

Rapid Transit Public Participation Meeting: The Importance of Proactive Accessibility

Introduction

Hello, my name is Sarah Hunt, and I am London resident and today I want to talk to you about the importance of proactive accessibility in new proposed transportation systems. Thank you for allowing me to speak today because, though it seems off topic and, dare I say, boring to discuss accessibility, I hope to compel you to learn that proactive accessibility is so crucial to the success of this new proposed system that it needs to be a topic on the table at every step (or ramp) of the way or failure is inevitable. In 5 minutes I plan to define proactive accessibility; discuss my personal experience of identifying as a Londoner with a disability to help ground this issue in reality; I am going to discuss the risks of inaccessibility and benefits of accessibility; I am going to show some examples of Light Rail Transit projects that used the proactive accessibility model specifically the Region of Waterloo; and I will discuss the method you can use to prove to us hardworking tax-paying citizens of London that our needs matter to you beyond just basic codes!

Before I begin I want to first acknowledge the extensive work, urban planning, and advocacy that has gone into this project especially from Counsellor, Jessie Helmer. Without everyone's tenacity and determination this exciting and important idea to improve transportation in this municipality would not have come this far and I am truly grateful and stand in admiration. There is nothing more annoying than when you've poured blood, sweat, and tears into a project for someone to stand up and say, "woops! I think you missed something!" which is precisely what I am here today to do!

Proactive Accessibility Definition

Proactive accessibility means welcoming in feedback from those who identify as having a disability from the very early conceptual stages and making a commitment to revisit accessibility on an ongoing basis to ensure continued feedback, upgrades and maintenance. When I first viewed the photo of the proposed Light Rail Transit stops on the Municipality of London's Facebook Page, I too, missed a common barrier for people who use wheelchairs at first glance. After some research and discussion with various consultants at the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disability Alliance, I discovered the placement of the enclosed shelters at the stops for the Light Rail Transit Model (or LRT), are counter to the standards set for accessibility in the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/05a11>). While I appreciate this photo is only conceptual in nature, and I'm told, "not near what the actual plans of the stations will look like," the fact that a photograph being made readily available to the public shows an illegal barrier, one that is so contentious disability

advocates are continuing to protest that old shelters be replaced, sends me and others like me the message that Londoners with disabilities are not proactively being included in this exciting new endeavour at the level we deserve to be!

My Personal Experience

I, like at least 15 330 people, 21 percent (Statistics Canada 2006) of the London, Ontario population identify as a person with a disability. In 2012 I sustained a significant injury forcing me to use a wheelchair for two years and I learned the vast majority of services I wanted to access were not conducive to the needs of a wheelchair user. AODA currently operates on an honour system and currently engages in small auditing of compliance. This is why when those of us with disabilities hear things like, “don’t worry, it’ll be to code”, we have a really hard time trusting that it will be and; furthermore, feel frustration that our needs seem to always been an afterthought when compared to the needs of the able boded. This is why I am so passionate that accessibility for the proposed new transportation system, needs to start now, proactively!

The Risks of Inaccessibility

If you remember nothing else from this presentation, remember this, it does not matter if this transportation service is to code, if people with disabilities don’t feel like it meets their needs, we will NOT use it and London will lose money! The price of inaccessibility is significant! Reiss (2015) in Forbes, estimates that inaccessibility translates to approximately 8 trillion dollars of lost potential revenue from people with disabilities in the global market (Reiss 2015). When I break the formula down to a municipality the size of London we are looking at potential available revenues of approximately \$94.3million that will not be spent on this new transit system without being proactively accessible and attracting ridership from the London Ontario community of disabled persons.

In addition to potential lost revenue due to missing this exciting opportunity for ridership from people with disabilities, another significant cost of not being proactively accessible is looming for 2025. This is the year the AODA has committed the province of Ontario to be completely barrier free. Advocates and their lawyers are gearing up for audits and law suits and a brand new system of this nature will surely be a target. Advocates, just last month, April 2016, successfully pressured the Wynne government to update 11 statutes in the AODA and they continue to push for more (www.aodaalliance.com Accessed May 20, 2016). Without proactive accessibility we run the risk of

being behind the times before this futuristic system even gets started. A transportation system that does not last more than 7 years is not the definition of sustainable!

The Benefits of Accessibility

Sustainability is a key argument in favour of a new transportation system for London, so how can proactive accessibility benefit sustainability? Firstly, every single person in this room will require some form of accessibility in their lives whether it is due to injury, disease, or old age. If we want this transportation system to withstand the test of time and make up for inevitable early losses, we need to ensure that all people of all abilities are welcomed and encouraged to use the system. How powerful would the argument be in favour of the new transportation system if we were not saying, “ sit tight we’ll make it to code we have a deadline to meet”, but instead welcoming in those 15 330 people and enticing them to help us understand on which they would most like to spend their \$94.3 million of disposable income? If we welcome in Londoners who identify with a disability to see this as the best option for transportation, we will decrease cars on the road, which is not only good for congestion and the carbon footprint, it means increased ridership and increased revenues.

A lack of accessibility and user friendly design is seen as a significant factor explaining the financial losses currently being experienced by the Toronto Transportation Commission or (TTC) (www.ttc.ca). Furthermore, those citizens unable to operate a motor vehicle and use other transportation such as, Voyager, would be more likely to instead use this service if it better accommodates their needs, which means even more potential revenues which is good for all Londoners.

Speaking of things that are good for all Londoners, you may be asking how proactive accessibility facilitates the needs of the able bodied. Research shows that most people prefer more open design concepts and that able bodied people too benefit from accessible structures. The idea that accessible design is meant only for those with disabilities is a passé concept. All people benefit from electronic door openers if they are pushing a cart or carrying groceries just to give one example. To that end, I have provided in the power point the examples of what the Region of Waterloo based its proactive accessible structure on. As you can see from the photos, open awning type structures are used at stops as opposed to enclosed structures. When surveyed most people preferred the awning structure because it is more inviting and can safely accommodate more people during inclement weather.

3 Step Solution to the Implementation of Proactive Accessibility in either LRT or BRT or Hybrid Model

So what can London be doing differently to ensure proactive accessibility on the new proposed transit systems?

Step 1: Immediately involve our already established AODA advocates as well as invite members of the London community who identify as having a disability to provide feedback on a transit system we would spend our dollars on. Not just people who use wheelchairs, but people from the deaf community; people who are blind; people who may fall on the spectrum of Autistic Disorders just to name a few of the Londoners who could give crucial feedback on making this structure sustainable and profitable.

Step 2: Get Involved! I challenge all of you to spend one day using a wheelchair! Perhaps even attend a hearing voices seminar. Help yourselves become more aware. The more aware those in power are, the better this is for London. Mathematically, one may even be able to physically squeeze a wheelchair past the enclosed shelter seen in the conceptual photos on the Municipality of London's website, but awareness comes with an understanding of what it is like for the person using the wheelchair to navigate crowds; bad weather; and avoiding falling on the tracks!

Step 3: Use Person First Language. It seems like a small thing, but you would be amazed at how differently your thought process occurs when you're planning this new structure, when you consider the experience of the person using the system as opposed to simply the device he or she uses.

Recap

To recap this presentation, the take home points are as follows:

Number 1: Proactive Accessibility means fostering a sense of belonging for the approximate 15 330 members of the London community who identify as having a disability.

Number 2: It does NOT matter if a structure fits basic AODA codes, if people with disabilities do not see it as a viable transportation option we will NOT use it and it will lose out on potential ridership and revenues.

Number 3: Ontario must be barrier free by 2025 (7.5 years away), standards keep increasing and this structure will be on the radar for audits and lawsuits at that time.

Number 4: Inviting ridership from Londoners with disabilities means significant revenues for this transportation system and London's taxpayers

Number 5: Proactive accessibility RIGHT NOW means long term sustainability for transportation in London.

Conclusion

With your help, I know we can ensure that this exciting and important idea for the city of London can be one that generates huge revenues for the city of and that fosters connection and a sense of belonging for all of us here regardless of ability. Accessibility equals sustainability. Thank you for your time.

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