

Ottawa's disabled should keep cheap bus passes: transit committee

Universal fare hike not recommended

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[CBC News](#)

A \$600,000 program that gives disabled transit users discounted bus passes should continue next year even though it produces a transit budget shortfall, the city's transit committee says.

Committee members decided unanimously Wednesday to recommend extending the pilot program that gives people with disabilities bus passes for \$28.25 a month instead of the regular \$71.25.

The committee also opted not to endorse a staff recommendation that would hike all bus fares by 7.5 per cent.

Debate and final decisions on both the discounted bus-pass program and the fare hike will take place during city council budget discussions in February.

Tuesday's committee meeting was attended by more than two dozen people who wanted to explain to councillors how the pilot project has changed the lives of the disabled, many of whom live below the poverty line.

Among those who spoke was 27-year-old Laura Stewart, who has an intellectual disability and who publicly thanked the committee for their decision on behalf of 50 others with intellectual disabilities.



Laura Stewart, who has an intellectual disability, rides the bus to work, the shopping mall, and dinners with her friends using her discounted bus pass. (CBC)

Stewart takes the bus to work, to the mall and to dinners with her friends, and she said public transit is an important part of her plan to move out of her parents' home in a couple of months and into her own apartment with a roommate.

The discount program allows her to afford the bus pass with her disability benefits and her income as a dog walker instead of relying on her parents, and that gives her a sense of independence, she said.

"[I'm] really happy inside that I can get around the city like I do."

Keenan Wellar, co-founder of a group called LiveWorkPlay that helps people with intellectual disabilities speak out for themselves, said many disabled Ottawa residents rely on transit as their only transportation option.

"This is a group of people that needs the bus the most of anybody," he said.

The city's spending is under pressure this year because of a \$95-million budget shortfall predicted by city staff, as well as Mayor Larry O'Brien's commitment to a tax freeze.

Budget discussions and consultations will take place after the draft budget is tabled Feb. 7, and the final budget must be approved by the end of the month.