

People's chamber is not accessible to all, says activist



By Brock Weir

Last month, Tyler Barker made an impassioned plea to Council to step up its game when it comes to accessibility. Aurora should set the standard when it comes to making things accessible and inclusive to everyone, regardless of ability, he said, rather than simply meet minimum standards set out by Provincial legislation through the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

‘Why do they always say it meets the minimum standard?’ he asked Council over concept plans drawn up for the future redevelopment of Library Square. ‘Would you like the minimum standard on your home renovations? On your car? On your health care?’

It was a message heard loud and clear by Council, but if his mother wasn't at his side holding the microphone, it's a point that might have been missed.

Mr. Barker lives with cerebral palsy and, as such, needs a motorized wheelchair to get around. While this is challenge enough, it is compounded by the size of his wheelchair, which makes navigating the narrow wheelchair ramps down to the floor of Council Chambers himself next to impossible.

Instead, he had to make his point from a top-deck door to the Council chambers, out in the lobby, talking to lawmakers below.

It's a point he has made before, and indeed some modifications have been made on the ramps to allow for a smoother ride, but with an election in the air, Mr. Barker is ramping up his efforts to see real change in the place where Aurora's laws are made.

Following last Wednesday's meeting of Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee, Mr. Barker invited The Auroran to accompany him as he attempted the trek down to the podium, a place where the politically-minded twenty-something would ideally like his voice to be heard.

The challenge was clear.

Wheelchair ramps down to the floor of the Chamber are only accessible from the rear of the room, where individuals using mobility devices have to navigate around a panel of wall concealing the doorway into the room.

Rounding the corner was impossible without the assistance of fellow Committee member James Hoyes who helped ensure Mr. Barker wouldn't catch his elbows or any other parts of his wheelchair on the corners. Rounding the corner from the upper platform to the top of the ramp was another challenge, ultimately met alone with a few back-and-forths of the wheels.

It was a different story when he came to the bottom of the ramp's first flight and had to round the corner. While approximately a foot of the railing going down the centre of the ramp has been removed since 2014 to allow for a wider berth, it still proved an obstacle and required a hand from his fellow committee member before he could make the journey to the podium.

The podium itself earned praise, since being modified and automated to change in height to accommodate all users, but the journey itself is the problem.

‘Imagine if I was on Council,’ Mr. Barker mused once he completed the trip. ‘It could take me 15 minutes to get up and down. [Accessing the Chamber] is better than it was, but especially with the \$500,000 audio system that was put in, this could definitely be

more accessible and inclusive.?

Mr. Barker referenced the \$500,000 new audio-visual system installed in Council chambers which has been fraught with technical difficulties since it was installed midway through this Council term.

?I don't bang my elbow on the ramp anymore, so there is a little bit of an improvement there, but the turning radius is still cumbersome and I can't do it on my own because I don't want to take a chunk out of my wheelchair. I mentioned it four years ago and let it go to be polite, but after the \$500,000 so-called enhancement of the audio in the rooms, I think they can do better than this. It doesn't need to be me, but what if someone in a wheelchair or walker just wanted to run [for Council]? How would anyone get down here without help? To do this on my own, I would have to bring somebody and that's not very independent and I don't see any other mothers or family members helping each other at Council. They may come to watch, but they don't come and sit beside them to help them. Whitchurch-Stouffville has a very easy-to-access Council Chamber, so do Richmond Hill, Vaughan and East Gwillimbury.?

Watching all this unfold was Councillor John Abel, Council's representative on the Accessibility Advisory Committee. While he said it is possible to get an elected official down to the floor with the modifications had been made, he gave it a failing grade overall because the desks and seats for Council members could not accommodate larger wheelchairs like Mr. Barker's.

?It fails, but he does get people up and down,? said Councillor Abel. ?We're going to adopt a phrase that it is ?not meeting the AODA, but exceeding it.?

?Exceeding the standards,? added Mr. Barker. ?This is not minimum standards.?

According to Stephanie Mackenzie-Smith, Manager of Corporate Communications for the Town, recent renovations to the Council Chamber were carried out for the audio-visual system only, and not intended to renovate the chamber itself.

?However, during the A/V project we did take the opportunity to improve accessibility,? she said. ?The Council and staff tables were moved closer together to allow more space for a wheelchair to manoeuvre behind, we installed an adjustable height lectern that is wide enough to fit a mobility device, and the old screens were removed and replaced with flat screens in order to provide more space for those navigating the wheelchair ramp. In addition to making improvements for those with mobility issues, we installed assisted listening devices for the hearing impaired.

?Renovations to the Chamber have been considered by Council in the past and the Town's current Multi-Year Accessibility Plan, which is reviewed by the Accessibility Committee on annual basis, includes a project to increase accessibility in the Chambers by 2023. In the meantime, the Town continues to work with the committee to identify and remove accessibility barriers and ensure that all AODA legislated obligations are met in a timely manner and compliance with these standards are maintained.?