



Administrative Report

Office of the Deputy Clerk

To: Warden McNamara and Members of Essex County Council

From: Katherine Hebert
Deputy Clerk

Date: Wednesday, September 21, 2022

Subject: 2023-2027 County of Essex Multi-Year Accessibility Plan Review and Annual Accessibility Status Report for 2022

Report #: 2022-0921-LCS-R22-KH

Purpose

To present County Council with the draft 2023-2027 County of Essex, Multi-Year Accessibility Plan for review and approval, and to provide an update on the status of accessibility initiatives and activities for the County and the Essex County Accessibility Advisory Committee for 2022.

Background

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), Essex County Council has adopted a Multi-Year Accessibility Plan. This year, a fulsome review and update to the plan is required for compliance. The Multi-Year Accessibility Plan further includes a provision that annually, a report would be provided to County Council on the status of the accessibility initiatives identified in the Plan that were undertaken in the previous year.

The Essex County Accessibility Advisory Committee (ECAAC) works year-round to promote accessibility and inclusivity in Essex County and often helps to realize many of the initiatives outlined in the above-mentioned plan.

Additionally, the County of Essex is required to ensure compliance with the standards and deadlines for municipalities mandated by the Ontario Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility.

Discussion

The Essex County Accessibility Advisory Committee

The Essex County Accessibility Advisory Committee has been meeting virtually since 2020. These meetings have been available to the public, via livestream on the ECAAC Facebook page.

In 2022, the ECAAC expanded on the WE Check the Trails project, adding Phase 2 trails to those previously identified on the feedback forms. Feedback received from the public continues to be reviewed by the ECAAC and recommendations are made based on the common themes and findings. Some examples of feedback received to date relate to trail condition, placement of gates and access points, as well as the need for rest areas along the trails.

As part of the WE Check the Trails project, there was an identified issue of the absence of adequate accessible trail signage and navigation tools. A working group comprised of emergency services communicators, Essex-Windsor EMS, ERCA representatives, County of Essex personnel and the ECAAC Chair, has met to discuss this issue, and possible solutions are still being considered. Accessible navigation and having knowledge of one's location is paramount to the safe use of trails, especially for people with disabilities and for anyone who experiences an emergency while on the trails.

The ECAAC has also had the opportunity to work with the Infrastructure and Planning Services department for the County of Essex, as they develop plans for the upcoming Civic Centre renovations. Draft plans have been prepared, the Project Manager and architect have attended ECAAC meetings to provide a detailed overview of the architectural layout and to receive the Committee's feedback regarding the accessibility of the planned spaces. When the project progresses, consultations will continue with the County team.

The ECAAC has undertaken a thorough review of the County of Essex accessibility policies and procedures throughout 2022. A feedback mechanism is available at all times, for anyone to provide comments or suggestions regarding accessibility matters.

The Essex Region Conservation Authority (ERCA) has consulted with the ECAAC regarding the accessibility of their facilities. The recent addition of a

new facility on the site of John R. Park Homestead as well as trails and other of their assets have been reviewed and visited by the Committee. ERCA has been a consistent delegation at ECAAC meetings, as they seek consultation on how to improve their sites and services.

The Committee continues to identify priorities, share information, provide education and better their communities through their attempts to remove attitudinal and physical barriers to accessibility. Communication has been key to maintaining connections. Support received from the County of Essex departments has been key to ECAAC project success and continuity. Since the ECAAC was an early adopter of a virtual platform for meetings, the continuity of their activities and communication has been possible, despite blips in technology and connectivity issues from time to time.

'No Barriers, No Problem!' – Virtual Summer Speakers' Forum

The Essex County Accessibility Advisory Committee and the County of Essex presented 'No Barriers, No Problem!' - a Virtual Summer Speakers' Forum. featuring 2 speakers, Julie Sawchuk and Michael Jacques.

Julie Sawchuk is both an accessibility strategist and a storyteller. She helps people understand that true accessibility allows participation without having to dismantle barriers or change attitudes first. After sustaining a spinal cord injury in 2015, she turned from teaching high school science to educating everyone that accessibility matters. Julie also consulted on the development of the National Building Code and is chair of the Standards Development Committee Review of the Design of Public Spaces for the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, is on the County of Huron Accessibility Advisory Committee and is a member of the board for Spinal Cord Injury Ontario. On top of that, is an author of best-selling books:

- 'Build Your Space: How to create an accessible home for you, your family and your future', and
- 'Building Better Bathrooms — connecting real stories with the details you need for truly accessible results.'

Michael Jacques was diagnosed with autism and an intellectual disability when he was young. Never one to shy away from obstacles, he is now a public speaker and activist. Using speech-to-text technology, he wrote and self-published 'Can't Read, Can't Write, Here's My Book' in 2018. In 2020, he then released the children's book 'I Belong: Can I Play?' which he co-authored with Heather Gale.

Through his brave story, witty personality and positive outlook on life, Michael is an inspiration to many. He constantly looks for opportunities to inspire and educate people on diversity and inclusion. He has said that diversity is a reality, and we need to embrace and celebrate our differences.

In addition to his public speaking engagements and work, Michael serves on the board of Community Living Ontario and as an advisor to the Niagara Catholic District School Board's Special Education Advisory Committee.

Throughout the forum, the message of 'accessible from the start' was clearly brought forward. These speakers that have made such an impact on their communities, and is something for which to strive. We heard from two people living with disabilities, who are authors, and accessibility experts, about their lived-experience and their incredible stories of success. The take-away from the forum was that 'true accessibility allows people to participate without having to dismantle barriers or change attitudes first', and that 'accepting yourself, and being comfortable in your own skin empowers us all'.

The afternoon event was well attended and the forum was a complete success!

WE Check the Trails

WE Check the Trails is a community engagement exercise, born out of the concept of inclusivity and access for all. The Essex County Accessibility Advisory Committee and the County of Essex have implemented a data collection tool. Members of the community can use to report on features, conditions and issues that may impact the overall accessibility of local public trails. This information is reviewed by the project team and reported to those who are responsible for the trails.

The WE Check the Trails feedback form can be used to report and rate the accessibility and conditions of designated local trails. The public's assistance is needed to make this program a success. The form includes a button for geo-location, so users can pinpoint which trail they are using.

Phase 1 of WE Check the Trails included a partnership with the Essex Region Conservation Authority (ERCA) and the trails that fall under their domain, and Phase 2 expands to include a multi-use path that is part of the County Wide Active Transportation (CWATS) network.

Benches:

As a result of feedback received during the WE Check the Trails program, three benches were purchased by the ECAAC, for placement along the trails.

These benches will serve to provide much needed additional rest areas. Two of the benches have already been installed, with another pending this fall.

Accessibility Flag

As a joint venture with the local municipalities, in honour of National AccessAbility Week a regional accessibility flag was commissioned.

The flag design is of a stylized figure in a wheelchair facing the right side of the flag, with a series of seven right-pointing chevrons behind it, the word Accessibility is below the design.

These chevrons symbolize the 7 local County municipalities moving forward with Accessibility together, in the right direction, suggesting momentum, progress and action, moving the most recognizable symbol for accessibility forward.

Kristine Verbeek of K. Design Studios provided the final design and the County of Essex hosted the inaugural flag raising, (along with several of the local municipalities) at the Civic Centre on May 30th. Several members of County and local Councils, Committees, staff and the public were in attendance. The flag will be raised annually during National AccessAbility Week in years to come, thanks to the endorsement of County Council.

Training and Tools for Accessibility

As a matter of compliance, the County of Essex has ensured that all existing employees and volunteers have received the basic accessibility training required under AODA and the Integrated Accessibility Standard Regulation, and continues to deliver training to any new employees or volunteers upon their onboarding. As more progressive training becomes available, and as employees express an interest in pursuing advanced skills in delivering accessible services for the County of Essex, staff are encouraged and empowered to take these opportunities.

The County of Essex uses software products and services that reduce the time and effort required to create and remediate documents to meet accessibility standards. External and peer to peer training has continued and progress is evident as the adoption and skill sets advance. The County has also served as a resource as local partners navigate their own accessibility requirements.

AODA Compliance for Municipalities for 2022

2022 is not a reporting year with the Ministry, however adopting an updated Multi-Year Accessibility Plan is required. The Province offers the following guidance:

Municipalities must create accessibility policies and a multi-year plan to help you achieve your accessibility goals.

- Policies must be reviewed annually and updated as required.
- Municipalities must communicate with employees and the public to notify them about the availability of your policies (e.g. notice on website, copy available online and at reception, etc.) and the provision of access to policies in an accessible format.
- Municipalities must, in the preparation of Multi-year Accessibility Plans:
 - consult with people with disabilities and with an accessibility advisory committee while establishing, reviewing and updating the plan
 - post the plan on the public website
 - provide it in an alternative accessible format, upon request
 - review and update the plan at least once every five years

The next compliance date for the County of Essex is 2023, where a biennial compliance report will be submitted to the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility by December 31st.

Essex County Multi -Year Accessibility Plan (MYAP)

AODA Compliance for Municipalities for 2022

The Multi-Year Accessibility Plan for the Corporation of the County of Essex is presented to County Council for adoption. This plan was prepared in consultation with County departments and with the Essex County Accessibility Advisory Committee. Public consultation was sought on the draft 2023-2027 Multi-Year Accessibility Plan for a period of 90 days prior to the plan being presented to County Council for adoption. Comments were received and reviewed by administration and by the ECAAC prior to incorporating them into the final preparation of the plan.

The seven regulatory requirements for municipalities related to accessibility compliance as follows:

- 1) Accessibility Advisory Committee
- 2) Accessibility Policies
- 3) Multi-Year Accessibility Plan
- 4) Procurement and Self-Serve Kiosks
- 5) Training
- 6) Accessible Feedback
- 7) Accessible Employment Policies

The proposed 2022-2027 County of Essex Multi-Year Accessibility Plan was reviewed in detail and endorsed by the Essex County Accessibility Advisory Committee at their meeting held September 8, 2022. The ECAAC has provided a letter of endorsement for Council's consideration (Appendix B).

Financial Implications

All financial expenditures related to accessibility in 2021 were included in the 2021 budget.

Consultations

There were no consultations necessary for the preparation of this report. The Multi-Year Accessibility Plan included consultations and discussions with internal and external stakeholders, the Essex County Accessibility Advisory Committee, as well as feedback received from the public.

Recommendation

That Essex County Council receive the 2023-2027 County of Essex Multi-Year Accessibility Plan Review and Annual Accessibility Status Report for 2022 as information, and that the 2023-2027 County of Essex Multi-Year Accessibility Plan update be approved.

Approvals

Respectfully Submitted,

Katherine Hebert

Katherine Hebert, Deputy Clerk

Concurred With,

Mary Birch

Mary Birch B.A., CMO, Director, Legislative and Community Services/Clerk

Concurred With,

Mary Birch

Acting Chief Administrative Officer

Appendix Number	Title
A	County of Essex Draft 2023-2027 Multi-Year Accessibility Plan
B	Endorsement Letter from ECAAC