



Canadian Paraplegic Association
(N.B.) Inc. Association canadienne des
paraplégiques (N.-B.) Inc.

How do we get there from here?

**Position paper on accessible transit in Fredericton –
A submission to the City of Fredericton Transit Study.**

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Background

Overview

Access to public transit is a human rights issue – access is a right, not a privilege.

The Supreme Court of Canada has affirmed the principle that society should be designed and structured for inclusiveness. In the context of transit services, this means that the design and development of transit services should be based on the objective of maximum integration of all persons into society. As part of the duty to accommodate, transit providers have a legal obligation to provide accessible transit services.

Transportation is fundamental to independent living for all Canadians. Transit provides mobility to many people who do not have access to other modes of transportation due to age, disability or income. Transit services facilitate integration into public and social life in our communities and allow people access to work, services and facilities. Public transit is a major key to independence, productivity, and community participation. With an aging population and a high number of persons with mobility-related conditions residing in our community, transit's accessibility role is becoming even more important.

The accommodation of personal wheelchairs in transit systems enables persons with disabilities to access public services and facilities as independently and seamlessly as possible. We acknowledge that the cost of the provision of personal door-to-door transportation for persons with special needs due to a disability is higher per trip than publicly subsidized bus services that run on scheduled routes. However, the service is indispensable. Persons with mobility related disabilities have a right to independent access to services with the same comfort, dignity, safety and security as those without physical limitations.

Progress in the area of transit accessibility has been slow in Fredericton. Transit services are purchasing low-floor buses that accommodate wheelchairs, and adding vehicles to their paratransit fleet. However, at the current pace, it will be many years before we have a fully accessible fleet. Persons with disabilities face significant barriers in using transit services in Fredericton. Accessibility standards are voluntary and as a result it is common for people to be left without transportation. People with disabilities must either plan out their lives in advance in order to use Dial-A-Bus or stay home because they live outside the area serviced. And for someone who is unable to transfer into a vehicle and needs paratransit services, it is almost impossible to get from our local airport into the city of Fredericton.

Lack of accessible transit service places barriers to education, work, and health services. For many, it makes the difference between isolation and loneliness, and full participation in their community. There is a pressing need for improvements. While there have been some improvements in the past, there remains much to be done to achieve the goal of barrier-free public transit for all persons with disabilities. A barrier-free transit system benefits not only persons with disabilities, but it significantly impacts seniors and families with young children.

Accessibility benefits communities both socially and economically. Education and planning are key tenets of accessibility and efforts to enhance accessibility in Fredericton are beneficial for all residents and will ensure it is a viable destination for diverse visitors.

Services should include both modifications to conventional systems (e.g., buses, taxis) to ensure maximum accessibility for all persons and the creation and maintenance of paratransit systems such as Dial-A-Bus.

Facts and trends to consider

People with disabilities participate in all aspects of community life and they utilize all types of services. The percentage of persons with disabilities in Fredericton and New Brunswick is high and it will increase over the next few decades, especially in our aging population base. According to Statistics Canada:

- Per capita, New Brunswick has the second highest number of persons with disabilities in Canada.
- Over 82,300 New Brunswickers over the age of 15 have a disability related to mobility – 11% of the population!
- Over 34,500 New Brunswickers over the age of 65 have a disability related to mobility.
- Seniors aged 65 and over represent 15% of Fredericton's population.

(Statistics Canada, 2007)

Many people with disabilities are living on low fixed incomes or lower levels of employment income. Many of these individuals also have extra costs related to their disability and are unable to afford the costs of specialized transportation. This lack of access to reliable and affordable accessible transportation has a significant social and economic impact as many people with disabilities are not able to pursue education or employment opportunities.

Our weather also makes transportation much more difficult during the winter months as the lack of adequately cleared sidewalks create a significant barrier for those who use wheelchairs or scooters or those with mobility problems.

Accessibility is good for business

People with disabilities and older persons are coalescing as an economic and social power, constituting a significant portion of the consumer market. It is estimated that people with disabilities are responsible for \$25 billion in annual buying power in Canada, and influence the spending decisions of an estimated 12 to 15 million other Canadians including friends and family members. Together, these increasingly overlapping groups are a growing force among consumers (Royal Bank, 2000/TABIA, 2006). In a 2001 article in Construction Canada, architect Pamela Cluff observed that seniors and people with disabilities "will represent between 20 to 25 per cent of the recreation, retail, entertainment, workplace and housing marketplaces in the next 10 years and beyond" (Cluff, July 2001).

Inclusion makes good economic sense. Give people the chance to participate, and you'll have a stronger society and a stronger economy.

Accessible tourism

Accessible tourism is about tourism for everyone, regardless of the type of disability they may have. It includes, but is not specific, to people with mobility challenges.

Accessibility includes both the removal of barriers by adopting principles of “universal design” as well as the provision of inclusive opportunities and service. One significant outcome of accessible tourism, aside from increased revenue to businesses, is that it makes the community more accessible to local people and provides an infrastructure that can draw on people with disabilities locally for a sorely needed labor source.

As part of the 2010 Olympics, British Columbia, through 2010 Legacies Now, is the first jurisdiction in Canada to begin work to prioritize and focus on market opportunities related to people with disabilities.

The geography (e.g., major hills that are difficult to ambulate) of Fredericton and the lack of accessible transit are a major deterrent to disabled travelers who wish to visit Fredericton. The CPA (N.B.) Inc. receives significant requests per year from disabled travelers who wish to include Fredericton in travel plans. The lack of accessible transportation (i.e., buses, taxis, retrofitted rental vehicles, flexible paratransit) is a major deterrent for tourists with disabilities. Reliable and accessible transportation to and from our airport also remains a major issue for travelers who use wheelchairs or scooters. As one of our clients recently reflected, “People with physical disabilities who want to visit Fredericton need to BYOT. Bring your own transportation.”

Current state of accessible transportation services in Fredericton

Recently, Fredericton has made some progress in the area of accessible transit. The City has made a commitment to purchase accessible buses to renew the fleet over the long term and has offered a \$25,000 capital subsidy to support the provision of an accessible taxi service in Fredericton to help address a growing concern regarding lack of accessible taxis services. The City has also included Dial-A-Bus in its Transit Fare Assistance Program for persons with limited incomes.

Ridership alone indicates the need to take accessible transit seriously. According to the City of Fredericton Transit services, in 2007, Dial-A-Bus ridership in Fredericton averaged 1033 to 1199 rides per month between the accessible paratransit bus and the supplemental taxi system. As of April 21, 2008, there were 820 registered users of Dial-A-Bus and there are currently 50 registered persons who use the system either on a daily basis, once a week or 3 times a week for work, education or medical appointments.

Some people who use wheelchairs can transfer to a regular car seat and load their wheelchair or walker themselves. Others require a larger vehicle with a wheelchair lift that can load the person and their mobility equipment without a transfer. The addition of the Supplemental Taxi Program for those transit users with the ability to transfer in a taxi, has been a value added to the Dial-A-Bus program and has helped to address the demand for service. The Dial-A-Bus schedulers make a concerted effort to get passengers where they need to go, when they need to be there. However, there are some days and peak times where passengers are turned away due to high demand for service.

City of Fredericton Transit Services currently has twenty-eight full-sized buses and three Dial-A-Bus units. Twelve of the current fleet of twenty-eight full-size transit buses are low-floor units; all twelve units have the kneeling feature that mechanically lowers or kneels the front of the bus to curb-side level, and all twelve units have a wide front door. Ten of the twelve units also have ramps. Only one of the low-floor buses has a rear-facing wheelchair station, including back cushion although all of the low floor buses are designed to allow a single wheelchair station. Retrofits will be needed to ensure the twelve units have all the features necessary for accessibility. Currently, people with mobility related conditions may get on a low floor, kneeling bus with a ramp; however, they are not guaranteed that the next bus at a transfer stop will have the same level of accessibility. Transit Services is exploring retrofit options and has indicated a commitment to ensure all new buses purchased will be low floor, with ramp, kneeling feature and wide front door. Currently, however, there are no targets set for retrofitting the current units or the establishment of accessible bus routes.

For over three years, a community-driven Accessible Taxi Committee has worked to try to secure an accessible taxi service for Fredericton with little success despite support from the City of Fredericton. To date, there has been no success in securing an accessible taxi service provider and our city remains without this much needed service.

Fredericton – “The Accessible City”

In 2007, Fredericton was named as one of the top 10 North American cities of the future by *Foreign Direct Investment magazine*. Fredericton was named a 2009 Cultural Capital of Canada as a result of its access to arts and culture. In 2008, Fredericton was named one of the top 7 intelligent communities of the year. Fredericton has been also called the “green” city. Our vision is Fredericton – the “accessible” city. This long term goal aligns with the City plan to “...create the best community possible in which the citizens of Fredericton can live, work, raise families and play” (City of Fredericton, 2007).

Recommendations for action

A primary goal of the City of Fredericton transit system should be to integrate its riders with disabilities into a primary transit system accessible to all consumers. For individuals who cannot access even a highly integrated or conventional system, a parallel system (e.g., Dial-A-Bus) should also continue to be integrated into Transit Services. In keeping with this goal, the CPA (N.B.) Inc. recommends that the City of Fredericton:

- Develop a target for an accessible transit system by 2020. All city buses must be accessible by 2020.
- Explore funding options to retrofit the 12 low-floor buses to ensure all are equipped with ramps and wheelchair stations.
- Explore and pilot an accessible regular bus route by 2011.

- Continue to work proactively to secure the provision of an accessible taxi service provider for the Fredericton area.
- Actively encourage and explore incentives for private taxi companies, charter and rental companies to include accessible vehicles in their fleets.
- Expand the current transit study to ensure an inclusive transit study that integrates a review of Dial-A-Bus services and includes consultation with persons who access the service.
- Continue with the Transit Fare Assistance program including the provision of Dial-A-Bus passes to provide additional support to community groups to assist low income clients' efforts to attend medical appointments, access education and training, seek employment or visit service providers.

The Canadian Paraplegic Association (N.B.) Inc. is pleased to collaborate with the City of Fredericton on issues related to accessibility. We are an available resource for the City and we look forward to future partnerships.

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The **Canadian Paraplegic Association (N.B.) Inc.** is a community-based non-profit organization that specializes in rehabilitation and vocational counseling services for people with SCIs and other physical disabilities. The CPA (N.B.) Inc. aims to assist persons with spinal cord injuries and other physical disabilities to achieve independence, self-reliance, and full community participation. For more information on the Canadian Paraplegic Association (N.B.) Inc., please visit www.cpanb.ca.