

2

MOVING FORWARD: YORK REGION'S 2005 ACCESSIBILITY PLAN

The Community Services and Housing Committee recommends that:

1. the presentation by Wilf Morley, Chair, Accessibility Advisory Committee and citizen committee members Zahra Brown and Mary Ann Proulx, regarding their role in the Region's accessibility planning process be received;
2. the letter dated March 8, 2005 from the Ministry of Citizenship regarding accessibility planning be received; and
3. The recommendations contained in the following report, March 3, 2005, from the Commissioner of Community Services and Housing be adopted.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. *Moving Forward: York Region's 2005 Accessibility Plan* be approved as included in *Attachment 1*.
2. The release strategy to make the 2005 Accessibility Plan publicly available be approved.
3. A summary of comments received during the public consultation on the 2005 Plan, as included in *Attachment 2*, be made available on The Regional Municipality of York's web site at: **www.york.ca**.
4. This report and the final printed version of *Moving Forward: York Region's 2005 Accessibility Plan* be shared with the area municipalities, members of the Municipal Staff Reference Group, the Human Services Planning Coalition (HSPC) and the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario.
5. That comments gathered during the public consultation that are the responsibility of other levels of government or local municipalities be directed to them for consideration/resolution.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to meet the legislated requirements of the *Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2001* (ODA) by presenting the final version of *Moving Forward: York Region's 2005 Accessibility Plan* (see *Attachment 1*). As well, this report and the 2005 Plan highlight the results of the implementation of the Region's 2004 accessibility plan.

Finally this report also presents the release strategy for making the 2005 Accessibility Plan available to the public.

3. BACKGROUND

The ODA includes specific requirements for all municipalities, including York Region. One requirement is the development of an annual accessibility plan. Under the ODA, the annual accessibility plan must address the identification, removal and prevention of barriers to persons with disabilities in municipal by-laws, policies, practices, programs, services and facilities. The ODA also requires that the accessibility plan is developed in consultation with persons with disabilities and made available to the public.

Even before the ODA was created, York Region had begun to enhance accessibility for people with disabilities in many of its programs, services and facilities. The Region's accessibility planning process, which was adopted by Regional Council in February 2003, is an extension of this work and enables the Region to incorporate all of its different accessibility-related initiatives into one central document.

Understanding Barriers: York Region's First Annual Accessibility Plan was approved by Regional Council on September 18, 2003. The Plan was widely distributed across the Region and also made available on the Region's web site. *Understanding Barriers* included initiatives from all regional departments for a 15-month period from October 2003 until December 31, 2004. This enabled the Region to integrate the development of *Moving Forward* with the Region's 2005 Business Planning and Budget process.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

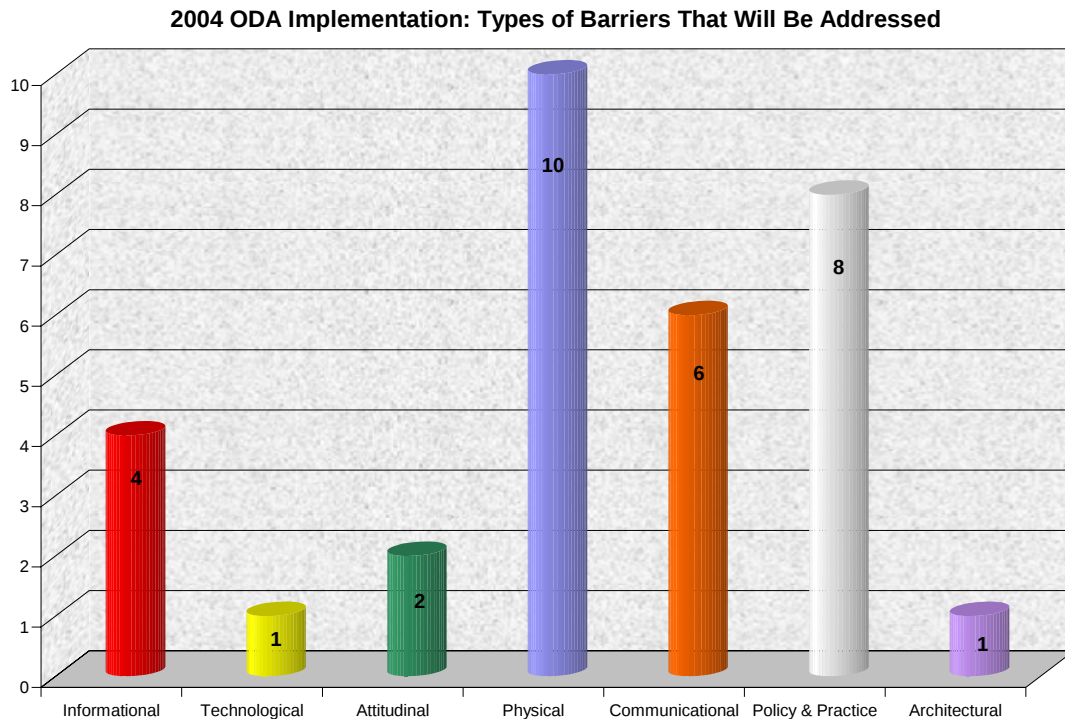
York Region is recognized as a leader in ODA implementation both for its "made-in-York Region" accessibility planning process as well as for the comprehensive scope and content included in its first Accessibility Plan. On November 4, 2004, York Region received an Investing in Abilities Award from Future Abilities and Creative Employment (FACE), a non-profit organization that champions on behalf of persons with disabilities who are entering or returning to the workforce in York Region and Bradford West Gwillimbury. York Region received its award for its ongoing efforts to remove barriers for people with a range of disabilities as both an employer and a promoter of accessibility.

Further recognition came for the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario who identified York Region's processes for establishing the York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC) and accessibility planning as a best practice to be shared with other organizations with obligations under the existing ODA. A case study detailing York Region as a best practice will be available on the Accessibility Ontario web site in the future.

4.1 Highlights of Accessibility Achievements Made in the First Plan

Implementation of the initiatives included in *Understanding Barriers* was carried out in all regional departments. As the title suggests, the focus of many initiatives in 2004 was on examining regional policies, programs, services, practices, procedures, by-laws and facilities to gain a better understanding of where barriers might exist.

One of the key goals of the ODA is to encourage people and organizations to move beyond addressing physical barriers to finding ways to remove the invisible barriers that also impact on people with different types of disabilities. Invisible barriers are those that are communicational, attitudinal, informational or technological, as well as those barriers contained in an organization's policies and practices. As illustrated in the chart below, it is noteworthy that the Region was successful in meeting this goal. In 2004 the Region successfully removed more policy/practice (8) and communicational barriers (6) than the more obvious physical (10) and architectural ones (1).



A few examples of barriers removed in 2004 are below:

- To make it easier for pedestrians, particularly those in wheelchairs or pushing strollers, road crews replacing sidewalks are now contractually required by Transportation and Works to provide temporary sidewalks with a surface that will enable everyone to pass smoothly.
- Health Services has made several changes to make the Region's Prenatal Education Program more accessible including holding the program in accessible

meeting spaces, offering sign language interpretation, using more posters, charts and videos, offering one-on-one sessions and offering transportation, if necessary.

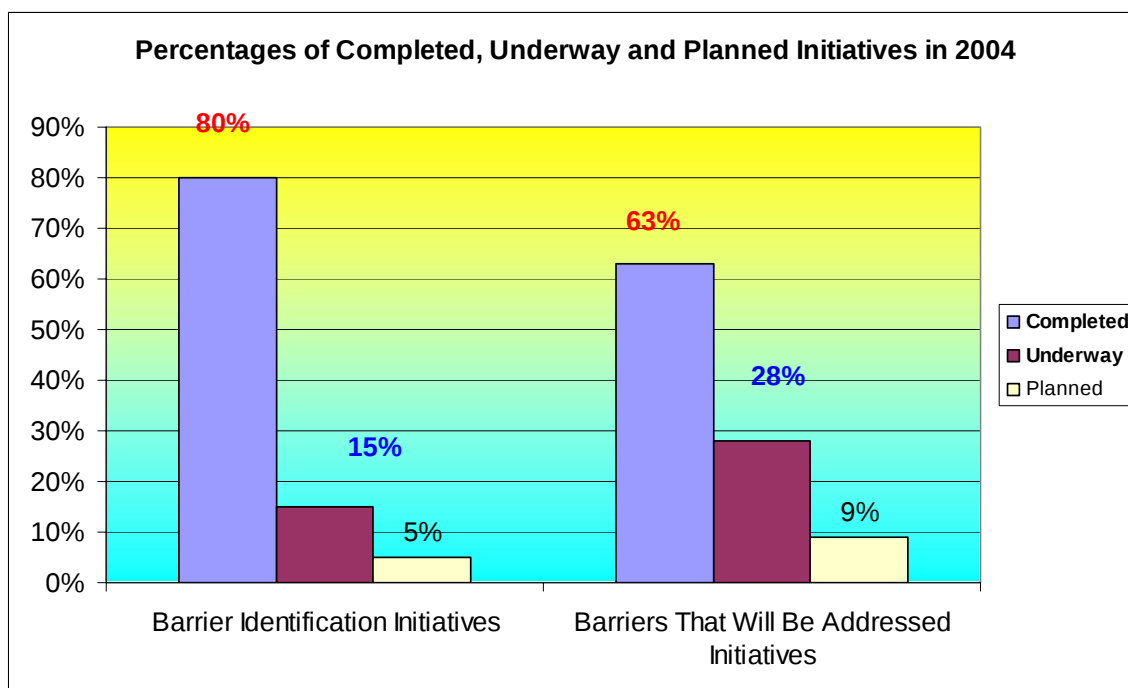
- Corporate Services has completed an accessibility study of the Regional Administrative Centre, which included input from the York Region AAC and a list of accessibility changes will be made in order or priority.
- York Regional Police have reviewed their human resource policies/procedures and identified the changes required to provide a more supportive working environment for existing employees who require accommodation.
- Corporate Communications conducted a focus group with people who are visually impaired to review the Region's web site and recommend ways to make it more accessible. At present, all material on the web site can be magnified up to 16 times.
- The Community Services and Housing Department made numerous physical enhancements designed for the safety of residents living in the Region's housing units to help them live more independently such as upgrading the lighting, installing power doors and replacing old furniture with more ergonomic furniture that is sturdier and easier for people to get into and out of.
- The Planning and Development Services Department commenced a review of policies in the Regional Official Plan that guide area municipalities in ensuring accessible urban design.

4.1.1 Implementation Status of the Region's First Plan

The majority of initiatives included in the Region's first Plan have been successfully completed. Other initiatives were underway and completion is expected early in 2005. A small group of initiatives were planned for implementation but have not begun due to delays in provincial funding or other factors that changed the way the initiative was to be implemented. Departments reported that these initiatives would still be carried out but would not be completed until 2005.

Below is a summary of the status of the Region's 2004 accessibility initiatives:

- **Barrier Identification** - a total of 65 barrier identification initiatives were included in 2004 Accessibility Plan. Among these initiatives, 80% (52) have been completed, 15% (10) were underway, and 5% (3) were planned.
- **Barriers that Will be Addressed** - a total of 32 initiatives were included in 2004. About 63% (20) of these initiatives were completed, 28% (9) were underway and 9% (3) were still planned to be carried out and may not be completed until 2005 due to the nature of the activities.



4.2 Developing Moving Forward: York Region's 2005 Accessibility Plan

While the Region has made progress in enhancing accessibility for people across the Region in 2004, there is still much to be done. During 2005, regional departments will continue to find ways to identify, remove and prevent barriers.

The Community Services and Housing Department as directed by Regional Council, led the development and coordination of the Region's 2005 Accessibility Plan, as well as its integration into the Region's 2005 business planning and budget process. Each regional department developed a departmental accessibility plan outlining the initiatives that the department would take in 2005 to identify, remove and prevent barriers in its core businesses. In addition, each department also reported back on initiatives undertaken in 2004 that resulted in enhanced accessibility for people with disabilities.

4.2.1 Ongoing Participation by the York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee

In keeping with its legislated mandate, the York Region AAC continues to play a key role in the development and implementation of the Region's Accessibility Plans.

Many initiatives in the 2004 Plan required the AAC's direct input and committee members took part in training sessions, reviewed customer satisfaction surveys and examined both existing and proposed policies to provide advice on how to break down barriers for people with different types of disabilities.

The York Region AAC also hosted the first meeting of all AAC Chairs in York Region. This meeting brought representatives from the ten AACs in the Region together with

municipal staff to share common experiences and ideas about different accessibility issues. The meeting was also an important opportunity to hear about what projects are underway across the Region and to learn from each other. A second meeting of the AAC Chairs will be planned for 2005.

York Region AAC members have also been involved in the development of *Moving Forward* and their advice on individual initiatives has been incorporated into the final version of the Plan. Regional staff presented their departmental accessibility plans to the AAC at two meetings held in November 2004. This gave AAC members an opportunity to provide their comments and input into the Region's Plan. The AAC were also given an opportunity to provide advice on the Region's consultation approach for the 2005 Plan as well as on the themes used in the Plan.

4.2.2 Themes included in *Moving Forward*: York Region's 2005 Annual Accessibility Plan

The primary purpose of the Region's annual accessibility plan is to present York Region residents with a comprehensive description of each of the initiatives that will be undertaken by individual regional departments in a coordinated way. Therefore, for the purposes of developing *Moving Forward*, each departmental initiative to identify, remove and prevent barriers in 2005 has been grouped under five key themes. These themes bring together different aspects of the Region's programs and services into broader areas of action. The themes reflect feedback from the York Region AAC and the public on the key regional service and program areas that impact on the lives of people with disabilities.

The themes used in the 2005 Plan are:

- Helping People Live Independently.
- Making It Easier to Move Around the Region.
- Making Regional Services More Accessible.
- Making It Easier to Participate in Regional Government.
- Changing Attitudes and Raising Awareness.

4.2.3 Public Consultation on the 2005 Accessibility Plan

As directed by Regional Council, an integral part of York Region's accessibility planning process includes the input and participation of residents.

A public consultation session was held in December 2004 to discuss the themes of the 2005 Plan. More than 30 people, including concerned individuals, regional and local AAC members, and representatives from many community agencies met to provide advice and offer suggestions to enhance accessibility across the Region.

Many issues and suggestions were raised by the participants who attended the consultation session. Transit, in particular, continues to be a concern for people with disabilities. Many comments raised are either reflected in the initiatives included in the Region's 2005 accessibility plan or will be examined further and potentially included in future accessibility plans. The York Region AAC had the opportunity to review the

consultation summary and provided additional input. The comments raised at the consultation along with the final comments received from the AAC are integrated in the attachment. It is recommended that a complete summary of comments received, as included in *Attachment 2*, be made available on the Region's web site at: **www.york.ca**.

This continuing consultation process provides an excellent opportunity for regional staff to learn about the potential barriers faced by the public in accessing regional government programs and services. Throughout 2004, many regional departments also worked with their own customers and clients to identify, remove and prevent different types of barriers that impacted on people from receiving services or accessing various programs.

In order to enable people to continue to be involved in the Region's accessibility planning process, a comment form will be distributed with the 2005 Plan. The comment form will ask people for their feedback about the plan and about issues that impact on people with disabilities.

4.3 Highlights of the 2005 Plan – Shifting the Focus

The 2005 Plan continues to build on the strong foundation established in 2004 to enhance accessibility in a wide range of services and programs. As the emphasis in the first Plan was on barrier identification, there is a shift in the 2005 Plan to include a focus on taking action and addressing various types of barriers.

Some initiatives included in the 2005 Plan are:

- Finance Department will address barriers in the Region's procurement process and add a formal accessibility component in the RFP/tender evaluation process.
- Corporate Communications will further improve and maintain web access for persons with visual impairments.
- Health Services will link its training project with corporate ODA training initiatives to increase awareness of accessibility issues among staff.
- Planning and Development Services will gather information on the accessibility of tourism attractions in York Region and include this information in the York Region Visitor's Guide.
- York Regional Police will introduce software to the CAD system to improve 911 services for people who are deaf, deafened or hard of hearing.
- York Region Transit will continue to purchase low floor buses to improve accessibility to conventional transit.
- Community Services and Housing Department will build on the positive response received over the past year and set up accessible computer workstations in the

employment resource centres at all Social Assistance offices to give people with disabilities access to employment resources.

- Corporate Services will coordinate sensitivity training sessions about the needs of people with different types of disabilities for regional staff to raise awareness.

4.4 Release Strategy for the 2005 Plan

The ODA specifically states that municipal annual accessibility plans must be made available to the public. Upon Council approval of *Moving Forward: York Region's 2005 Accessibility Plan*, the Plan will be posted on the Region's web site.

It is recommended that copies of *Moving Forward* also be sent to individuals, agencies and organizations that represent or provide services to people with disabilities in York Region, the nine area municipalities and to members of the Municipal Staff Reference Group, HSPC and the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario. The Plan will also be made available in alternative formats (such as large print or on CD) upon request. In addition to the comment form mentioned above, the Plan will include contact information to enable people to submit comments throughout the year.

4.5 Provincial Direction for the Development of Future Plans

With the introduction of the new Bill 118, the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2004* (AODA), the status of the current ODA's requirement to develop annual accessibility plans is unclear. The proposed legislation allows for the repeal of whole or parts of the ODA by proclamation. These proclamations may be issued at different times, so municipalities may have to balance existing ODA requirements with the new AODA requirements. This also could have additional human and financial resource impacts to maintain consistency in the implementation of two different pieces of legislation so that the Region continues to meet all of the legislated requirements. The role of AACs continues under the proposed legislation and may also be changed.

On January 31, 2005, the Commissioner of Community Services and Housing and the Regional Solicitor participated in the provincial hearings being held on Bill 118 by the Provincial Standing Committee on Social Policy. The Region's submission was based on the five recommendations outlined in the Council report approved at the January 20, 2005 Council meeting. The Region's submission was very well received and staff will continue to monitor the progress of Bill 118 and report back on implications for York Region once the Bill is proclaimed.

4.6 Relationship to Vision 2026

Regional Council has taken a strategic approach to accessibility planning that is grounded in Vision 2026. This approach has enabled the Region to focus its efforts in a way that supports and balances the needs of York Region residents.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Ongoing costs to administer and manage ODA implementation were approved as part of the 2005 Business Plan and Budget.

Many initiatives included in the 2005 Plan have been included as part of the existing base budgets of the various departments. However several initiatives that are included in *Moving Forward* are new initiatives that were approved as part of the 2005 Budget. The total estimated cost included for new initiatives is \$1,148,500. Of this 34% are linked to service improvements for York Region Transit Mobility Plus Services, 34% will be funded by the Province (MOHLTC) for supportive housing and 22% are for renovations planned for the Region's Administrative Centre and for facilities owned or leased by the Region including parking space and washroom improvements. The remaining 10% will be used for other regional services and programs.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

The York Region AAC and regional staff have established strong relationships with their counterparts in the local municipalities. There have been several opportunities to share information and learn from one another. Both local AAC members and local municipal staff have been invited to take part in many activities hosted by the Region including the public consultation on the development of the Region's 2005 Plan.

One particular activity that was well received by all who attended was the first meeting of all AAC Chairs in York Region. This meeting was hosted by the York Region AAC and provided an important opportunity to hear about what projects are underway across the Region and to learn from one another. A second meeting of the AAC Chairs is being planned for 2005.

Representatives from many of the local municipalities also participated in a forum in January on the proposed AODA (Bill 118) that featured David Lepofsky as the keynote speaker. David Lepofsky is the Chair of the provincial ODA Committee and one of the legal architects of the new Bill.

A commitment has also been made that once the new AODA is proclaimed, the Region will host a workshop for all AAC members in York Region and municipal staff to outline what the new requirements are and to discuss developing common approaches to implementation.

7. CONCLUSION

As outlined in this report, the Region's second accessibility plan clearly builds on the work underway in many regional departments to enhance accessibility to regional

programs and services. This Plan and the expertise that the ODA Staff Committee has acquired will undoubtedly be useful in preparing the Region to better meet the challenges of the proposed new accessibility legislation. The positive outcomes of this work that are already becoming apparent include, a heightened level of awareness among staff about the needs of people with different types of disabilities, that is resulting in new approaches to the delivery of regional programs and services. The Region's initiatives are also enabling an increasing number of people with disabilities to participate in regional activities and decision-making.

The work done by the Region has been publicly recognized locally and provincially. However, more importantly, it is now more clearly recognized that initiatives taken to enhance accessibility help many more people than perhaps those for whom the initiative was originally intended. All residents benefit from initiatives that make services easier to find, access and use.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.

(The attachments referred to in this clause are attached to this report.)