

Accessible washroom trailer will help community achieve full potential

By Brock Weir

If you're living with a disability, the last thing that should keep you from coming out and being an active part of your community is worrying about whether or not you can use the bathroom, according to local activists.

And the same can be said for their parents and caregivers.

But, now municipalities are stepping up to the plate to help make this mindset ? and this barrier ? a thing of the past.

Aurora is joining forces with Whitchurch-Stouffville to make community events just that ? events for the whole community ? through the construction, purchase and maintenance of an accessible washroom trailer.

Whitchurch-Stouffville Mayor Justin Altmann's marriage this past summer, to which his entire community was invited, pledged all wedding gifts received in cash to fund the \$100,000 trailer. His very public nuptials raised \$50,000 towards the cost, and now, following a motion from Councillor John Abel, Aurora is kicking in \$5,000.

Council's thumbs-up to the motion came following a delegation from Tyler Barker, Chair of Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee, and Derek Bunn, the York Region teacher behind last month's Wild, Wild West Hoedown for special needs students region-wide.

Highlighting young adults from across the community who go to great efforts to be active and contributing members of their hometowns, Mr. Bunn said an investment in a trailer like this would replace barriers with peace of mind and respect.

?It is to provide a respectful location and accommodation,? said Mr. Bunn. ?I have been to a lot of events through my job with the school board and a lot of community events that just do not have the accommodations for us. We are lifting kids and seniors out and changing them on tables with pads on them, changing them on the floor. We are looking to close the gap in making it more accessible and making it something that brings us into the year 2016.?

In addition to support from Whitchurch-Stouffville, the initiative has gained traction from a wide cross-section of the community ranging from nursing homes, to Community Living organizations, and many groups providing placements within the communities.

?[At events] there might be port-o-potties there and accessible washrooms for people who can transfer themselves out of a wheelchair, but there is nothing to help the severely handicapped people in our community,? said Mr. Bunn, adding the trailer they have outlined includes two separate units, change tables for caregivers, toilets for those who can use them on their own, ramp systems, and lift devices, which can all be pulled by a truck to any facility, event or festival at which it is needed.

?It is very expensive to change each location where an event is held. Whitchurch-Stouffville has taken ownership of it. They said they would house it and tow it to any event in York Region that would want it. You would pay a fee, call them up, and ask them to?drive it over.

?It is a comfort level because a lot of parents of kids with disabilities don't venture to go out into their community because they don't know what accommodations are out there. I would like to help them feel more comfortable in our community and I would like them to access our community. I would like the kids in my class and the kids that I have worked with over the years to come to these events because they are so excited to be a part of our community [but] accommodations just aren't there.?

This sentiment was shared by members of Council who said they too would like to help them feel more comfortable in the community.

Speaking to his motion, Councillor Abel said the idea was floated at the York Region Festival Alliance where it received enthusiastic support. While it was noted this enthusiasm was not shared around the Regional Council table where Mayor Geoff Dawe said he would bring the matter up again for further consideration.

While Councillor Tom Mrakas called it a ?great idea,? he questioned how the backers can go about getting more municipalities on board. Councillor Abel said the idea has been presented at other municipal Accessibility Advisory Committees where it gained favour, but it is a matter of waiting for the respective municipalities to put their committees' endorsements in the form of a motion for Council consideration. He suggested drafting a letter and sending it to York Region's other seven municipalities to let them know where Aurora is in the process, giving them a way forward.

?I just want to thank everyone for their support shown,? said Councillor Abel. ?I think it is great for our communities and it is a step forward that shows where we're at in the Region and in the Town of Aurora.?

Added Mr. Barker, who lives with cerebral palsy requiring the use of a large motorized wheelchair: ?This is going to be really helping people with disabilities. This is a great initiative and maybe this will be a branch off to other new projects and new ideas.?