

Accessibility Plan renews Plans to break down barriers across Aurora

Efforts continue to make Aurora a barrier-free community.

Council has approved a new Multi-Year Accessibility Plan which will serve as a blueprint for barriers to break down between 2022 and 2026.

Aurora's last Accessibility Plan was approved in 2018 and was intended to be a guide for the municipality through 2024, but a revised Plan was brought forward to both align with Provincial standards and result in quicker action.

Under the last Plan, several advances were made towards the overall goal of becoming a barrier-free community including the installation of emergency evacuation chairs at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex and the Aurora Community Centre for smooth stairway ascent and descent during an emergency. Wave sensor door openers were also installed at the Aurora Seniors' Centre, and portable ramps were purchased for various Town-led initiatives including the Christmas Market, Petch House, Sheppard's Bush cabins, and skate changerooms.

But a new Plan brings about new goals, much of which has been informed by citizen members of the Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee.

"We have focused on condensing the Plan quite a bit to make it a little bit more legible for individuals who are trying to see what the Plan really is going forward," said Mat Zawada, Accessibility Advisor for the Town of Aurora. "The [previous] Plan was approximately 75 pages and it was quite lengthy for individuals to read through and really get an idea of what the Accessibility Plan is built upon. The previous Plan was a six-year term. The AODA (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act) requires us to actually update the Plan on a five-year basis, so we decided as a committee to actually have that aligned closer to the terms of both Council and the Committee members who are going to be on the Accessibility Advisory Committee.

"I think it is a really good opportunity for the committees themselves to see their goals and their outcomes come through during their terms."

Among the goals in the new Plan is to foster greater accessibility in transportation. Some of the tasks the Committee has taken on including further research into how many on-demand accessible taxis are needed in the community, working to ensure owners and operators of licensed taxis do not charge higher fares or levy additional fees onto persons with disabilities using their services, examining self-automated vehicles and any accessibility concerns that might arise from those, and a review of parking policies throughout Aurora with an eye to creating a strategy to reduce barriers.

The design of public spaces is another area that will come under the watchful review of committee members to ensure persons with disabilities can move through and use amenity spaces comfortably.

Goals under this umbrella include addressing existing barriers on trails, playing and eating areas at outdoor amenities, a focus on identifying places that need improvements or repairs, and the installation of power door operators at all Town facilities to allow for persons using all mobility devices, and looking at opportunities to install universal washrooms at Town Hall, the Aurora Family Leisure Complex, Aurora Community Centre, Victoria Hall, and more.

Acoustic issues at the AFLC and the SARC identified as potential barriers between speakers and listeners will also be examined

Audible pedestrian signals have been identified for the intersections of Yonge and Kennedy, Yonge and Henderson, and Wellington and Wells Street as well.

"You did a fantastic job to move this forward," Councillor John Gallo, who currently sits as the Council member on the

Accessibility Advisory Committee, told Mr. Zawada at Council.

Added Councillor Rachel Gilliland, who preceded Councillor Gallo on the Committee, "Having sat on the Committee as well, I know you work very hard at collaborating with the team and making sure that you're condensing the list for the Plan moving forward."

In looking at the Plan, Councillor Gilliland questioned whether site visits across the community, which were Planned by the Committee prior to the pandemic to identify barriers, had resumed.

Mr. Zawada replied that these visits had continued "but not with the entire Committee. Instead, he's been visiting sites and taking videos of potential barriers for members' review.

This, he said, has been successful "as has allowing Committee members to meet virtually throughout the pandemic, and potentially beyond.

"Many years ago, I suggested that Committee members, instead of being in person if they weren't feeling well or if there were transportation or weather issues, [if] they would be allowed to join in on video," said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. "That was denied for some reason. It might have been because they had to be in-person, but with our use of Zoom and everything we've learned, is there a possibility that if a Committee member is not able to physically come that they could come, join and vote online as we do?"

Replied Mr. Zawada: "Our intention is to keep the Committee working online. It significantly reduces risk for individuals having to come to the facility. To the point of transportation?it most definitely does improve the ability for [the Committee] to have high attendance. I have been amazed with the attendance we have had over the last four years."

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter