

Hotel accessibility in focus as Aurora reviews building code

By Brock Weir

More should be done to keep hotels, motels, and other lodgings accessible for people in wheelchairs, according to local accessibility advocates.

These things should be kept in mind when the province reviews the Ontario Building Code, say members of Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee. (AAC)

The AAC met earlier this month to discuss possible changes handed down to similar committees across Ontario from the Province which were drafted last year. Pending input from groups such as the AAC, the modifications are likely to take effect soon after the New Year.

Proposed alterations to the building code include parameters for renovating existing buildings, creating and maintaining barrier free paths of travel, including increasing the width of doorways to accommodate larger mobility devices, a reduction in ramp slopes to make things a bit easier, as well as increased emphasis on barrier free washrooms, visual fire alarms for the hearing impaired, and barrier free pools, locker rooms, and spas.

Comments were due back to the Province at the start of the month, but there was some leeway in that deadline, according to Chris Catania, Aurora's Accessibility Advisor, to get those comments in. As such, the Committee met last week to go over them. While they were generally in favour of the changes, some came under scrutiny.

?We have noticed the average size of a wheelchair has increased from 685mm to 992mm, however the door size is only going from 850mm to 860mm, so that is a comment that is of concern,? said Mr. Catania of changes noted by himself and his municipal counterparts. ?There is also the issue of exiting the building, especially for emergency and fires.?

Standards set under the guidelines, he added, are often based on manually operated wheelchairs, posing some difficulties for users of electric devices. Places like hotels, for instance, will also see changes in that they will be required to provide one fully accessible washroom every three floors.

?If there is one every three floors, you're now discriminating against someone with a disability because you're asking them to go to another floor to access a washroom,? he said.

These concerns were shared by AAC member Tyler Barker, who recommended along with the committee that every accessible hotel room have a wheel-in shower and replace the very common pedestal-type bed with beds on legs and other ?adapted furniture?, to better accommodate lifts to hoist people into and out of bed.

?I have stayed in a lot of hotels that are ?wheelchair accessible' and I can't even get in the door,? he said. ?I'll bang the door, the washrooms are so tiny I can't even move. The lifts that need to get to and from bed?the beds are on a platform so the lift cannot get under the bed for the wheel and that is really pointless.?

Ground is expected to be broken on a new Best Western hotel and conference centre in Aurora near Highway 404 and Leslie Street later this year.