

Demand for mobility increasing among disabled

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

Without it, close to 5,000 disabled people across York Region would not have freedom to shop, attend meetings and therapy sessions or visit friends and family.

But the disabled users of Mobility Plus transit, recently amalgamated into one regional service, are eagerly awaiting changes they hope will improve the once-patchwork service for all customers.

"The service is a good one and I'd rather have it than nothing at all, but there are things that could be rectified," said Markham's Ashley Joannou, a 17-year-old high school student who used the service for months to get to a co-op placement.

Demand for the special service is expected to increase at least 30 per cent in the next five years, and regional funding levels will have to rise drastically from the current \$2.5 million a year to not only meet that demand but to improve the service levels, as well. In 2000, the net cost of specialized transit was \$3.32 per capita in York, compared with \$15 in Toronto and \$13 in Calgary and Edmonton.

BIG PLANS

But there are big plans and the fruits of a 42 per cent budget increase, ahead.

A five-year draft plan for the service was submitted to the region by consultants the IBI Group last month.

"One of the key recommendations is eliminating the municipal boundaries within York Region, so there will be no transfers. We hope to do that with Toronto as well," explained Don Gordon, director of York Region Transit (YRT).

"One of the biggest problems individuals with disabilities face is having to book rides with multiple agencies, then transfer vehicles. That's going to disappear," Mr. Gordon said. "We will provide service directly to three accessible subway stations, Finch, Downsview and Don Mills. They may have to make a booking with Wheel Trans (in Toronto) but they will be getting on to an accessible system and those who can travel



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

The Octagon restaurant owner Ken Stathakis donated a van to York Region Transit Mobility Plus through Markham Mobility Foundation for use in southern York Region.

that way, will."

YRT staff will decide on an implementation date for region-wide seamless travel later this month, but it's expected to take place sometime this spring, Mr. Gordon said.

As well, a pilot project in the Bathurst Street corridor will test the boundary elimination with Toronto across Steeles Avenue. It should be up and running by April, Mr. Gordon said.

"Not having to change will be a major plus," said Robert Munn, a Thornhill resident and member of Markham's accessibility committee.

He's also pleased with the recommendation that the region start a consumer advisory committee on accessible transportation, ensuring users have a say in guiding and planning the service in the future. "It's very important to listen to the local consumers, as well — there are nine municipalities in this region," Mr. Munn said. "This

isn't perfect but it's a good first step."

Some recommendations have already been implemented. For example, fares in all municipalities have been harmonized at \$2 since Jan. 1. A three-zone fare system will be implemented once boundaries fall.

Meanwhile, YRT will continue contractual agreements with ADAPT, which is a taxi-like service in East Gwillimbury and King, Simcoe Coach in Georgina and Wheels on Wheels in Whitchurch-Stouffville.

ADAPT, a registered charity, has been lobbying for transit for the disabled for 31 years. President Jim Knox welcomes the report, saying the current system is grossly unfair to users who often can't get where they need to go within the region.

"The problem has been that all municipalities wanted to maintain their autonomy," he said. "Now some of these things, like the boundary issue, will finally happen

under regional transit."

As the region grows and ages, meeting increasing demand with the region's fleet of 15 specialized vehicles will continue to be a challenge, said Steven Wilks, an associate with IBI Group whose company created the five-year plan. IBI's solution is two-fold — first, increased hours and seamless service should help reduce current stress on the system and second, ensuring accessible infrastructure exists on conventional vehicles and at destinations should increase the ability of some disabled people to access conventional transit.

"There is an option for some of the people, some of the time, to use conventional transit," Mr. Wilks said, adding the region has committed some of those budget dollars to acquiring more low-access buses, grab bars and operator training.

Mr. Gordon confirmed all new buses purchased by YRT will be low-floor, except those running on

express lines, and older buses will be retrofitted with grab bars and higher front seats as part of their overhaul.

Another recommendation is standardizing hours of service, both with conventional transit and municipality to municipality.

"If conventional transit service is offered until midnight, specialized transit should, too," Mr. Gordon said.

Martha Schultz of Thornhill is a regular user of the service. She said she will benefit from standardized hours into Toronto and the north as she attends evening accessibility and Multiple Sclerosis Society meetings across the GTA.

"Elderly and disabled people miss a lot because we can't get there," she said.

The taxi scrip service — where half the metered fare is subsidized by Mobility Plus, but the passenger pays the other half — will continue in the short term.

As Mobility Plus service expands and boundaries are eliminated, it may not be as necessary, Mr. Gordon said.

Communication concerns, often the most frustrating for users, are being monitored as well. Lengthy waits on hold on the telephone booking or canceling trips and missed meetings between drivers and passengers are decreasing, Mr. Gordon said. The goal is centralized dispatch by year's end.

YRT is also contemplating loosening eligibility requirements.

"One of the first focus groups told us there were problems with the criteria for eligibility, which was based mainly on physical limitations," Mr. Wilks said.

"But those with cognitive disabilities or the mentally ill may have orientation problems and could find it difficult, if not impossible, to use conventional transit, as well. We have recommended eligibility be based on functional limitations."

But he pointed out people must be able to take care of themselves upon reaching their destination.

"This is a shared ride service, not an attendant care service," he said.

The draft report is circulating through York Region municipalities now for comment.



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