

## Fair Fares Calgary Celebrates Reduced Fare Transit Passes

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### • *Challenge* •

Since 1999, members of Calgary's disability community had been lobbying city council and the provincial government to establish a low-income transit pass program. Originally, they worked on behalf of residents who were receiving benefits from Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), a program for which benefits were recently increased from \$855 to \$950 a month. Interested organizations, municipal employees and community residents had banded together under the umbrella of the Calgary Committee for Discounted Transit Passes. Though they had won the sympathy and support of several city aldermen, their efforts had yet to bear fruit. By the time the provincial government scheduled a review of the AISH program in 2004, the committee had expanded its concern and was asking the provincial government to extend reduced-fare transit passes to all low-income Albertans.

### • *Strategy* •

Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) had established good relationships with several members of the transit-pass committee through its work in preparing a submission on the AISH program to the provincial government, a process that was initiated in 2003 and completed in December 2005. In 2004, VCC offered to lend its support to the transit pass committee's work, and was immediately welcomed aboard.

VCC represented a wider spectrum of interests and community sectors, but it also brought fresh ideas, an excellent reputation and communications expertise to the initiative. VCC first suggested re-branding the committee "Fair Fares Calgary," a name that neatly summarized the group's message and goal.

To keep the group's message in front of decision-makers, VCC also encouraged committee members to shift from their grassroots approach and adopt a more traditional structure. Two co-chairs now act as primary spokespeople for the initiative. VCC helped organize a successful letter- and postcard-writing campaign to demonstrate the level of public support for establishing low-income transit passes among the general population. Two thousand postcards were distributed through VCC's membership, and many high-profile VCC participants wrote letters to their local aldermen in support of the initiative.



• *Impact* •

In the spring of 2005, members of city council noted the hundreds of requests for low-income transit passes they had received before they voted to pursue establishing such a program, even without the financial support of the province. In June, city council voted to move forward with low-income transit passes for AISH recipients, and in September, they voted to extend the program to 35,000 low-income adult Calgarians under age 65. On August 1, 2005, reduced-fare transit passes were issued to 2,000 AISH recipients for the first time. In January 2006, such passes were made available to all Calgarians with incomes less than 75 percent of Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off.

How the \$2.5 million required to pay for the reduced fare transit passes will be covered is still up for discussion. For 2006, the City of Calgary has agreed to use its Fiscal Stability Reserve Fund to meet program expenses. VCC has already headed off one suggestion that, beginning in 2007, the passes be paid for from a joint provincial/municipal fund that supports local social programs. Within a week of the suggestion's unveiling, VCC members had made enough phone calls and written enough letters and e-mails to city council and local media to convince decision-makers that the idea would effectively rob one poverty-reduction program to serve another. VCC members are optimistic that continued discussions with the province will result in a sustainable funding solution.

