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Dear Mayor Brown and City Councillors,

I was deeply concerned by the rhetoric heard both in and out of public session on Monday evening regarding the proposed Medway Valley conservation plan and felt it necessary to write in and provide some opinion and insight. As you can probably imagine, I was heartbroken by the repeated characterization that disabled people in this city are less deserving of using public spaces simply because we may access them in different ways or that we, as a people, are some sort of annoyance or burden because of our differing needs. Lurking behind many comments, made by both the public and some councillors, were some insidious implications that disabled people do not have the same value as the nondisabled, that we cannot possibly make an equitable world that is accessible for everyone or that the drive to become more accessible would inevitably lead to an ecological catastrophe. I feel there are some important clarifications and explanations missing from this debate and hope to fill some of those gaps with the following letter.

It is my interpretation of the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) and its subsequent accessibility standards that the municipality will eventually have an obligation to provide access to all municipal services or infrastructure otherwise being provided to people who are not currently disabled. The light in the darkness, so to speak, of the AODA is that disabled people have the same right to exist in our city as everyone else and it is our duty, both the public and the private sector, to begin tackling the structural, architectural and attitudinal barriers that functionally disable people. The AODA states it is the obligation of our world to change, not the duty of the disabled themselves to fit within a rigid normative hierarchy of ability. And best yet, the AODA states unequivocally that Ontario must be *fully accessible* by 2025.

From this interpretation, and based on Part 4 Section 80 of the *O. Reg. 191/11: Integrated Accessibility Standards*, the municipality has an obligation to “ensure that any recreational trails that they construct or redevelop, and that they intend to maintain” follow a set of technical requirements, including ensuring the surface of recreational trails are “firm and stable.” The Standard also states that the requirements do not apply to wilderness trails, backcountry trails and/or portage routes (O. Reg. 413/12, s. 6) and Section 80.15 outlines exemptions from compliance in instances where there may be “significant risk” to ecological integrity and at-risk species (as scheduled by the *Endangered Species Act, 2007*) in direct or indirect ways.

When looked at in the context of the Medway Valley plan, I think the critical point here to note is not necessarily the exemption on ecological grounds but the phrasing around creation and maintenance: I am of the opinion that the AODA does not *require* the creation of new pathways, especially into areas that are ostensibly not intended to be accessed by anyone, disabled or not, such as ecologically sensitive areas. Given the spirit of the AODA, to provide equitable access for disabled people, the requirement seems to indicate that if the city intends on creating new and/or maintaining existing pathways, places where members of the public are welcome, then there *is* an obligation to ensure pathway access for diverse means of ambulation.

Which brings us to my point: this discussion is not and should not be about the accessibility of pathways. Non-exempt recreational paths must be accessible going forward. Full stop. Building off comments from one city councillor on Monday, debating accessibility *is* actually “moot” because that debate already happened at Queen’s Park and now it is the law – we don’t really have a say in that anymore, unless we’re interested in going to court.

The *actual* choice here is about whether or not to provide publicly useable pathways. Not who will use them, what they should look like, but whether they should exist at all.

Which is where this screed began: do the disabled deserve to access a “natural gem” in the city? If the nondisabled are able and facilitated by the municipality to experience it, then yes, absolutely we do. Morally, ethically, and legally yes, we do.

Living with a physical disability has meant that I only get to explore a small portion of London. Many places Londoners take for granted, staples of the community, I have never visited because they are inaccessible. Most of my life opportunities have been decided not by the things I want to do or the places I want to go but based on the arbitrary patchwork of accessibility that has resulted in a miniscule list of places I can physically access. Before I go out with friends, before going shopping, before applying to university, before applying for a job, I have to call ahead and ask if the space is wheelchair accessible. All too commonly, the answer to this question is “I’m so sorry, but no.” Polite as the response may be, what I really hear and see is a city that intentionally or otherwise does not believe people like me are worth, fiscally or physically, the cost of accommodation. I hear and see that I do not belong. Frankly, at times on nights like Monday, I felt like I am not particularly wanted nor welcome.

I can access a mere fraction of the freedom enjoyed by the approximately 84% of Londoners who do not have a disability. This is, by and large, because of choices we’ve made about how to imagine our city and who we presume are its residents. Worse still, these are choices we regularly make without asking disabled people about how these decisions will continue to marginalize their experiences and prevent full citizenship. Ultimately, we are not people *with* disabilities, we are people disabled by system of ableism that prefers to assume disabled people either have everything they need already (we don’t) or that they simply do not exist (we do...and our numbers are growing).

And the continued vacillating on tackling the systemic and attitudinal barriers faced by disabled Londoners validates that belief. Every “we can’t afford it” or “now is not the right time” or “this is not the right place” makes us all complicit in this oppression based on bodily formation.

London may or may not *need* city-provided access to Medway Valley. That is ultimately something you will need to decide on Tuesday. But if you do not believe disabled people “belong” there, then I implore you ask where *do* we, disabled people, belong? If Medway Valley is one of the few spaces that we cannot accommodate, and you genuinely agree that the disabled do in fact belong in London, then I urge you to make up for this one ecological limitation by committing to resolving some of the countless other barriers that we *can* remove – we just have to stop finding excuses not to.

Thank you for your time and consideration,



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