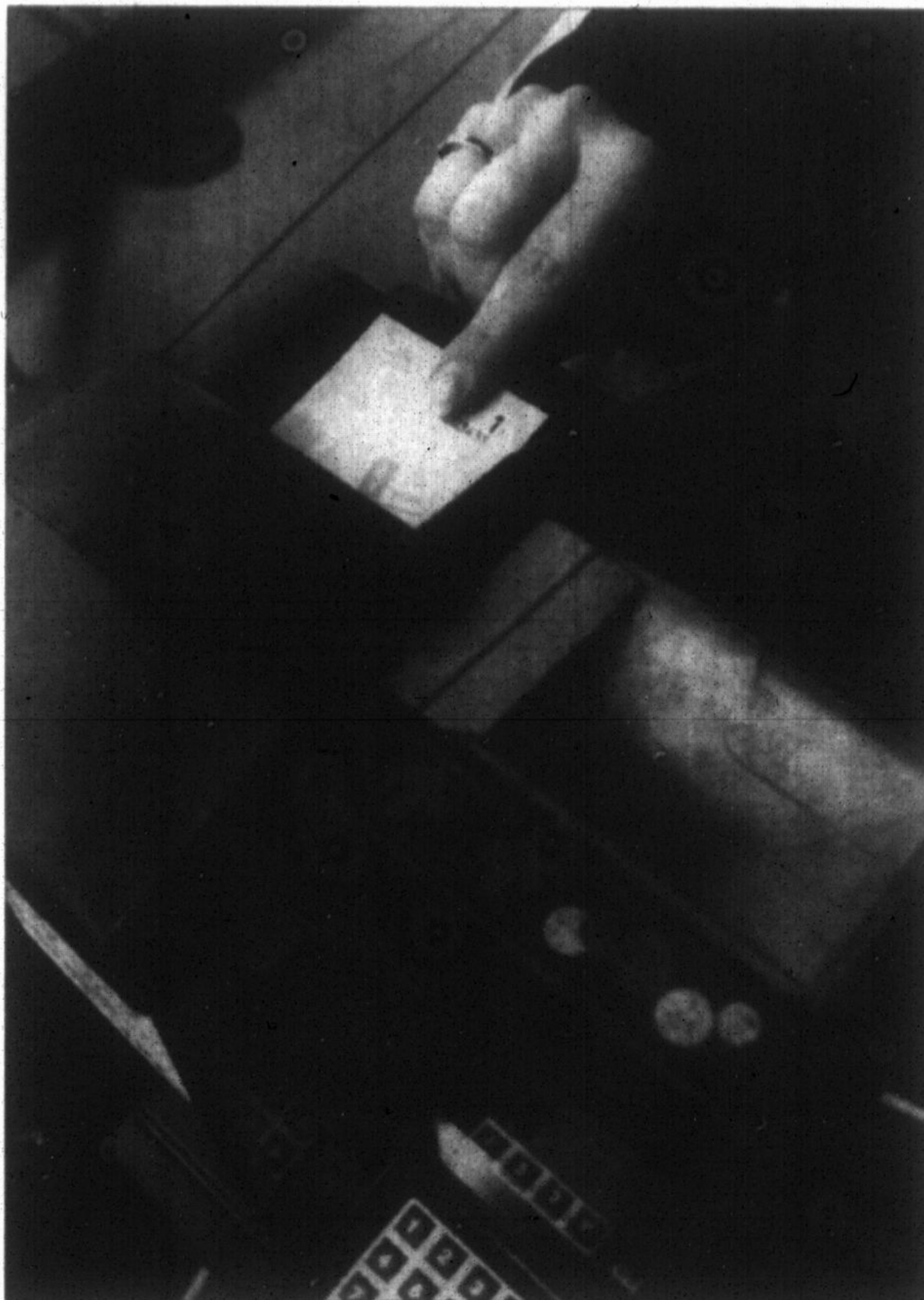


York Region might offer discounted bus tickets to people with low incomes. Hamilton, Ottawa and Durham Region are among municipalities already offering discounts ranging from 30 to 70 per cent.



SUN-TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

York considers subsidy for low-income YRT riders

BY DAVID FLEISCHER
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York Region is set to spend more than \$1.3 million to see if discounting transit helps low-income residents get to jobs and other places they need to go.

The region's community and health services committee approved a pilot project Wednesday that will distribute transit passes and tickets to low-income residents.

It took a while to work out the details, but staff are happy with how the project meets long-term objectives to battle poverty and with their close collaboration with York Region Transit, commissioner Adelina Urbanski said.

If approved by council later this month, many low-income residents will receive transit passes at a 50-per-cent discount or be able to obtain YRT tickets for free from select community agencies.

The effort began late last year when Andrea Sager, representing People Ensuring Quality, a group affiliated with Community Living Newmarket/Aurora, submitted a 327-signature petition and was among those asking the region to make using transit easier for people with low incomes. She spoke of having to walk more because her disability pension did not leave enough room for taking transit every time she needed.

Staff hosted several workshops and brought a report back to council in February.

Council then asked them to develop a two-tier plan to reach as many people as possible, while also including a spending cap so costs don't spiral.

Hamilton, Ottawa and Durham Region are among municipalities offering discounts ranging from 30 to 70 per cent.

Durham's program, costing about \$350,000, discounts monthly bus passes by 60 per cent for people presenting proof they receive ODSP payments.

There are also subsidy programs for people on the Ontario Works program and individuals living below the low income cut-off, which stands at about \$19,000.

York Region has more than 10,000 Ontario Works beneficiaries and nearly 13,000 residents using ODSP, but the pilot will focus on target groups, including Ontario Works recipients looking for work or being denied certain benefits because they have found employment and ODSP clients who similarly have earnings or who are in the ODSP employment support program.

Eligibility will be determined through clients' caseworkers as part of their regular pro-

cess. Once guidelines are finalized, clients will be provided a three- or six-month voucher they can redeem at the main YRT office in Richmond Hill and eventually, other locations.

Up to 1,400 of YRT's \$115 monthly passes will be available for \$57.50.

About a dozen local social agencies have already been purchasing discounted tickets for their clients as part of two earlier pilots, distributing about \$40,000 worth each year.

...many low-income residents will receive transit passes at a 50-per-cent discount or be able to obtain YRT tickets for free from select community agencies.

Under the new plan, up to 100 agencies can access up to \$2,500 worth of tickets to distribute freely to clients so they can access basic needs and jobs.

The pilot also requires one full-time coordinator, at a salary of \$96,000.

Staff members agreed with Richmond Hill Regional Councillor Vito Spatafora that monitoring to ensure tickets are not being hoarded or re-sold, for example, must be part of the pilot.

Regional council initially set a cap of \$1 million on the pilot, but staff said an expanded target group means a greater opportunity to get people off social assistance sooner.

The \$1.3 million cost for the pilot will be drawn from the social assistance reserve, something that raised concerns for Newmarket Regional Councillor John Taylor.

He pointed out groups such as senior citizens and students received transit fares subsidized through the general tax levy and wondered if this program would be sustainable.

The pilot would be funded through the reserve, but if it's successful, council would then have to decide whether or not to add it to the annual budget, Ms Urbanski said.

Despite his reservations, Mr. Taylor was happy to move forward.

"I'm more excited that it's here than I am concerned with the funding source. I don't want to put up barriers," he said.

Council must approve the committee's decision at its next meeting, after which it will take several months to roll out. Staff will report on progress in September 2013.

Bruce's Mill

MASTER PLAN

PUBLIC MEETING

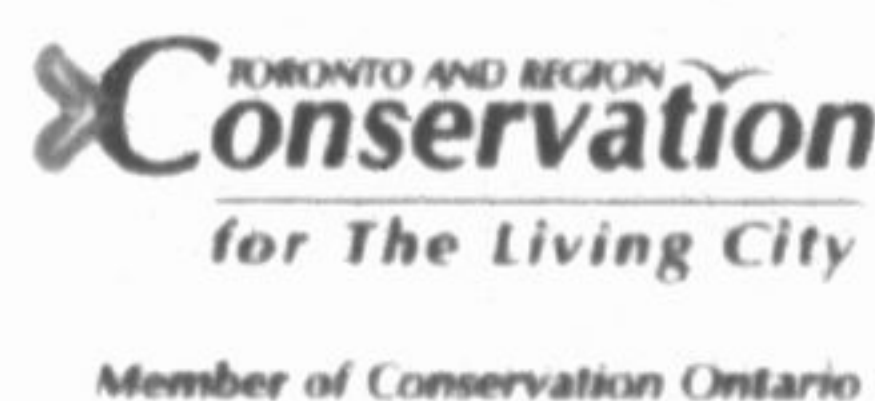
Your Opinion Counts

Toronto and Region Conservation Authority invites you to a public meeting to learn about the revised public use and recreation plan for Bruce's Mill Conservation Area (BMCA). We have taken your suggestions to heart and developed new themes that build on the existing strengths of BMCA, and will appeal to the surrounding communities.

Please attend the meeting and get involved - your opinion counts.

Thursday, October 27, 2011 ~ 7pm

The Chalet at Bruce's Mill Conservation Area,
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- A package of 8 specialized arts credits offered as part of the high school curriculum
- Admission to Grade 9 through audition and/or portfolio presentation-January each year
- Applications for all Secondary Arts Programs due early December each year
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