



## **Administrative Report**

### **Office of the Manager, Records and Accessibility/Deputy Clerk**

**To:** Warden MacDonald and Members of Essex County Council

**From:** Katherine Hebert  
Manager, Records and Accessibility/Deputy Clerk

**Date:** Wednesday, December 20, 2023

**Subject:** Annual Accessibility Summary Report 2023

**Report #:** 2023-1220-LCS-R37-KH

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#### **Purpose**

To provide County Council with a summary update on the status of initiatives in the Essex County Multi-Year Accessibility Plan (2023-2027) and an update on the activities of the Essex County Accessibility Advisory Committee for 2023.

#### **Background**

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), Essex County Council adopted a Multi-Year Accessibility Plan for the years 2023-2027. This Multi-Year Accessibility Plan included 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 over the course of the 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 Provincial Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility.

## **Discussion**

### **Essex County Multi -Year Accessibility Plan (MYAP) (2023-2027)**

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The Essex County Multi-Year Accessibility Plan was completed in 2022 and is effective through 2027. The MYAP Status Update is outlined in Appendix 'A' to this report. Many items are in the 'Ongoing' status, which confirms that the County of Essex has endeavored to adopt these actions as part of the typical business practice. Items listed as 'Planned', have perhaps been discussed, but have not yet been set as a priority or are related to matters that are subject to a pre-determined schedule. Action items listed as 'In-Progress' have been identified and steps taken to accomplish such actions. As items are accomplished the status shall be marked as 'Completed' and when a revision of the MYAP is undertaken, these items will drop off the list.

County Council adopted the 2023-2027 Multi-Year Accessibility Plan for the Corporation of the County of Essex on September 21, 2022. 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

### **Accessibility Flag Raising**

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In 2022, as a joint venture with the local municipalities, to commemorate 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.

This spring members of the ECAAC, Council and Administration along with several members of local Councils and the public were in attendance. This annual event is symbolic and representative of the County's commitment to improving accessibility for all.

## **Training and Tools for Accessibility**

As a matter of compliance, the County of Essex has ensured that all existing employees and volunteers have received Accessible Customer Service training, as required under the AODA as well as 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 advantage of 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 of staff in each department advance. The County has also served as a resource as local partners navigate their own accessibility requirements.

Further in 2023, a member of County Administration, Crystal Sylvestre, earned a designation as an Accessible Document Specialist, through the International Association of Accessibility Professionals (IAAP). Having a County of Essex staff member as one of only 134 people in the world to have obtained this high level of expertise, is certainly something that supports the County's vision for accessibility through leadership and inclusion.

## **'Invisible No More' – Accessibility Forum**

In October, the Essex County Accessibility Advisory Committee and the County of Essex hosted the 'Invisible No More - Accessibility Forum'. This was a revival of sorts and reminiscent of events of the past where guest

speakers educated participants on the subject of accessibility and inclusion. This year, with the ECAAC primarily focused on Invisible Disabilities, the theme for the forum was just that; raising awareness to the many facets of invisible disabilities.

The keynote speaker, 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, Julie is a best selling author!

One session was delivered by Community Living Essex County, with Panelists from the Career Compass program, who outlined their experience with perspectives from 1) the Employer, 2) the supported Employee, and 3) the support worker. Further sessions included presentations from A Life Worth Living, the Canadian Mental Health Association of Windsor Essex County, as well as a lesson on the fundamentals of AODA training, delivered by one of the ECAAC members, Julie Miles.

The afternoon event was well attended, feedback was positive and the forum was a success!

## **WE Check the Trails**

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[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 that 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.

A soft launch of Phase 3 Trails was undertaken in late summer. This Phase includes a section of CWATS trail in Lakeshore, in the area west of the Puce River along County Rd. 2. The feedback forms are live and available on the County Website to receive public comments on accessibility of trails in the County.

## **AODA Compliance for Municipalities for 2023**

An Accessibility Compliance Report was submitted to the Province in November of 2023. These compliance reports are required biennially by municipalities with populations of 10,000 or greater.

Compliance Reporting addresses accessibility issues dealing with the following matters:

### **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.

2024 is not a compliance reporting year, therefore the next compliance report will be filed in 2025 and will be submitted to the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility by December 31, 2025.

## **The Essex County Accessibility Advisory Committee**

The Essex County Accessibility Advisory Committee is comprised of 7 members including people with a disability, people working in the disability community and County Council representation. The Committee meets

monthly with some exceptions, and these meetings primarily take place in-person and are livestreamed whenever possible, where technology exists.

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.

## **Financial Implications**

Although all financial expenditures related to accessibility initiatives in 2023 were included in the 2023 budget, it was evident during the planning and executing of the Accessibility Forum, that the cost of hosting this type of event has increased significantly.

## **Consultations**

There were no consultations necessary for the preparation of the 2023 Annual Accessibility Summary Report.

The Multi-Year Accessibility Plan included consultations and discussions with internal and external stakeholders, County Council, the Essex County Accessibility Advisory Committee, as well as feedback received from the public.

## **Recommendation**

That Essex County Council receive Report number 2023-1220-LCS-R37-KH, the 2023 Annual Accessibility Summary Report, presented in compliance with Essex County Multi-Year Accessibility Plan (2023-2027) as information.

## Approvals

Respectfully Submitted,

*Katherine Hebert*

Katherine Hebert, Manager, Records and Accessibility/Deputy Clerk

Concurred With,

*Mary Birch*

Mary Birch, Director, Legislative and Community Services/Clerk

Concurred With,

*Sandra Zwiers*

Sandra Zwiers, MAcc, CPA, CA, Chief Administrative Officer

<b>Appendix</b>	<b>Title</b>
A	2023 Status Update – Essex County Multi-Year Accessibility Plan (2023-2027)