

More accessible recreation opportunities needed in Aurora, study finds

Aurora residents experiencing accessibility challenges are not participating in as many recreational opportunities they'd like to, and the Town needs to support additional chances to do so.

This is the finding of a new study mapping recreational opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Commissioned by Council last fall to help guide the development of Aurora's first dedicated recreation plan for persons with disabilities, it's intended to guide the decision-making process through 2029.

First presented to Council at this month's Committee of the Whole meeting, it identifies existing barriers and gaps to participation in recreational activities, as well as opportunities to address community needs while removing barriers at the same time.

"A core component of inclusion and accessibility work is the understanding of the broadness of disability and the majority of disabled people have more than one disability," said Gabrielle Peters of J Consulting Group, who presented the report with colleague Jodi Ball. "We're specific in one of the grassroots groups that we included and reached out to was self-advocates, neurodivergent self-advocates among other disabilities often referred to as invisible."

Hearing from the community, added Ball, was "central" to the mapping process.

"The goal of the engagement process was to hear directly from disabled people to have a better understanding of current needs, existing challenges and barriers, and also opportunities for create more welcoming, safe and accessible programming. In addition to hearing from persons with disabilities, the engagement process reached out to caregivers and family members, disability organizations and networks, the Town's Accessibility Advisory Committee and Parks & Recreation Advisory Committee, Town staff, members of Council and York Region staff."

In all, the consultation took in 335 individual residents and stakeholders, 144 persons with disabilities, and 16 community organizations."

The study estimates that there are currently 10,000 persons with disabilities in Aurora and this number is projected to rise to 14,000 by 2036.

"There is strong support for a recreation plan for persons with disabilities in Aurora," said Ball. "Program participants find Town programming welcoming and the summer and spring break programs are highly valued. Demand for programming with support is growing. Many disabled people are not participating in recreation activities who want to. There are financial barriers in accessing recreation. The built design in some facilities is not fully accessible, transportation can also be a barrier in accessing programming, lack of sufficient resources to offer inclusive programming, there are limited programs for youth and adults, and some caregivers and persons with disabilities may not be aware of the programs that are being offered by the Town."

The resulting plan, which was given the tentative green light at the Committee level, has seven key goals: ensure diversity of programming that is inclusive and adaptable to individual needs; prioritize well-trained staff and adequate resources; address financial, transportation and accessibility barriers; create volunteer and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities within recreation; increase availability of adaptive sport and fitness equipment; enhancing communication and awareness of program offerings; foster and deepen partnerships with local organizations, businesses and community groups.

Under these key goals, priorities within each area includes professional development programs for municipal staff focused on the areas of inclusivity, disability and adaptive techniques; the development of "try-it" days for people to experience different activities "that best suit their needs," and the creation of a new full-time position "a program coordinator" dedicated to persons with disabilities."

?The full-time coordinator position is probably what I would say is the most important recommendation in this entire plan,? Ball said. ?They are all important, but that one is key. It's key because that's going to help with many of the other recommendations. It will help with making programming more welcoming, it will help provide a feedback loop between staff and people who want to use the programs.

?We heard over and over again in the consultations that people don't always know where to ask the questions, or they see a program and are unsure whether it is really suitable for them, their child, a parent, a friend. They want a little more information. Having that? is vital.?

Council was broadly supportive of the plan this month, asking questions to ensure stakeholders across the broad spectrum of accessibility were included as part of the process, as well as timelines on which each goal is recommended for completion.

The plan is slated to come forward for formal ratification by Council on October 22.

By Brock Weir