

The Legacy of County Council and People with Disabilities

After attending a second Accessibility Forum sponsored by the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario and the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, I come back to the County even more discouraged but somehow encouraged.

Discouraged because the County will be so far behind other municipalities and communities by not creating an inclusive community that the cost to “catch-up” will be substantial.

Discouraged because the defining moment in the legacy of the current Council is the way that specialized Transportation service and people with disabilities is being handled with in the County of Brant.

So why am I encouraged?

When I first went to one of these forums a couple of years ago, the participants were members of the Accessibility Advisory Committees (AAC). At the two forums I’ve attended this year, AODA Consultants, municipal Counsellors, staff, members of the Accessibility Advisory Committees and others have been in attendance and eager to network to share successes.

After the initial response to what the County is doing with Para transit of “...but that’s against the law....” There were offers to come and help.

As I come across Counsellors and members of Accessibility Advisory Committees offering assistance, I’m passing the information to the County. It will be up to Council whether to accept the assistance.

I’m heartened because I had the opportunity to talk with the Director of Education and Outreach for the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario and brought him up to date with the current specialized transportation service situation in the County. He said he would call the County and that, yes, the AODA and its subsequent standards ARE provincial law.

I’m heartened because I get to see once again what is possible and what other municipalities are doing without question as a “no brainer.”

Orangeville and Huntsville state as the first line in their version of our strategic guidance “To build a barrier-free community” and to “build an inclusive community.” The “barrier-free” covers all aspects of our lives, not just the built environment and open spaces. There is a respectful commitment to be inclusive.

Orangeville has audible and countdown traffic signals at every new intersection within town.

The AAC for the county of Brant recommended to Council, and Council approved the recommendation for 3 audible crosswalks at the major intersections in Paris, Burford and St. George. That was four or five years ago. It was in the budget, out of the budget, the AAC was told that it, as an advisory committee, had to pay for them, then the AAC was told that it didn’t

have to pay for them, then the audible signals were to be installed in 2012...now they will be installed “eventually.” Sounds like the same process that the specialized transportation service is going through!

The focus of the presentations at the Accessibility Forum provided some keys to success. One of them is to have a champion on Council. We don't. Not one Counsellor, even the Counsellors assigned to the Accessibility Advisory Committee has championed the reality of a community that includes those of us with disabilities.

In some municipalities, the AAC provides “lunch and learn” sessions for staff about the AODA and its standards, about the needs of people with disabilities, the types of disabilities people have and how that disability affects their lives and independence, and works “with” staff.

In the presentation by Huntsville, the keys to success for an Accessibility Advisory Committee were put forward as ideas to be used by other AAC's. They included knowing the AODA and its subsequent standards to be able to advocate and advise Council. Yes, Council. The AODA states that the Accessibility Advisory Committee is a committee of Council, not a committee of Community Services as it appears to be in the County.

Recently the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario (charged with AODA compliance and enforcement) was moved from the Ministry of Community and Social Services to the Ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Employment and the Ministry of Research and Innovation. Hopefully the Accessibility Coordinator and the Accessibility Advisory Committee for the County of Brant will be moved from Community services in the County to a position where they can effect more global compliance with the AODA and its standards.

Another exciting change is that Accessibility Coordinators are now being called “Accessibility Planners” and are involved in all aspects of planning and development for municipalities.

In the presentations at the forum, members of the Accessibility Advisory Committee were encouraged to be broad thinking, consider all people with disabilities not just those with the same disability as you have, to know the Ontario Human Rights Code, the Municipal Act and any legislation that the municipality is drawing on for implementation.

Members of the AAC are encouraged to read the minutes of all meetings, to be present at meetings where issues that affect people with disabilities are discussed including by law changes and policy development. AAC members are encouraged to work closely with other committees and Council and to present their reports and recommendations directly to Council with a representative from the AAC being present at Council meetings. Of course this means that Council needs to work “with” their Accessibility Advisory Committee.

It is also recommended that members of the Accessibility Advisory Committee be involved in the budget planning process! What a novel idea!

The Orangeville AAC produces brochures and newsletters that are sent out with other municipal documents such as tax statements and hydro bills, Copies of which I've given to both the County and the AAC.

Not only are other municipalities building inclusive communities within their boundaries, they are working collaboratively and sharing ideas with each other to exceed the minimum standards set out in the AODA.

The Ontario Municipal Social Services Association has published two booklets (also provided to the County) on Conducting Accessible Meetings and Accessible Public Engagement. Both of these have specific steps and processes for ensuring that as the municipality moves toward inclusion of people with disabilities that there is collaboration with people with disabilities.

And in the County we are being told that if we can't afford a taxi to call an ambulance; being told that we have to learn how to budget our money like everyone else and if we can't afford the "luxuries" we should move and reconsider our lifestyle; being told that we are "abusing" Para transit by being independent; being told that if we file an Ontario Human Rights complaint that Para transit will stop...and that our human rights are a "gift" given out of the goodness of heart and that they can be taken away at any time.

At this moment in time, this defining moment appears to be the legacy of the current Council and leaders for our community. Can this change? Of course it can, Council is writing its own legacy.

We need to start thinking about what we want the legacy of the next Council to be as we get closer to municipal elections. Creating an inclusive community and ensuring that the AODA is at the core of everything we do should be at the core of the platform of anyone wanting to sit on Council or lead the municipality.