

WEEKLY Rocky View WEEKLY

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"Don't forget us": handibus society manager

Enrique Massot

The manager of a special needs transportation society in the M.D. of Rocky View appeared before council during a session of public input into next year's budget, to plead for funding for his organization.

"Consider us on your business plan," said Paul Siller, with the Rocky View Handibus Society.

Founded in 1980, the Rocky View Regional Handibus has been functioning with funding from municipalities that is less than 10 per cent of their operating budget.

"Our vehicles can travel as much as 60,000 km per year," says Siller, adding that Rocky View Handibus actively fundraises on its own to raise \$30,000 per year just to keep operating.

As the provincial government has progressively favoured a community-based approach to health care services to children's special education and seniors, it has failed to adequately support the very services that make those services accessible to those with reduced mobility.

And as the need for rural transportation for seniors, adults, youth and children in rural areas and small towns surrounding Calgary increases exponentially, the handibus society's operation has been growing to meet those growing needs for transportation but without a regular provincial funding source.

"A review of our passenger list indicates we help the Alberta government save about \$500,000 per year," said Siller.

Because of lack of regular funding, Siller must often abandon his bus-driving seat or his managerial duties in order to fulfill his fundraising functions, the activity that has made him well known in Calgary region municipalities and private corporations.

Siller unrelentingly knocks on doors, chasing the next donation that may allow fixing a broken down bus, or, occasionally, buying a new unit to replace over-travelled vehicles.

And the hot economy has increased the needs and has put extra pressure on the society. Labour costs have increased along with the fuel and repair expenses.

"We had to increase our salaries just to keep our employees," said Siller.

The annexation of Rocky View land to the city has also dealt another blow to the handibus society with the loss of a contract with Rocky View School Division, a good source of income for the organization.

"After 25 years of operation, we just moved to our first building with garage," said Siller.

Long rural routes impact the society's buses, leading to higher maintenance costs, as the buses age sooner and experience more frequent breakdowns.

For more information on the Rocky View Handibus, log on to www.rockyviewbus.ca.

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