

New transpo pass to help mentally ill, disabled

By Greg MacCormack

It's a free bus ride no longer for anyone who uses a wheelchair, scooter or walker and takes OC Transpo.

Starting next month, people with visual disabilities will pay just under \$30 a month to use the bus under the City's new community bus pass program. It's a service that used to come for free.

But the new program also comes with major savings for transit users with mental or other less visible disabilities. Under the new program, they'll see their cost drop \$60 from the adult fare of \$71.25.

That's good news for Donald

Shultz, who suffers from depression and says he has been forced to choose between transportation and food on at least one occasion. He gets \$725 a month from the Ontario Disabilities Support Program but finds it difficult to pay all the bills.

The new pass will make it easier for disabled people to go to medical appointments and self-help group meetings, says Shultz. "It will allow them to get involved in the community. There's a good chance their health, both mentally and physically, will improve."

Transit users who rely on a wheelchair, scooter or walker have been allowed to ride free for the past three years, says

Kathy Riley, who specializes in accessible transit for OC Transpo.

The allowance was initiated to relieve the load on Para Transpo, says Riley, but was limited to users who could be easily identified by the driver as disabled and was never seen as a final solution. The new program aims to help people whose disabilities are not as obvious.

The community bus pass is available to anyone who receives aid from the Ontario Disability Support Program and has been "in the works for years," says Lisa Jamieson, who worked with a local lobby group to propose the pass to the city.

Disabled people are more than

twice as likely to be poor, she explains, citing a 2001 study by Statistics Canada. The new pass will treat those with visible and less visible disabilities the same and costs as much as a senior's bus pass.

At this point the pass is considered a one-year pilot project. But if it is successful, it may be expanded to include people receiving other disability benefits, says Jamieson. The city estimates as many as four thousand people will use the pass in its current form.

Shultz says he hopes the program will be expanded to include disabled people on welfare, who receive even less money than he does from the

provincial support program.

Coun. Rainer Bloess, a member of the city's transit committee, says the city will be monitoring the pilot project in an attempt to see if the plan meets its objectives.

The new pass is an attempt to target people in need and the Ontario Disability Support Program is one way to identify these people, he says. "It's a litmus test."

The pass costs \$28.25 and is valid for both regular and express routes but customers on a rural line may have to pay an extra fee. Community pass transit users will also have to pay a one-time \$7 fee for photo identification.