

York Region company promises "purpose built" solution



By Brock Weir

A possible solution could come forward this week in getting local companies to sit up and re-evaluate their accessible taxi policies.

MV-1, a Vaughan-based company specializing in vehicles purpose-built to accommodate wheelchairs and scooters, is expected to come before Council this week to make their pitch to Aurora.

Their vision, according to MV-1's Nick Grande, is to provide an affordable alternative to converting already-made vehicles like vans, to make way for wheelchairs.

"York Region means something special to us personally," said Mr. Grande, a resident of East Gwillimbury. "When you take something and modify it, it has its new virtues but it is still modified to make due. I use the example of the chair I sit on behind my desk. It has wheels on the bottom, but we can't call it a wheelchair. It was modified, but it is not designed in the true function that a wheelchair needs to be."

According to Mr. Grande, the vehicles were designed with an eye to creating accessible taxi fleets across North America. Come Tuesday, Aurora will just be the latest community they have brought the concept to and vehicles are already on the road in many Canadian communities including Bracebridge and Winnipeg, along with several US states where the concept originated.

The company is backed by bus and transit manufacturer AM General, itself an offshoot of American motors. His journey with the Canadian branch of the concept began in 2003 when the Toronto Transit Commission approached his company looking for purpose-built cars.

"The answer at the time was no, but I went out and looked to try to find better answers than the word 'no'," he says of being asked by the TTC if they had any leads.

They then turned to the American distributors of London Taxis and they introduced them to what was then simply a plywood concept of a vehicle. From there, Mr. Grande participated in concept development, testing, and making sure everything would be up to snuff for the Canadian market.

"It's durability, it's strength, and it has people wanting to know more, but as true Canadians, everyone is cautious of anything new and it has to be tested," he says of the draw communities see in the vehicles. "Now that we have two years of testing, the City of Chicago has hundreds of them, Pittsburgh has hundreds of them, Connecticut hundreds of them, Winnipeg is using them, Quebec as a whole has done a study testing to make sure that if this is what they want, they are going to pick this as the only taxi available in Quebec because they want to meet the universal design."

In Ontario, under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, the province has some of the most stringent guidelines to meet when it comes to accessibility. The end product from MV-1, says Mr. Grande, goes a long way to achieving the mandate of the act.

“Government fleets must be 100 per cent accessible,” he says. “For human rights and equality, someone with a disability must be able to hail a cab and pay the same fare as everyone else. If something is universally designed, that is something that a city, planners, and fleet managers would look at. Plus, there are 35 years of history of problems with [vehicle] conversions. That is why our car exists.”

Whether or not MV-1's presentation is going to provide any of the incentives Councillors such as John Abel and Sandra Humfries were envisioning to boost the number of accessible taxis in Aurora remains to be seen, but when the company comes forward they will be received by a Council that was primed the previous week.

“I think even the taxicab [companies] will see there is a viable way to move forward,” said Councillor John Abel at last week's General Committee meeting. “It's great with ingenuity and development of designs and technology provide exceptional, cheaper ways of doing things.”