

Please note that I stand before you, authorized by the accessibility advisory committee to speak on its behalf as Chair. As well, this statement was read at the Feb. 25, 2021 ACCAC meeting and received unanimous endorsement from the committee as an approved representation of its sentiments.

At this moment, we are at the cusp of determining whether an unintentional systemic barrier becomes an intentional one.

This city has done a lot to support the dismantling of discriminatory practices. We are quick to support anti-BIPOC racism efforts. We are quick to condemn issues against LGBTQ2+. But when it comes to systemic barriers that preclude people with disabilities from fully being a part of the community, they're met with a shrug. I don't think it's unrelated that we have representation of both the BIPOC and LGBTQ2+ communities on council, whereas we don't have representation from people with disabilities. And it shows.

The bigger issue is that as a community, we use the term "accessibility" as a way to soft-sell the issues. Accessibility is a concept that makes it much easier to ignore those issues, deprioritize them, or even commoditize them because they're not framed as discussions on basic human rights.

We are no longer talking about accessibility. We are saying what this truly is: ableism.

Now, I'm not saying that everyone who doesn't want a sidewalk on their street is ableist. However, it is reflective of our societal beliefs that has enabled the establishment and maintenance of barriers that prevent people with disabilities from fully participating in society.

Here are a couple of examples:

- As a committee, we once received a request from a local company doing renovations asking for an exemption to the minimum number of accessible parking spots because, "we don't have any disabled employees working here." And that request, had it been granted, would send a very strong message to people with disabilities that they're not welcome to apply in the future, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- A couple of years back, one of Old South's self-proclaimed leaders was quoted as saying, "Do we want to be the first generation that paves The Green?" when the idea for an accessible path through that park was brought up. Which I would rather have been phrased, "Don't we want to be the first generation that allows all people, regardless of their ability, to have equitable access to the community and all the events that go on?"

Our actions, though maybe not intended to do so, have a dramatic impact on perception. If you swapped out either of those above statements with "people of colour" or "LGBTQ2+" those notions wouldn't be even considered -- much less be stated comfortably without fear of reprisal.

Why? Because accessibility is nothing but a concept -- an inconvenience. That's why we must frame this as ableism.

I appreciate the desire to maintain canopies and the costs of retrofitting communities. But ultimately, there are more dramatic costs. Under AODA laws, this entire province needs to be accessible by 2025 -- no exceptions. And at the point, the City could be very much at risk that someone with a disability comes forward and files a complaint about lack of equitable access. Resolving that would come at a much greater cost.

But I don't like to make this about money. Again, if we were talking about other marginalized communities, money would not be a consideration. As a society, we'd do it. So why do we feel comfortable reducing accessibility to a transactional cost? Why are we willing to put people with disabilities on a ledger and balance them against costs?

Because accessibility is a concept that can be seen as an expense. If we frame it as ableism, does that change the balance?

Sure, there may not be anyone with a disability on a street currently, but accessibility isn't just about wheelchairs and canes. Accessible built environments support all members of the community: older adults with mobility challenges, young families pushing strollers -- neither of whom should be on the street.

And hopefully this never happens, but what if someone has a catastrophic accident and is now paraplegic? Or has a stroke? Are we confining them to their homes because we're not willing to make a pathway that can be used by all. As we argued in the unsuccessful Medway Valley accessible path debate, there are significant environmental benefits. Accessible pathways have a beneficial side effect of keeping people on paths and away from treading on potentially sensitive environmental areas.

Absent accessible pathways, a neighbourhood no longer becomes famous for its canopy. It now sends a message that people with disabilities aren't welcome.

There is room for compromise. We don't need a sidewalk on both sides of every street. Some areas just don't make sense. But our stance is that unless there is a reason that puts people at significant critical risk for danger (e.g., adding a sidewalk would compromise the integrity of an area, resulting in residual damage), the expectation should be for universal accessibility.

This should not be up for debate. Creating and maintaining a fully inclusive community should be the foundation upon which all decisions are made.

I appreciate the cost considerations, I really do. But what's being presented is neighbours' concern about costs. Yes, there are costs, but they are the cost of essentially undoing the historic societal barriers that we have put up -- largely unintentionally -- that prevent certain members of OUR community from fully participating in THE community. That, sadly, does come with a cost, but what is the cost of not being inclusive?

It sounds like there's a solution that satisfies both parties, but one that has a price tag attached. But I ask what is the cost of determining which members of our community get to fully participate and which must be excluded because we're not providing them the equitable access they need? My belief -- and I say this as an able-bodied person -- is that we shouldn't be perpetuating artificial barriers that say, "You have to meet this community threshold to join" -- especially when there's a solution that will meet both sides' needs.

In our minds, this is about systemic ableism and we have a choice to make right now. We are dealing with an unintentional accessibility barrier. If we choose to perpetuate that barrier, it no longer is a representation of unintentional systemic ableism. If we perpetuate this now, we have chosen to actively and intentionally maintain a systemic barrier.

This is not the first time we've had this discussion. The precedent has already been set when council allowed exemptions last year to mandatory sidewalks. We are here again today with new opposition to inclusivity. If you approve this exemption today, I have no doubt there will be more. We can learn from our past to create a better future. Today represents an opportunity.

Today we have an opportunity to put to the test as to whether the City's expressed commitment towards -- and I'll quote from the Diversity and Inclusion Policy for the City of London -- "removing systemic barriers to accessibility and access as experienced by our community by listening and responding to the voices of those who are marginalized" are more than mere words on a page.

We have identified a systemic barrier. We have shared those voices. Now it is upon you to choose how you respond.

Thank you for your time.