

WEEKLY Rocky View WEEKLY

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Handibus society steps up fundraising effort

Enrique Massot

After a collision sent one of its vehicles to the junkyard, a non-profit society providing mobility to residents in the M.D. of Rocky View and neighbouring communities has stepped up its annual fundraising campaign goals.

"Our capital campaign has been revised, seeking to put three new buses on the road this year," said Paul Siller, transportation manager for the Rocky View Handibus Society.

In an early December collision, one of the society's eight buses was rear-ended and damaged beyond repair.

"No one was hurt, but the insurance company determined that it would cover about five per cent of the replacement cost," said Siller. The loss prompted the society to step up its fundraising efforts at \$240,000 under the Three to Get Ready 2007 campaign, enough to purchase three buses instead of two.

The handibus society has been facing increased demands for special transportation serving Crossfield, northeast Rocky View, Balzac, Sharp Hill, Butte Hill, Beiseker and Irricana. Airdrie residents can obtain transportation on a referral basis.

As a result, Siller's duties have included knocking on prospective donors' doors.

"In the last 10 days I put 24 letters together circulating our proposal, and I have another 20 to do before the end of the month."

EnCana, the society's anchor donor for the 2007 campaign, was the first to step up with a \$20,000 contribution in November 2006, and has supported the new campaign goals.

"When we had to revise our project they were happy to approve our new goals," Siller said.

Siller says some reliable government funding would alleviate the uncertainty the society faces, reducing dependency on the goodwill of corporate and individual donors.

"It would be nice if we had some core funding, with communities supporting and enhancing the service, similar to the STARS air ambulance service," he said.

"STARS improve the level of services with community support while the government pays to keep the helicopter in the air."

In the early 1990s, the province would provide funding through municipalities to address special transportation needs in the communities. However, that funding dried up in 1994 in the midst of massive cutbacks, and was never reinstated.

Since then, those providing rural special needs transportation have been struggling to keep the service up and running, while facing increased wages, fuel, insurance and repair costs.

On the other hand, provincial initiatives emphasizing a community-based approach to services such as health care, children's services, education and senior care have resulted in a sharp increase in transportation needs.

"Access to many of these services often depends on a wheelchair-accessible vehicle being available in the community," said Siller.

The trend towards early patient discharge allows for savings in hospital budget, as a bed costs \$1,600 a night.

"If someone can get out a week early, the system saves over \$10,000 in costs," Siller said. "And that amount allows us to pay a driver and run a bus for two months."

The Foothills Hospital wants to discharge an Irricana resident who survived a stroke, but the patient will need to commute several times a week for treatment.

Such long trips put additional pressure on the limited vehicle capacity of the society.

"They say, 'we can't afford to keep them in hospital,'" said Siller. "And we say 'we can't afford to run them on the bus.'"

While Siller estimates that handibus groups play a unique role, by allowing rural passengers to participate in provincial "care in the home" programs allowing the

province to save an estimated \$500,000 a year, special transportation has struggles to provide services without direct provincial funding.

While the Rocky View Handibus Society fundraises about \$35,000 per year and uses most of it for vehicle repair, funding from municipalities is less than 10 per cent of its operating budget. However, not all jurisdictions act in the same way. Rural handibus transportation is pampered by comparison.

The Province of British Columbia funds a third of rural handibus transportation, while the municipalities provide another third, with the remaining third being paid by the passengers.

"The government of B.C. has a commitment to make transportation available and helps communities to get started," said Siller. "In Alberta, it has not been a priority so far."

Most Rocky View Handibus passengers pay 25 per cent of the total costs of the service.

"The mystery is where the other 75 per cent comes from," Siller said. "Right now we are fundraising to pay for that."

Because of long rural routes, the society's buses age fast under the impact of travelling 36,000 miles per year.

"A trip into town for groceries or an appointment can be 40 km for a one-way trip," said Siller.

Although he hopes that a new provincial government will take a close look at the current situation, Siller said, "we have not heard yet from the new premier for anything that would help us".

For information on the Rocky View Handibus Society call Paul Siller at 948-2887 or log on to www.rockyviewbus.ca.

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