

Special Needs Transportation Backgrounder for Alberta Leadership Candidates

Background 1: Statement on Provincial Funding of Special Needs Transportation

Municipalities continue to experience increasing demand for specialized transportation services due to factors such as population growth and population aging. Another significant portion of the increase in demand can be attributed to provincial government policy changes initiated in the mid-1990's.

These policy changes included health care restructuring. For example, a trend toward shorter hospital stays with more treatment being provided on an out-patient basis. Health care services are now provided through community-based delivery models. These changes have necessitated more people (including those with disabilities) requiring transportation in order to access health care services.

Two other significant policy changes which occurred in the 1990's also impacted the demand for specialized transportation. The first change was the move to community-based living options for people with developmental disabilities. The other change involved increasing the number of adult day-programs for seniors as a means of delaying institutionalization. These changes have assisted the provincial government in achieving significant cost-saving or cost-avoidance objectives. They have also resulted in increasing costs for municipalities to meet the need for specialized transportation services.

Until 2010, Alberta municipalities were eligible to receive funding from the Unconditional Municipal Grant Program (UMGP) administered through Alberta Municipal Affairs. In 1993, the UMGP was created to replace five conditional grant programs**: Police Assistance Grant, Public Transit Operating Assistance Grant, Urban Parks Operating Grant, Municipal Assistance Grant, and the Family and Community Support Services Program. The Public Transit Operating Assistance Grant included a conditional \$3.19 per capita component for the transportation of people with disabilities and seniors. The Unconditional Municipal Grant Program became an annual grant to municipalities with the population of the 1993 census as the basis for the \$3.19 per capita rate. The UMGP was never reviewed during its existence although Alberta's population grew by 42% (MLA salaries increased by 31%). In 2010/2011, the UMGP was discontinued.

(*Source: Resolution C.2 Alberta Urban Municipality Association, 2003 Conference Resolution Package)

Background 2: "Rural/Small-Town" Special Needs Transportation Providers

Alberta Transportation acknowledges that Alberta rural non-profit groups often have to expend their capital reserves on provision of transportation for vulnerable Albertans. Buses are growing old and bus replacement funds are often spent transporting Albertans with disabilities to the community-based care programs that were established by the province to save money for debt reduction.

Infrastructure grant programs have recently been expanded with an operating component but only if the local municipality deems accessible transportation to be a local priority. Finally, Alberta Government staff balks at the gross cost of transportation, preferring to haggle for the local subsidized rates of transportation -- the rates offered to local residents who have no means to pay the full transportation cost to services they need.

Special needs transportation is cost-effective. An overnight stay in a hospital can cost \$1,600 for the accommodation alone. This is an amount that will provide 10-20 round trips for a rural patient requiring wheelchair-capable transportation to any follow-up on an outpatient basis. These savings add rapidly. For example, one rural service provider estimates it facilitates some \$600,000 to \$750,000 in annual savings for Alberta Health, Alberta Seniors and Alberta Children services. The major urban municipalities facilitate even greater degree of savings to the delivery of health care and community services.

Over 100 groups across Alberta provide special needs transportation in all sorts of communities. This effort enabled a billion dollars of government cost savings since 1995. Alberta depends on this transportation but won't provide assistance. Some twenty provincial programs across 5 provincial ministries depend on this community-based accessible transportation for the goals/outcomes of government programs. Recent government initiatives to "help" include removing accessible transportation resources that were once available on Alberta Transportation's website (deemed too costly to update).

In the past year, six rural Alberta organizations have struggled with near closure (or dissolution) due to lack of resources. Demand for travel is growing. Money is harder to fund-raise. Volunteers are burning out and government regulation is increasing. Non-profit groups have to "beg, borrow or steal" to get their neighbors to essential supports.

These groups wonder what the future leader will do.

For further information:

Paul Siller, Rocky View Regional Handibus Society, 403-948-2887

leadership@rockyviewbus.ca

results will be posted to : www.rockyviewbus.ca/leadership

Special Needs Transportation Backgrounder for Alberta Leadership Candidates

For further information:
Paul Siller, Rocky View Regional Handibus Society, 403-948-2887
leadership@rockyviewbus.ca
results will be posted to : www.rockyviewbus.ca/leadership