

COMMONSENSE ACCESSIBILITY INITIATIVE

Fairfax County Transportation Advisory Commission

INTRODUCTION

Fairfax County is home to a considerably large, and growing, disabled population. Conservative estimates show that persons with disabilities now account for over 11% of the County's population. And all indications – like the County's rapidly aging population and the increase in war veterans returning home – point to a likely expansion of this segment of the population in the coming years.

Public transportation is a vital link between the County's disabled population and basic living services. Without accessible public transportation, our disabled population would lose their independence, as well as their ability to enjoy and participate in the many aspects of County life, including work, commerce and leisure activities.

To ensure the County's disabled residents remain actively involved in their communities, maintain productive roles in the economy, and have access to the full range of facilities and services needed to lead enjoyable and productive lives, the Transportation Advisory Commission ("TAC") is launching a "Commonsense Accessibility Initiative" dedicated to improving the overall accessibility of public transportation to the County's disabled residents.

THE INITIATIVE

Consistent with its name, the Commonsense Accessibility Initiative (or “CSA Initiative”) will seek to improve the overall accessibility of public transportation to the County's disabled residents by producing “commonsense” solutions endorsed by the Board of Supervisors and implemented by County staff regarding:

(1) The expansion and improvement of educational services offered to disabled residents to better inform them of their public transportation options;

(2) The prioritization of existing structural repair projects necessary to improve the accessibility of public transportation facilities; and

(3) The planning for, and prioritization of, new accessibility infrastructure projects at key public transportation and public service facilities.

Expanding Educational Opportunities

A first, commonsense step toward improving the accessibility of public transportation to the County’s disabled population is educating disabled persons on the public transportation options currently available to them, how to effectively utilize those options, as well as how to report deficiencies at locations where access is needed. Thus, as part of the CSA Initiative, the TAC will work with County staff to develop new and more effective outreach programs, while researching and leveraging the

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many educational programs and tools currently utilized by the County and other jurisdictions. The goal of this component of the CSA Initiative is to educate the disabled population and to make appropriate recommendations to the Board of Supervisors regarding the possible expansion and improvement of the educational services available to disabled residents.

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Prioritizing Accessibility Improvement Projects

A second, commonsense step toward improving the accessibility of public transportation to the County's disabled population is re-thinking how repair projects to public transportation facilities, such as bus stops, are identified, scoped, and prioritized. Indeed, there are many persons with disabilities who understand well their available public transportation options and, yet, they are foreclosed from using those options because their public transportation facilities are in need of repair or upgrade.

County staff has indicated that projects are usually scoped to bring facilities up to current standards and projects are geographically grouped for economy of scale and work productivity. The TAC believes that a change in approach to existing repair projects -- an approach which would focus instead on identifying and prioritizing smaller scale repairs and accessibility upgrades that can be targeted to locations where deficiencies exist and are impeding access to needed users and that can be accomplished quickly and within existing budgets -- would likely

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result in more immediate and wider ranging benefits to disabled residents.

Before the TAC and County staff will be in a position to make appropriate recommendations to the Board of Supervisors regarding shifting the current approach to addressing existing repair projects, however, considerable factual research will be required. Most critically, following an endorsement of the CSA Initiative by the Board of Supervisors in concept, the TAC will work with County staff:

(1) To identify priority locations and requirements for potential repair projects necessary to make select public transportation facilities accessible to disabled residents living in the area;

(2) To commission a study, which will be overseen by the TAC, to establish a priority rating and strategic approach to allocating funding to existing or newly identified projects; and

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(3) To establish and publicize a dedicated County phone line, which can be used by the County's disabled to report repair issues necessary to make mass transit options more accessible.

Planning for New Infrastructure Improvements

A third, commonsense step toward improving the accessibility of public transportation to the County's disabled population requires planning for the construction of new, additional accessibility infrastructure at key public transportation facilities near employment centers and other public service locations. While the County has taken

great strides toward making public transportation accessible and effective for its disabled residents, there are still many critical locations that are not accessible to our disabled population by way of public transportation. Thus, as a long-term goal of the CSA Initiative, the TAC will work with County staff to commission a study, which the TAC will oversee, to identify those public transportation facilities that are in the greatest demand by, and essential to meeting the basic needs of, the County's disabled population. Based on the results of that study, the TAC and County staff will make appropriate recommendations to the Board of Supervisors as to a prioritized list of potential improvement projects to existing public transportation facilities and other public service facilities to make those facilities accessible to disabled County residents via public transportation.

CONCLUSION

Access to basic living services, which the able-bodied person often takes for granted, can become problematic for the disabled person who has limited or no access to public transportation. Through the CSA Initiative, the TAC hopes to assist the Board of Supervisors in continuing and strengthening ongoing efforts to improve the lives of the County's disabled residents by making sure disabled persons have appropriate access to vital public transportation services.