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## Handibus society calls for provincial funding

*Enrique Massot*

When Tim Veenstra's sister-in-law, who has Downs Syndrome, needed help to get to the city from her home in rural Rocky View, he made an appeal to the Rocky View Regional Handibus Society.

Because Veenstra and his wife had conflicting schedules and could not drive Marie-Anne Lorentz to her job at Dairy Queen in Airdrie, the handibus took her to the city for the last 11 years.

"She could not do without the organization," said Veenstra.

"That is my reason for giving back."

Senior citizens in Crossfield going to Airdrie for a fitness program; special-need preschoolers travelling to the city; infants required to attend hospital appointments; drivers with the Rocky View Regional Handibus Society try to transport them all.

However, 25 years after its creation as the Crossfield, Rocky View, Airdrie, Balzac Society for the Handicapped (CRAB), the non-profit organization working to transport special needs seniors and children in the M.D. of Rocky View and area has been trying to cope with lack of government funding that prevents the renovation of the society's aging vehicles.

"There is a growing need for transportation," said Albert Hulzebos, the society's new president elected at the Annual General Meeting on Wednesday.

"We often have to turn away people."

Working with eight vehicles half of which are 10 years or older, the society made 13,300 trips last year, up from 9,800 trips in 2003.

"We are putting more people on the bus, we are becoming more efficient," said Veenstra.

The society coped with 32 per cent workload increase with only seven per cent funding increase in the same period.

However, using ridership data, transportation manager Paul Siller estimated that having transportation available facilitated less hospital stays, saving money to Alberta Health; kept seniors at their own residence longer, saving Alberta Seniors money. In addition, it allowed special needs children to go to development programs in Calgary, reducing expenses to Alberta Children's

Service.

"We identify over \$500,000 of support in 2003 to the Alberta Government," said Siller.

But in spite of transporting a growing number of passengers every year, the Airdrie-based association has fielded many calls to which it was unable to respond, in an area five times larger than Calgary.

Siller said the society had to turn away about 12 requests to transport special needs preschoolers during the second half of 2004.

"That is the worst part of the job," he said.

And, while Calgary funds 90 per cent of the operation of its handibus service, municipal contributions finance about 10 per cent of what the handibus society needs to pay for drivers, fuel, bus maintenance and administration.

"We are pleased Rocky View allocated \$20,000 of their \$37,000 Special Transportation Provider program to our operations," said Siller.

The Town of Crossfield and the villages of Irricana and Beiseker have also provided funding to the society, while numerous community organizations and private corporations have fronted contributions.

The Rocky View School Division has been an excellent client-contributor by having the society transport special needs students from Airdrie, Beaupre, Cochrane, Dalemead, Chestermere and Shepard to Calgary. The school division pays for operations and for capital, however the society has been is constrained to direct all the money to pay for operations and to transport others.

"We take the capital component and use that to run the administration and all the other runs, like the children runs," said Veenstra.

"And then, we do not have capital money to pay for replacement of new buses."

Although Airdrie consolidated its public service transportation with a Calgary coach service, the regional handibus still responds to requests for transportation on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, the days when the Airdrie special needs bus does not travel to Calgary.

"Almost three years after Airdrie's policy change, we still receive three to five serious inquiries each week," said Siller.

Without a source of steady funding, the society barely make ends meet and has been having a hard time trying to replace aging vehicles, one of which has already been driven for over half a million kilometres and must undergo expensive repair and maintenance every year. A new bus is priced at between \$70,000 and \$75,000. And although the society's representatives are quick to thank the contributions to the society, they say the provincial government should allocated steady funding for the operational costs; \$100,000 per year would go a long way towards stabilizing the society.

"We really need provincial support," said Hulzebos.

The society has made numerous demands, but only one-time funding has come through agencies.

Carol Haley, MLA for Airdrie and Chestermere, was unable to attend the society's AGM on Wednesday, but sent a letter congratulating the society in its 25 years of service.

"I commend all those involved in this society that give generously of their time to ensure this valuable service is available to the residents of the area," she wrote.

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