

Dear Councillor Lehman,

I am contacting you again, and have cc'd Susan Skelton, the delegate who spoke on the issue of disability at yesterday's council meeting. I feel that we were not heard at the meeting yesterday and that there is a sweeping assumption made that "one" person does not represent all people with disabilities, yet the city's accessibility committee seems to be able to say that they do represent everyone with a disability.

I give you permission to use my email and letter for the public record. I'm concerned that there is not enough time for me to write about and research all of the ways that we, in our neighbourhood, feel silenced and that our voices are erased. We, in fact, represent quite a few different perspectives within our community. Like Susan Skelton said, she represented the voices of 10 individuals, all with different disabilities, impairments, and ages. There are many more individuals with disabilities in our community and only a few of us chose to have Susan quote us. And one of the things that concerns me as a disability advocate (and I am also a PhD with an extensive record of committee work and accessibility advocacy in the past within London, Ancaster, and Toronto, I am also an occupational therapist, and a disability advocate) is that I do not feel that the city of London is considering context when making the decision to include sidewalks on small neighbourhood streets.

I am concerned that sidewalks are deemed the only accessible option for all. But I would like to know how the city defines accessibility and also barriers. When the city considers universal design, does this include individuals who are not able to use the current accessibility standards? The city has done a great job recognizing when there is an absence of accessibility. For example, in our neighbourhood, the absence of sidewalks means that our streets are deemed inaccessible by the city. However, the only thing this dichotomy (absent/present) can pinpoint is that the physical environment is in fact causing disability via a lack of accessibility. What this fails to recognize however, is that we live in a space of mediation, a space of in-between where each of us embodies our abilities differently. And suddenly, after yesterday's decision, those of us with disabilities find ourselves unable to connect to and engage within a space in an environment where we are denied the simple ability to ask questions about what our belonging might look like within this city. The decision by the city and the arguments by the accessibility committee fail to consider context, and context is vital for the inclusion of any person with a disability.

Yesterday, we asked for the city to consider context. This evening, with this email, I am asking you again to consider the context of our community, how we use this community, and the concerns that we might have as those of us who live in this community know it the best. Making a sweeping decision to silence (to ignore) our embodied knowledge of (i.e. how we mobilize and use) the Old Hazelden community makes me wonder whether the city truly cares about our bodies and our questions of access and how we relate to each other within this community? This is a social practice that not only disables us, but it could be argued that it represents systemic oppression (ableism). When absent/present is the only question - the only consideration - it represents an overall perception of accessibility, for the whole city, that disables those of us who enjoy living in a universally usable, friendly, safe, and accessible community - a context that is very rare in this city - in the name of improving physical access. I want to ask "improving accessibility for whom?"

It bothers me, if I may say so, that the media and people on the accessibility committee state that they are the only disability advocates. This is not the case. I am someone who lives with a disability since birth, I am an occupational therapist, and I work particularly with women with disabling chronic conditions to navigate their health and the systems/institutions that further entrench their disablement every day. In particular, my work centres on how power is enacted in the lives of women with disabilities and how systemic oppression for a lack of a better phrase 'hits them in their faces' on a daily basis.

I simply ask the city to debate what an accessible street looks like when considering the context we currently have. Why would the city of London create a universally accessible street (e.g., Dundas Place) and then take something similar on St. Anthony and create barriers for more than half of the residents here? Would Susan Skelton and myself be able to meet with the Accessibility Committee? Or could we have a meeting with yourself to discuss our concerns? If a sidewalk is the only way forward, can our street remain pedestrian friendly and a traffic calmed zone so that people can move and use the road depending on their abilities and their needs? I

have heard it repeated recently that sidewalks are safer, and more accessible, and I know that individuals get frustrated when persons using motorized and wheeled devices such as scooters and wheelchairs use the streets instead of sidewalks. If parents would know how bumpy, uneven, and uncomfortable a sidewalk trip is for many seated in a wheeled device, they may also advocate for smoother and more integrated alternatives. When the city sees individuals using their mobility devices on the road and on bike-lanes, does the city ever ask why that is? What does the city have to say about inclusivity and accessibility when the people for whom sidewalks are made, don't fully use them.

We feel silenced after yesterday. I may not be an assistant professor at King's college, but I am a critical disability studies scholar, a woman living with a lifelong disability, and an occupational therapist with an extensive understanding of disability, accessibility issues, and accommodation and inclusion for individuals with physical and disabling chronic conditions. When a decision displaces persons with disabilities, makes them feel segregated and trapped, and makes these very individuals (who currently feel fully integrated, safe, and included) feel unheard and that they do not belong, then this decision does nothing more than to marginalize them; to make them feel discriminated against. It's not about looking at what is present/absent, but about engaging with the community and the context within which we live no matter whether we can walk on two feet, use a motorized wheelchair, or live with an invisible disability that creates proprioceptive and/or balance issues on uneven and slanted pathways.

I hope that with this email we could open communication with you about this complex situation if you have the time? Perhaps we could speak with the accessibility committee on solutions that include the disabled voices from this community? And if you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

Sincerely,

Susan

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