

# W Rocky View WEEKLY Y

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## Special-need transportation neglected in election campaign

### Service provider says funding issue becoming pressing

A Langdon-area resident who is living on Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped says after spending his monthly cheque on his basic life needs he still has to find money to pay for transportation to a city hospital for his routine medical follow-up.

"AISH won't pay \$30 for a handibus," said Gary Mercer.

"But they'll pay \$500 for an ambulance."

Mercer had to request the Rocky View Regional Handibus Society for free transportation to the city, and his case is becoming more and more common.

Special needs transportation issues have not become a priority during the provincial election campaign, says the society manager, Paul Siller.

"Not one party specifically addresses special needs transportation," he said.

Although health care in general has been discussed during the campaign, details on how to effectively deliver care were not addressed, said Siller.

While transportation of the chronically ill, the elderly or the handicapped is seen as a luxury for smaller communities, special needs transportation helps save money by allowing cost-effective for the delivery of home-based therapies and services.

"In 2003, the Rocky View Regional Handibus helped Alberta Health save an estimated \$250,000 by facilitating rural participation in community-based home care instead of institutionalization," said Siller.

In addition, the Alberta Children's Services saved about \$150,000 and Alberta Seniors saved about \$125,000 thanks to the services of handibus transportation.

"That is over a three-to-one return on the cost of providing such transportation," said Siller.

The Rocky View Regional Handibus, which covers the entire Airdrie-Chestermere riding and the northern portion of the Foothills-Rocky View riding, e-mailed messages to candidates asking for

their opinion and to inform them about special transportation issues.

"The responses from the smaller party candidates were very supportive but their policies don't really discuss our role in the community," said Siller.

Since the province slashed funding for handibus services, municipal contributions to the organization have dramatically shrunk, leaving the charitable organization scrambling to maintain their services.

"In 1994, municipalities contributed about 30 per cent of our budget by distributing the special transportation component of the Public Transportation Operating Assistance Grant," said Siller.

"Last year, Rocky View Handibus received only five per cent of its budget from municipal contributions."

The provincial government currently provides municipalities a smaller grant with no mandatory use, which led Alberta municipalities to use the money as general revenue, reducing or cutting altogether transportation funding programs.

Although the province has over 30 programs relying on special needs transportation, this grant has not been reviewed since its inception, although a provincial review has been promised since 2001, said Siller.

"The lack of provincial government support means that we have to charge as much as \$18 for travel to Calgary one way and still have to find funds to cover the balance of the cost," he said.

Some rural residents on restricted income are reduced to request the Rocky View Handibus to be transported for free to medical appointments, which places the society in a difficult position.

"We have some modest resources to help one citizen, but having to help more and more users is stretching us," said Siller.

"We could become one of those services that people only notice when it is gone."

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