

TRANSIT: Fare increases possible

Ridership up despite YRT strike

BY CHRIS TRABER
ctraber@yrmg.com

Two months of free public transit netted the desired results, York Region Transit/Viva general manager Richard Leary told the region's Transportation Services Committee this week.

Ridership for April, the first month when customers were required to resume paying fares, reached 1.76 million, a 1.4-per-cent increase compared to April 2011.

The committee, which, in December, authorized the two months of free service to repay taxpayers after a three-month transit strike, was encouraged with the extra 24,400 fare-paying riders in April.

Mr. Leary, while "very pleased", was guarded, suggesting last year's strike-free ridership projections for the same period called for an 8-per-cent hike.

FREE RIDES ENTICING

"Typically, when a transit organization experiences a strike, you lose about 10 per cent of ridership," he said following his overview to committee. "We took progressive steps by offering two months of free transit. It was very successful."

It was a timely administrative tactic and a strong public relations initiative, he said, noting the exercise worked on key levels. It was a responsible reinvestment to taxpayers and drew back customers who changed their transportation habits during the stoppage of services.

The free rides also enticed residents to try public transit.

The affable transplanted Bostonian and former chief operating officer of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority reiterated his commitment to staying the course, service enhancements and cost containment.

"We didn't lose our (ridership) base, but our growth was reduced," he said.

To counter the growth slide, there's the potential for fare increases in future, Mr. Leary hinted, adding he has been working with corporate finance to "see what might be necessary in 2013".

YRT/Viva's challenges are not any different from those of any other North American transportation supplier, he said.

"Our biggest challenge is getting ridership back to where it should be," he said. "What do we want to look like in the future?"

Some tough decisions await, Mr. Leary admitted.



STAFF PHOTOS/NICK IWANYSHYN

Shanghai Dragon (above), the Styrofoam work by Louise Noguchi, was featured during the opening reception for the TransFormal exhibition at Latham Gallery Thursday.

GALLERY 'TRANSFORMED'

Artist Akira Yoshikawa (right) talks to attendees about his bronze, acrylic and graphite piece, titled Agnes, during the opening reception for TransFormal. The exhibition continues until July 28.



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