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ESTABLISHING THE YORK RAPID TRANSIT AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

The Rapid Transit Public/Private Partnership Steering Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendation contained in the following report, October 7, 2004, from the Vice President of the York Region Rapid Transit Corporation:

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Council endorse this report, for the purpose of establishing the York Rapid Transit Ambassador Program.

2. PURPOSE

The Ambassador Program would consist of high profile “champions” from the community who can actively promote York Rapid Transit at Queen’s Park, Parliament Hill, throughout York Region, with stakeholders and in the media. The Ambassadors could also be instrumental in challenging criticism and recruiting new “champions” from the business community or political arena.

The Program could prove to be invaluable as work continues to raise the profile of *Quick Start* and secure phase two funding.

3. BACKGROUND

Establishing the Rapid Transit Ambassador Program is an integral part of the overall government relations’ plan developed by the Sussex Strategy Group in July 2004.

The idea of a high profile Ambassador Program is not new, in fact it is an effective strategy that is used by charities, corporations and at times, political campaigns. Simply through association, Ambassador Program members can add credibility and importance to a project. These individuals could raise the profile of rapid transit, advocate on York Region’s behalf politically and publicly, and attract the support of other community leaders.

The Ambassador Program could supplement the outreach work that will be carried out by rapid transit staff. While the Ambassadors meet and provide strategic advice and input, staff will be working on a parallel track to build support through a public “court and track” approach. It would work like this:

- Staff would identify potential supporters or contacts within an organization (potentially through suggestions made by the Ambassador Program).

- Staff would employ a “court” and “track” process that would begin by sending a letter of introduction.
- The letter would then be followed up by a phone call, and possibly a site visit depending on the level of enthusiasm and support.
- This would help break the ice with a potential supporter, give staff an opportunity to provide information about rapid transit, and develop an ongoing relationship.
- The strategy would also include identifying and attending regular Chamber and Board of Trade events to promote the project through the distribution of materials and networking.
- Staff could also provide a print package, electronic updates, or make presentation(s) to senior management/staff.

The Ambassadors could also provide support by giving speeches or presentations, writing “opinion editorial” (op-ed) pieces or letters to the editor, providing quotes for news releases, attending public events or meetings or simply by riding the new service.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

Clearly, the greater the community support, the more successful rapid transit is going to be in York Region. The project has the solid backing of Regional Council and Municipal Councils along with Chair Fisch and local Mayors, but getting high profile community leaders to endorse the project, could demonstrate to our senior funding partners that York Region is united in its support of rapid transit.

The Ambassador Program objectives are:

- To champion the York Rapid Transit project at Queen’s Park, on Parliament Hill and in the media to ensure the project continues to move forward.
- To provide recommendations on expanding the Ambassadors Program throughout the Region, building on the community outreach program being implemented by the Rapid Transit staff.
- To provide strategic advice on government relations and communications, ensuring the project informs, excites, inspires and motivates a whole new generation of transit riders.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The meetings would take place at the York Rapid Transit Offices in Richmond Hill, eliminating the need to book meeting rooms. However, support staff would be required to prepare materials beforehand, record and distribute minutes, and provide any administrative support Ambassador Program members may need.

It is felt that Ambassador Program members should be asked to volunteer their time and expertise for the betterment of the community. Administrative costs for items such as meals and support services will be covered within the Rapid Transit budget.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

The Ambassador Program could be comprised of up to 10 members and a Chair. After being appointed, the Ambassadors would meet periodically to get a project status report, assess the government relations strategy, and provide advice on ways to expand the “champions” program. Program members could also be called upon individually to provide additional support by attending an event, or lending their name to an op-ed piece, etc.

7. CONCLUSION

The Ambassador Program is one piece of an overall comprehensive government relations / communications / outreach strategy. However, this could be a critical piece, as work continues to raise the profile of *Quick Start* and secure funding for phase two.

The idea is to reach out to the community with a new service that excites, inspires and motivates a whole new generation of riders. These community leaders could bring additional profile to project by promoting it in their profession, in the media and politically in the halls of Queen’s Park and Parliament Hill.