

Aurora should provide support for more accessible taxis: Councillors

By Brock Weir

Aurora should look at ways to encourage taxi companies to take the plunge and increase the number of wheelchair accessible taxis throughout Town, according to Councillors.

That was the conclusion reached around the committee table last week while considering a report on how to close the gap in any fare discrepancies between these and conventional taxis.

According to a report submitted to Councillors from Techa van Leeuwen, Aurora's Director of Bylaw, there are currently two accessible taxis licenced by the Town. Both of these vehicles are run by Royal Taxi. Current bylaws, she added, permit one accessible taxi for every 10,000 people, so there is still some room to add more accessible taxis for the fleet, but there has not been a rush from other companies to pick up the slack.

?The Town has not been approached by any taxi owners to license additional accessible taxicabs likely due to the increased costs to retrofit the vehicles and the lack of demand for service,? she said, noting that the two currently in the fleet are vans that have been modified to accommodate lifts.

Current fares stand at \$3.10 for the first 200 metres and \$.40 for each additional 200 metres across the board, with no discrepancy between standard and accessible taxis. The gaps, however, surface when these two taxis are otherwise unavailable to users.

?Royal Taxi endeavours to respond to every call and prefers advance notice to ensure availability of accessible taxis,? says the report. ?Royal will inform and refer customers to various accessible transportation options available within the Region, all of which have varying rates and varying service levels.?

One of these services is Mobility Plus. In addition to chair lifts and ramps installed on standard York Region Transit and Viva Buses, Mobility Plus helps fill the gap for those who need more than standard bus service. Mobility Plus does not rely on regular bus stops, but provides door to door services for clients. Regular Mobility Plus users, however, have repeatedly spoken of difficulties making appointments for rides without over a week's notice.

Sharon Doyle, Manager of Mobility Plus, is due to appear before Council this week to give a status update on the group's services. In her report, she states nearly 5,500 registered clients used Mobility Plus in 2012 alone. Ridership was over 269,000 with nearly 48,000 kilometres travelled.

Recent service improvements, she notes, include a revised cancellation policy, a 14 day eligibility application process, improved visibility for the mobility plus fleet, new driver training, and booking features. With these improvements there are, however, challenges, including a five per cent annual growth in ridership rate, ?relaxed eligibility requirements? and increased contractor costs.

In providing equal access to taxis across the board, however, Councillors were unable to come to a direct conclusion on how that can be done.

?This is about equal access to taxis in Aurora and, as I understand it, there is a problem with accessibility,? said Councillor John Abel. ?Taxi companies in Aurora are opting for a third party to provide this service for those in need of accessible taxis and the reasons they need those taxis is because Mobility Plus is not able to extend past certain hours.

?I think this is a very important issue, especially in light of there are other municipalities within the country and in parts of North America that do provide same fares for people who require accessibility. Somebody can call a cab and it would cost a certain amount as someone who is in a wheelchair and it would be three or four times the amount of the same fare.?

While Councillors ultimately received the report for information only, many expressed favour in keeping the window open to examine further options, particularly in light of a presentation coming forward this week on purpose-built accessible taxis.

?There might be some opportunities here to provide incentives or some initiatives to encourage taxi owners to investigate some of the great things that Councillor Abel is speaking of,? said Councillor Sandra Humfries. ?There is an opportunity here to start building our case to provide more accessible transportation.?