freedoms.

It is not clear whether this is part of what appears to be a continuing agenda to eliminate specialized transportation for those of us with disabilities and imprison us in our homes, or whether this is simply a case of not wanting a quality, standards based Para transit service for those of us with disabilities.

As with this entire process, the question still remains: why is the County determined to create an unaffordable and unsustainable “subsidized transportation program” instead of following global standards for specialized transportation services?

If the “subsidized transportation program” is meant to include seniors and people with low income, where are the eligibility criteria and forms to include those segments of the population? This would be the only other reason for rebranding what has been a specialized transportation service for people with disabilities to a “subsidized transportation program.” That the County is moving toward an accessible conventional transportation service that is bus based and includes a larger group of citizens.

Perhaps seniors and people with low income should join the discussion for the “subsidized” public transit system!