

IMPORTANT PART OF PROCESS

Accessibility committee seeking public input

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Even if the Town of Yarmouth's Accessibility Advisory Committee looks at every sidewalk crack, studies every blade of grass, and measures every piece of playground equipment, it's still going to miss something when it comes to identifying all of the needs and barriers that people with disability and accessibility issues face.

So says committee chair Stephen Nicholl.

Which is why, he says, upcoming community engagement and input will be so important in helping the committee to formulate an accessibility action plan for the town.

"If the public can come together and say this is where we need change, or this is not working for us, that will help," he says, saying the committee is looking at the overall situation from a variety of disability and accessibility needs.

"We're looking at mobility issues, visual issues, hearing issues, autism, and so on. We're going to miss something along the way so it's important to have the community reach out to us," Nicholl says. "Then we can look at what's not working and how do we fix it."

Nicholl notes, for instance, that he's lived in Yarmouth most of his life and only three months ago did he learn of the presence of public washrooms on Killams Wharf. While it's good to have facilities he says, it's not good if the public doesn't know they exist or where to find them.

The town's citizen advisory committee got to work over seven months ago. It was formed in response to Nova Scotia's 2017 Accessibility Act, which mandates public sector bodies to develop accessibility action plans.

The committee is largely made up of people with disabilities, or people who work with those who have disabilities.

The action plan is scheduled to be completed and released next year. It will identify priorities to tackle right away, but work will also be an ongoing process.

There has been legwork completed by committee members and town staff and there has been some public input to date. But now the official public engagement is a vital part of the process.

The committee is looking at several areas, including how accessible things are when:

- people are using municipal buildings or public spaces;
- people are accessing goods and services;
- people are receiving communication and information;
- people are using public transportation;
- and, people are applying for employment and working in workspaces.

Coun. Derek Lesser, one of the elected representatives who is on the committee, says it is very important for them to hear from people about their lived experiences when it comes to accessibility issues.

"My mom, being in a wheelchair, she often will say, 'They did something to make things accessible but they didn't consult people in a wheelchair.' There are different types of wheelchairs and then there's scooters, which are all different sizes," he says, saying while those constructing a ramp might think they've found the ideal solution for creating accessibility, they may have missed something in the design that wouldn't be obvious to them but would be to someone who experiences accessibility



Accessibility committee members Stephen Nicholl, Natalie Smith and Derek Lesser say upcoming public consultation is an important part of the committee's work. **TINA COMEAU ■ TRI-COUNTY VANGUARD**



If you've seen these added to some areas in Yarmouth where sidewalks meet up with crosswalks they're to help alert people with mobility and visual issues that there is a transition happening from the sidewalk to the street. **TINA COMEAU ■ TRI-COUNTY VANGUARD**

“No one in Yarmouth should ever experience a barrier to goods and services, or transportation or parking lots or whatever the thing may be.”

Stephen Nicholl
Town of Yarmouth's Accessibility Advisory Committee chair

issues.

Adding to that, Lesser says, parents and caregivers would also have good feedback for the committee to take into consideration.

Identifying barriers is being done by the committee through a two-part process: a formal audit and the public consultation. The audit has seen town staff working on a full examination of town-owned buildings, parks and trails to determine accessibility and issues with the built environment. The audit had also involved recommending improvements and a schedule to achieve them.

Natalie Smith serves as accessibility coordinator for the town on the committee. She says whenever new infrastructure projects are carried out in the town – like the streetscape project or road infrastructure – the town incorporates the new, and required, built environment standards into the design.

Municipalities can also go beyond what's called for, or the province itself can direct municipalities to do more than what the current standards call for.

With any discussion also comes the issue of grandfathering things in. That can be tricky, particularly when it comes to the private sector since as a municipal unit you're trying collectively to be as accessible as you can be.

"If some things are already existing, unless it's a safety hazard, which we would enforce, you're not necessarily going to look at changes," Smith says. "But when they come in to do renovations or new construction, then the standard of the day would apply to them."

While it may be expensive to be proactive and make changes, businesses have to ask themselves if they're losing business if their places aren't accessibility, and/or how that is also a disservice to their customers.

"I think businesses will have to make that decision," says Smith. "Should I still have my business on the second floor if I can't put in a lift or an elevator or provide some sort of ramp to accommodate my clientele? In some cases they may have to consider, am I in the right building?"

She says the action plan also will take into account that fact that tourism is big part of the economy, as you want to ensure visitors with accessibility issues are also properly being served and treated, in addition to the local population.

And then there's the fact

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Community consultation begins this month and will allow community members to provide valuable input on the barriers they've faced.

Through direct consultation, residents can provide first-hand experiences on accessing public spaces and receiving goods and services from the town.

A variety of consultation options will be available to the public to participate in, including virtual meetings, focus groups, hand-written input, and the opportunity to provide input through the town's 'Get Involved Yarmouth' online engagement platform.

People's stories and experiences will play an important part in developing the action plan.

The committee is also hosting a virtual conference on Tuesday, Sept. 21 at 7 p.m.

Participants must register before the event. They can do so by visiting: <https://hopin.com/events/accessible-yarmouth>

Anyone with questions about the event can use these contacts:

email: accessibility@townofyarmouth.ca
phone: 902-742-2521

we all age and what may not be an accessibility issue for us today, could be one in the future, she says.

Nicholl himself is hearing impaired and experiences respiratory issues. He notes COVID measures, while necessary, have highlighted accessibility issues and downfalls.

It can be difficult enough to be in a store or restaurant and hear people talking with music playing (often too loud), he says, but throw in masks and plexiglass into the mix and the issue is more pronounced.

Yet while eventually the masks will go away, the issue of accessibility is one that will always be present.

"No one in Yarmouth should ever experience a barrier to goods and services, or transportation or parking lots or whatever the thing may be," Nicholl says. "No one should encounter a barrier because of their accessibility issues."