

Accessibility champions left out of awards process, says activist

By Brock Weir

If Aurora is having trouble finding champions for accessibility to recognize at the annual Community Recognition Awards each year, why not turn to the people who advocate for accessibility every day?

That was the argument of Tyler Barker, Chair of Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee, last week, calling for the Town to reinstate the Accessibility Award at next year's Community Recognition Awards.

Recently, the citizen-led committee tasked with drafting the format of each year's ceremony, issuing the call for nominees, and vetting each nomination that rolls in, decided to 'enhance' this particular award, expanding its definition to be an award for 'Inclusivity.'

Despite some members of the Accessibility Advisory Committee also sitting on the awards panel, this decision to open up the nomination process did not sit well with others.

'All the Committee would want is for the Accessibility Award to be brought back,' said Mr. Barker. 'Nobody wants to take away the Inclusivity Award. I was informed there was a problem [attracting] recipients. Perhaps next time, if you come to the Committee, we can open it up to churches, service providers, and many other groups.'

Responding to Mr. Barker's concerns, Councillor Sandra Humfryes, who sits on the Awards Committee, said it was felt 'accessibility' and 'inclusivity' worked hand in hand.

'If the Committee wants that, we can absolutely go forward with it,' she said. 'I just want to make it clear that it was not at all true [we got rid of the award]. It was an honoured award [for] people who are making our community accessible and inclusive.'

Championing a change back around the Council table has been Councillor John Abel who said although it is too late to get the Accessibility Award back in time for this spring's 2018 nomination process and ceremony, it should be brought back for 2019.

'We completely understand the nomination process is well on its way, so this is just going forward for next term,' he said.

'Inclusivity, I agree, does include accessibility because inclusivity means just that. If the Committee is having a challenge getting nominations, I am sure, as the Chair suggested, we would be pleased to put that as something to do and provide those names.'

Meanwhile, this was the first time Mr. Barker has been able to delegate to Council from the podium.

Living with cerebral palsy, Mr. Barker uses a large motorized wheelchair to get around and, due to the size of the chair, has faced a continual challenge accessing the floor of the Council Chamber by its relatively narrow ramps and, instead, has been forced to delegate from the top of the Chamber, behind members of the public, with someone holding a microphone for him to make his point.

Some modifications have been made to allow him, and those facing similar challenges, to address local lawmakers at eye-level, but it is a long way from an obstacle-free course.

'It is nice to be down here for the first time,' he said. 'It is a different look ' and you all look pretty good. The design simply doesn't work. If we use the benefit of hindsight, which is always good, if an Accessibility Advisory Committee had been established in 1990 or 91, when this Chamber was built, I am sure it would have been better and this Chamber would look very different.'

Mr. Barker took aim at a recent \$500,000 audio-visual retrofit of the Council Chamber when previous estimates for a more accessible ramp clocked in at \$113,000. This was voted down and modifications to the existing ramp were carried out instead.

'I know it calls for the completion of a more accessible ramp in the people's chamber in 2023; that is five years from now,' said Mr. Barker of Aurora's Accessibility Plan. 'It was put on the pending list in 2011. That is not acceptable. That is 11 years. People with a disability belong in the people's chamber. I believe it serves the people for this to be completed sooner or later. I have ideas. Aurora has an opportunity to lead. As Chair, I want to reinforce the goals and motivation of our committee: we want to work with you so Aurora can develop the best practices and solution-based approach to accessibility. The role of the accessibility municipal committee is to provide advice to the municipal government on a wide range of municipal processes to help make public services and facilities accessible to everyone.'

'Think of the committee as a conscience whispering very nicely in your ear now: now is the time to do the right thing.'