

Mobility Plus aims at 'travel training' in the year ahead

By Brock Weir

Significant costs for taxpayers means Mobility Plus has to get the right people on the right service.

That was the message brought to Aurora Council this week by Mobility Plus, the division of York Region Transit, to provide for the transportation needs of people in wheelchairs and living with other challenges throughout the Region.

According to Mobility Plus manager Sharon Doyle, it costs York Region Transit \$40 for every journey travelled by a person using the mobility service, but just \$7 for those using conventional transit. Despite the disparity, the end-cost to the user comes to the regular fare currently standing at \$3.75.

While she said this cost to the taxpayers means it is 'important' for them 'to get the right people on the right service,' there have been significant changes made to better address the services received by clients since Mobility Plus' establishment by the Region in 2001.

'It was now time to address the service concerns, the ease of movement within the Region, safe vehicles, and an escort to and from the door,' said Ms. Doyle of a review of their services just a few years into their existence.

Service gaps and service loopholes also needed to be addressed, including addressing maintenance issues in the Mobility Plus fleet, additional sensitivity training for drivers hired by the service, and better guaranteed service after some drivers 'refused to accept short trips.'

'No-shows and late cancellations escalated because there had been no parameters in the past to prevent someone from booking for every day of the week and cancelling all but one trip, and the task of overseeing 13 contractors was difficult,' she added.

Overhauls after this midway point led to a rejigging of the service, including bringing the number of contractors they have to deal with on a daily basis down to four, expanding service into Toronto, removing barriers for travel within York Region, additional driver training, and more overall freedom, she said.

'All contracts include provisions for additional driver training, customer service requirements, vehicle safety and maintenance standards, and are monitored for compliance by staff,' she said. 'Interactive voice response and web-based bookings were introduced, allowing clients to confirm and cancel 24 hours a day without the need to reach call centre staff.'

'A new family of services eligibility status was introduced for people who can take conventional transit for all or part of the requested trip. This allowed for times and spaces to be available for those who are not able to take conventional transit.'

Even after this was put in place, however, Mobility Plus still faced challenges. There were increasing enrollments and all the 'potential implications' that came with increasing provincial regulations governing accessibility and all that comes with it. Contractor costs also increased, so it was necessary to look at ways to 'limit growth and ridership while enhancing mobility by making use of the conventional service.'

'Each trip is booked on a case by case basis by first looking at the passenger's pickup and drop-off locations, and whether the applicant can utilize conventional services for all or part of the trip,' said Ms. Doyle. 'If the trip includes the conventional service, the client is supported by staff until they are confident in making the trip independently.'

'The application and travel training process is currently being reviewed with recommendations due in 2014.'

Over 48,000 kilometres had been saved with the introduction of Family of Services, she added.

The use of Mobility Plus by people in the community has been a hot topic at Town Hall over the last year, with members of the Accessibility Advisory Committee, and mobility challenged people in the community at large, complaining that Mobility Plus does not meet their needs. This, they said, includes onerous wait times and trouble getting the services they need when they need them.

To underscore this point, they organized the Mobility Maze this past spring to highlight some of these challenges.

When Ms. Doyle came before Council last week, it was in a flurry of delegations, presentations, and recommendations to provide better taxi and transit services to people with mobility challenges. Councillor Evelyn Buck questioned whether support for Mobility Plus was coming from the right place.

?No part [of funding] comes from Provincial coffers, and yet that would be considered a social service,? said Councillor Buck. ?I happen to know that the [cost of] social services are shared and this is not a transportation service. It is a social service.?