

New Town Park playground designed to be inclusive of whole community



Spending time in the park and enjoying all it has to offer is a great way for families to spend time together and forge lasting bonds ? but, for some parents, this can be just out of reach.

Aurora mother Alison Hughes, who uses a wheelchair, has shared her sadness at not being able to play with her own children when they hit the playground at their local park. A member of the Town's Accessibility Advisory Committee, she has been a long-time advocate for fully accessible playgrounds in the community, where families, regardless of any physical challenge, can participate equally ? and, last week, was on hand at Town Park to see this dream become a reality.

Hughes joined Mayor Tom Mrakas and Councillors Ron Weese and Wendy Gaertner last Tuesday to help dedicate a new accessible and inclusive playground shelter at Aurora Town Park, one of the community's most busy and popular green spaces.

?This state-of-the-art playground was designed with inclusivity in mind, following public consultation and feedback,? said the Town. ?The old equipment was replaced with a modern, accessible play space that welcome a range of abilities.

?The playground features a junior and senior child combination play structure with full ramping, as well as other accessible features such as a double side-by-side slide for two children or to accompany a child supervisor, an interactive play board feature, accessible roller slider, flush grade rubber surfacing and a direct connection from asphalt to the junior and senior combination play structure. As a centrepiece, a state-of-the-art wheelchair mountable swing will highlight the playground, becoming one of only a handful of playgrounds in Ontario to feature the [innovative] direct mount swing.

?The new playground at Aurora Town Park is a space where everyone can come together to play, explore, and create memories. We're proud to offer a vibrant, inclusive environment for our community to enjoy.?

As a Committee member, Hughes says she was ?insistent? on a number of changes to the playground plan from when it was first presented, particularly having a wheelchair swing, and a ramped slide so kids and parents using mobility devices can join in the fun.

Other key elements she advocated for were spinners that were flush with the ground with seats so users can wheel on and off the equipment.

The resulting playground is a move in the right direction, says Hughes.

?I am really excited that the Parks Team has said there are going to be three other parks [of this nature],? says Hughes. ?They hope to have four total that they can feel good about saying it's accessible.?

That being said, however, she added there were a few things on her list that were not achieved this time around that she will continue to press for as the other new park spaces take shape.

?As a parent, I feel better bringing my kids and knowing they can play safely and I can get to them if they need me,? she says. ?As a parent visiting playgrounds, often I am left on the sidelines. If my kids were to fall or if they were to need me, I am stuck relying on other parents, so I am just excited to play with my own kids at the park. [This new playground] means we don't have to drive to another Town to go play together, which is what we had done in the past. I am excited to chase my son around the park and play together. Town Park is such a hub. It's a good spot because you've got the Farmers' Market, Concerts in the Park ? there are lots of reasons to go there already, so it is a great, central place.

?I am very grateful the Town did pause [the design process]. There were moments where I had to say, ?Wait a minute, slow down, let's re-evaluate,' and they did! They listened and they sort of knew that they didn't know what they didn't know and were willing to adapt along the way, which was great and they had some strong advocates. Councillor Weese was really firm in advocating for us to do everything that was possible in that space, even increasing the budget substantially, and I am really grateful for that.?

For future parks, Hughes says she would like to see a full double-wide slide rather than a double-wide that is divided into two, which would ?allow people who need assistance to go down with a caregiver or a friend,? and potentially advocating for a return to metal slides as advocates say the static generated when a person goes down a plastic slide can interfere with Cochlear implants.

In addition to this advocacy for municipal parks, Hughes is also working on helping raise funds to replace an accessible and inclusive playground at Highview Public School. For more information, visit yrdsb.schoolcashonline.com/Fee/Details/4/72/false/true and select HIGHVIEW P.S.-C239 in the dropdown menu next to Fund Destination.

By Brock Weir