June 5, 2013

To: Mayor and Members of Council

Subject: various thoughts on the DARTS article in the Hamilton Spectator

It's easy to blame the new communications system (link) for the problems at DARTS. However, EVERYONE knows that the ride scheduling software system that was purchased by Mark Mindorff is not capable of handle the task for which it was acquired.

The DARTS drivers tell me that this new software scheduling system is "better suited for delivering pizzas, not patients."

As a daily dialysis clinical out-patient, I have been on DARTS rides where the drivers were required to pick-up three clients, some with walkers or mobility issues, in Stoney Creek, Hamilton Mountain and Waterdown; all within a 30-minute window. This is not unusual: just ask any DARTS bus driver, or any of the DARTS-contracted VETERANS minivan drivers.

Clearly, the software scheduling system acquired and used by DARTS was not designed or modified to take into account variables, like the escarpment, or clients with mobility issues.

Scheduling ran smoother in "the old days" when it was done manually, by former drivers who were familiar with the challenges of transporting "disabled" and "aged" clients through Hamilton's unique transportation infrastructure.

Also, I agree with Spectator interviewee Donna Dobroski about DARTS resources (meaning the lack of drivers and vehicles on the road). Over a two year period, I have missed a dozen dialysis treatments because the DARTS dispatch manager said that she didn't have any rides available to take me to the hospital....and that I "should take a cab."

If the complaints "have largely tailed-off," it is NOT because the situation at DARTS has improved: it is because clients and their supporters have given-up on trying to resolve problems through the DARTS Customer Service Department. I have heard many story's where individuals, and executives from institutions, have been "blown off" by the DARTS Customer Service Manager because she knows that her boss, Mark Mindorff, will not take any action to correct a situation.
This is because the responsibility for scheduling rides was transferred from the City's ATS Department, to DARTS, which effectively eliminated opportunities for the City of Hamilton to provide oversight of DARTS.

The consensus among drivers, and clients, and healthcare professionals is that DARTS management, meaning Mark Mindorff and those who report directly to Mark, views DARTS as just another form of public transit. DARTS must be viewed and managed as part of the spectrum of public transit that takes into account an increasingly aged and disabled population.

An Operational Review of the ATS and DARTS situation should bring these customer service story's and situations out into the open and then, maybe, we will see the kind of house-cleaning that occurred after Council conducted the Operational Review of the Licensing and Standards Board, several years ago.

The spectrum of public transit, in reverse-order or urgency:

HSR & Taxi Scrip "public transportation" for relatively healthy folks,

*DARTS buses and minivans "public transportation" for the ambulatory,

*OPT-and-the-like "public transportation" for stable in-patients, and

*EMS & air ambulance "public transportation" for critically injured and ill.
FYI: I've been advocating for an Operational Review of DARTS for over two years now. We were planning a petition which would have included the healthcare professionals, and even the DARTS drives themselves.

I put this effort on-hold at the request of Rick Badzioch, the Director of Clinical Operations at St. Josephs Healthcare who, along with Marg Doma, the Director of Risk Management at St. Josephs Healthcare, began a dialog with the City of Hamilton's newly-minted ATS Director, George Brovac to try and address the shortcomings of the DARTS operations that were having a negative impact on the clinical operations at St. Joe's and, conversely, the short-comings in the St. Joe's dialysis operations which were playing havoc with the DARTS operations.

I viewed this initiative as a positive development and would ask City Council to STRONGLY encourage City staff to pursue such dialog with more vigor and priority, with community stakeholders in order to send a message to Mark Mindorff and the DART board of directors that they are, if in fact, accountable to the community they are mandated to serve.

And lets be sure to include input from the grass roots service providers (nurses, social workers, DARTS drivers and the adult daycare agency's) who provide care and advocate for the aged and the ill so the rest of us can live normal lives.
Having said all this, the DARTS inside and outside workers are currently in contract negotiations; not for money, but for better treatment by senior management. Perhaps some improvements will come from these negotiations.

Although it will cost more, it may be time to cut-loose the DARTS organization, bring the DARTS employees into the HSR family, and find a way to maintain a taxi company as a contractor.

If an Operational Review of ATS and its oversight and authority over DARTS operation is commissioned by City Council, the review committee should also examine the drastic reduction of services (vehicles & drivers) that has been imposed on clients after 6pm.

St. Josephs Healthcare Dialysis Clinic run three shifts: mornings, afternoons and evenings, ending around 11:30pm.. A few years ago, DARTS management cut the van service after 6pm; forcing clinical out-patients like myself, who were receiving evening dialysis, to use BLUE LINE taxi service, at full cost, funded by the tax payers through Special Supports, until we could get squeezed into an over-crowded morning and afternoon dialysis time-slot. This caused resource and scheduling problems for DARTS drivers, dialysis nurses and technical and cleaning staff that I see and experience to this day.

I am suggesting that DARTS re-allocated resources so they can offer some level of mini-van service from 6pm-12-midnight so it conforms to the new harmonization policy. This is especially important for the 100-or-so out-patients who are under doctors orders to ride in mini-vans because of the rough ride and mandatory seating arrangements of the heavy DARTS buses that trigger or aggravate physical illness and conditions and injuries in many clients.

Sincerely,

Peter Hasek