

Accessibility advocates hail opening of Diamond Jubilee Park



By Brock Weir

If it were in place 20 years ago when he was still a kid, Tyler Barker would have been among the first to "pester" his parents to take him to Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park.

Alas, a fully accessible park "with features for individuals of all ages and abilities" was still a long way's away from his childhood, Barker has been an vocal advocate for change. He has lent his voice to ensuring kids in wheelchairs today now have something to pester their parents about.

Mr. Barker, who lives with cerebral palsy, now chairs Aurora's citizen-led Accessibility Advisory Committee, and was one of the dignitaries on hand for the formal opening of Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park on Tuesday night.

"This is such a great thing to happen," said Mr. Barker, hailing the Park's development as a "community effort" while thanking his fellow committee members for their input. "This is a great thing and hopefully more people who have disabilities can enjoy something like this. I can imagine that if something like this was here when I was a kid, I would have bugged my parents to come over. This is a great thing, so thank you very much."

After five years since it was first proposed, Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park is now open for visitors of all ages and abilities. First proposed in 2012 to mark the 60th anniversary of the Queen's accession to the throne, after extensive consultation and long-running construction, the park is now completed and ready to welcome visitors in the Queen's Sapphire Jubilee year. While kids, their families, and local seniors have been enjoying the park for weeks, the formal dedication of Aurora's first purpose-built fully accessible park, complete with a playground for the kids, sensory features and a meditation garden for older Aurorans and more, took place last just before last week's Council meeting.

Joining Mr. Barker at the opening were Mayor Geoff Dawe, Newmarket-Aurora MP Kyle Peterson, and members of Council. "This idea was brought forward by Councillor Pirri back in 2012 and it took a bit of effort to get this going, but I think it has turned out absolutely fabulously," Mayor Dawe told dignitaries and onlookers. "There has been a great deal of thought that went into the design of this park; a lot of effort went into how do we make this truly accessible? How do we make this available to all our residents?"

"I am so glad for all the effort we put into it. There were a wee bit of funds expended on this, but I think it is money well spent because it really does provide that little bit of extra for some of our residents who don't get to use all of our facilities on a regular basis. Thank you very much for all of the input you have [provided]."

As Mayor Dawe noted, Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park, as it now stands, was the brainchild of Councillor Paul Pirri. Plans were quite different from what was originally proposed to Council to commemorate the Jubilee milestone.

An unnamed parkette on Aurora's west side was first mentioned as a lasting reminder of the occasion, the first in our history since 1897, but in the minds of the Council of the day, a 'parkette' simply wasn't grand enough.

A more fitting tribute, they agreed, was a larger park and the final candidate was the former Civic Square Park on John West Way. Former mayor Evelyn Buck, who was on Council at the time, was the first who stepped up to suggest a simple re-naming wouldn't do and suggested a rose garden, or a similar destination feature, to make the park stand out from the rest. Councillor Pirri's idea to transform the perimeter into a fully accessible park, however, won the day.

'I just wanted to thank everyone who has been involved in the process, members of Council who helped us get this through, our Accessibility Advisory Committee who put in a lot of time picking out all the appropriate features, and all of their work was greatly appreciated,' said Councillor Pirri.

'From the get go, I wanted to create a space where everyone could come, play and enjoy the outdoors. I had a lot of people commenting today on how nice this composite is to be walking on, and it is a safe product which also allows wheelchairs, which is extremely important. It was always to have both elderly people playing with their grandchildren or people who have some accessibility issues, getting out and being able to enjoy something they wouldn't always be able to enjoy.'