



Fort Erie Accessibility Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes

Meeting Date, Time and Location

Tuesday, September 24, 2024 at 4:00 p.m. at the Town Hall – Conference Room #1

Members

Lori Brant, Chair
Dennis Hernandez-Galeano, Vice Chair (at 4:48 p.m.)
Ashley Greaves
Adam McLeod
Gary Kooistra
Marilyn Abbs
Jennica Giesbrecht (regrets)
Lindsay Davis
David Pantano
Councillor Ann-Marie Noyes

Staff Resources

Keegan Gennings, Chief Building Official
Sean Hutton, Manager of Parks and Facilities (regrets)
Bev Bradnam, Manager, Strategic Initiatives

1) Call to Order

The September 24, 2024 AAC Meeting was called to order at 4:12 p.m.

2) Roll Call

All AAC members were present with the exception of Jennica Giesbrecht. Sean Hutton was also not in attendance. New returning member, Dave Pantano, was welcomed. Dave provided a brief introduction to the Committee for those that did not know him.

3) Disclosure of Pecuniary Interest

There were no disclosures of pecuniary interest.

4) Adoption of the Agenda

Recommendation No. 1

Moved by: Gary Kooistra
Seconded by: Adam McLeod

THAT: The September 24, 2024 Agenda of the Fort Erie Accessibility Advisory Committee meeting be approved as printed.

(CARRIED)

5) Adoption of Minutes

Recommendation No. 2:

Moved by: Marilyn Abbs
Seconded by: Lindsay Davis

THAT: The June 25, 2024 Minutes of the Fort Erie Accessibility Advisory Committee meeting be approved as printed.

(CARRIED)

6) Site Plans

No site plans were reviewed.

7) Multi-Year Accessibility Plan 2024 - 2029

A draft of the 2024 Annual Accessibility Status Report was reviewed and the following recommendation was passed:

Recommendation No. 3:

Moved by: Marilyn Abbs
Seconded by: Adam McLeod

THAT: The Town of Fort Erie Accessibility Advisory Committee approves the draft Annual Accessibility Status Report, as amended, that will be presented at the Council-in-Committee meeting of October 7, 2024.

(CARRIED)

The Committee agreed that we have accomplished quite a lot during the past year. The Multi-Year Accessibility Plan 2024 – 2029 is still being developed and a draft will be available at the October AAC meeting for review and approval.

8) Outstanding Matters

1) Regional Accessibility Advisory Committee

Bev advised that the Region's Accessibility Coordinator reached out on behalf of Shared Services at the Region to discuss how the Town of Fort Erie's AAC is so successful and wanted our Terms of Reference. Bev directed them to the AAC webpage and Boards and Committees link. AAC members agreed that they are not interested in the Region leading accessibility on behalf of the municipality or being part of a joint committee.

2) Parking Concerns

Keegan advised that with respect to the Commercial Hotel and lack of accessible parking, he put in an order for signs, noting that the Town supplies them for free. The Town recently ran out of the signs, which are provided by the Region of Niagara, but they did have two available and offered them to the Commercial and Scuttlebutts. Keegan advised that there are no parking requirements, including accessible spaces, in the Stevensville downtown core, so the businesses do not have to comply. The AAC asked that letters be sent to both establishments encouraging them to put the signs up if they are not erected within two weeks time.

Dave questioned how we go about requesting additional spaces, especially with our aging population. Keegan advised that the Town has a Zoning By-law that regulates both Type A and Type B accessible parking spaces. Keegan advised that Council can direct staff to review the requirements and also staff could consider revisions/amendments during the annual housekeeping amendments to the Zoning By-law. Keegan will follow-up with Planners. Bev noted that when the Design of Public Spaces was introduced she worked with the previous Manager of Development Approvals to review the requirements.

Gary questioned accessible parking spaces at the previous Rose Seaton Elementary School and Keegan will review the site plan and provided him with details.

3) StopGap Ramp Project

Bev advised that she received calls from concerned residents in Niagara-on-the-Lake and Oshawa asking how the Town put into place the StopGap Ramp Project. Bev shared our experience, power point presentation to the BIAs and application process and encouraged them to contact their local accessibility advisory committees and BIAs. Bev also directed them to funding opportunities in Niagara. With some of the remaining funds, Bev advised she will be purchasing some threshold ramps for two of the Ridgeway businesses that did not meet the eligibility criteria. Remove from outstanding.

8) Outstanding Matters, continued

4) Barrel Restaurant Access

Keegan advised that he spoke with the owner who claimed he had never received the letter. Keegan resent the letter and the owner agreed to meet but has not yet set up a time to do so. Remain on outstanding.

5) Beatties – accessible door

Keegan advised that there is no mechanism to force Beatties to widen the sidewalk and if they were to, it may push parking spaces back. A letter will be sent to Beatties encouraging them to add an automatic door on the eastern door that is currently marked as accessible and close to the accessible parking space. Remain on outstanding.

6) Ramp at Royal Bank, Jarvis Street

Bev advised that Councillor McDermott went in to the bank and met with the Manager who moved forward with the ramp repair. Thank you to Councillor McDermott! Gary shared his concerns with the base plates still being above the surface and felt it still created a barrier. Keegan noted that if the plate and bolts are flush it would not be a concern. Dave noted that in the past he had trouble with the ramp and in the winter his wheels could lock-up and possibly cause him to fall through the rails. It was noted that the ramp was considerably widened. Councillor Noyes advised that the handrails seem to be out past the plates but it was hard to tell in the photos provided. AAC members will attempt to visit the bank during the month and the matter was tabled until the October meeting. Remain on outstanding.

7) Crafted 1885

No response has been received. A follow-up letter will be sent. Remain on outstanding.

8) A & W

Keegan is awaiting a response from the Engineering team on the tactile warning surface indicators. Remain on outstanding.

9) Accessible Taxis/Accessible Shuttles

No updates.

8) Outstanding Matters, continued

10) Sidewalk Issues

Dennis asked about the bump outs at the intersection of King and Albany. Councillor Noyes noted that it may be related to traffic calming. Dennis noted it is only on one of the four stops and there is already a stop sign there. Bev thought maybe some infrastructure is buried there. Keegan will follow-up.

9) New Business

1) Transit On Demand Changes and their impacts for persons with disabilities and residents

Lori provided an overview of the email message she received announcing changes to OnDemand Transit in the Town. Lori advised that she called Niagara Regional Transit to confirm some of the changes that will affect riders and she was taken a back by:

- Riders should book 7 days in advance;
- If you have an appointment at 1:00 p.m. you should look for a pick-up time for noon or earlier. This can be an extremely long day for a person with a disability if you have to add on an extra hour for pick-up and drop off.
- There is a 15 minute window for the vehicle to arrive but they will only wait two minutes – this will be difficult for specialized users as it may take them more than two minutes to get to the vehicle, especially in winter weather.
- Booking times state to 11 p.m. but she was told that the last time offered in Fort Erie is 10:00 p.m. as the drivers have to get the buses back to Merrittville;
- It was recommended that specialized transit bookings be made two weeks in advance to ensure availability. This does not seem right for persons that want to plan the day of or have a last minute trip they want to take.
- There is a payment process that is confusing with OnDemand as she asked about paying for the person accompanying her on a trip and they would have to separately book and pay for the ride. For Specialized transit, the person with the disability pays and books for themselves and the people they are with.
- In most cases you would have to have a phone to pay and they were insisting you use the transit app and then show payment on your phone. Bev advised that passes can be purchased at the Town Hall and cash can be provided on the bus. Lori advised that the old passes are no longer valid and passes expire.

Lori advised that a Facebook group in Port Colborne has posted what an “absolute nightmare” they are finding the service and so many are complaining it is so complicated they won’t use it. Lori noted that it feels like they are trying to give such poor service that our numbers just drop and they say we don’t need it anymore.

9) New Business, continued

- 1) Transit On Demand Changes and their impacts for persons with disabilities and residents, continued

Bev advised that a senior came back in with the passes she purchased asking for a full refund as she was totally overwhelmed trying to use the OnDemand service.

Lindsay shared the following Facebook message from a couple in Thorold that uses the specialized transit:

HELP US BRING AWARENESS “The Niagara Transit Commission Public Advisory Committee is a volunteer advisory committee that supports the commission in providing an affordable, accessible, reliable, safe, and convenient transit system while meeting customers' expectations. The committee will provide its perspective and input to the commission on various transit services in the Niagara Region. They will discuss service levels, policies, and programs to raise awareness and implement legislation. They will also address the issues and concerns of public transit users.”(from the website of the Niagara Region Transit). Niagara Specialized Transit's new system/affiliate (Voyago) is not meeting the needs of the Niagara Region's disability community as described on its website. We have been using the Niagara Specialized Transit for three weeks and it has been excessively late 6 times. On July 15th we were not even picked up for our return home. We were booked to be picked up at 2:20 pm. After being on the phone with them for over 20 minutes we were told we would be picked up at 3:26. At 3:26 we phoned the transit once again to be told that our ride was canceled because of unable to be serviced. The best they could do was to pick us up at 6:15 pm, which was almost 4 hours after our original confirmed pickup time. We have been using the paratransit system for 20 years to get to and from employment, volunteer opportunities, doctor appointments and shopping, and social activities and we have never had as much trouble as we have had in the past 3 weeks. We can fully understand being a few minutes late. But being an hour to half an hour late or not even picking people up is unacceptable. Come the winter people will be stuck in the cold waiting for rides. Persons with disabilities should not have to be nervous or afraid to leave their homes, with the fear of rides not arriving in a timely matter or at all.

Councillor Noyes advised that the Town was promised five years of similar service provision or better. The AAC members advised that the terms of the contract have not been met and questioned how we could end the contract and revert back to our former in-town provision.

The CAO joined the meeting and advised that it was a triple-majority to put the integrated service in to place. Lori and Lindsay noted that several of the municipalities like Port Colborne and Thorold are just as frustrated. Chris explained that triple majority is 2/3 of the local area municipalities representing half of the population so Niagara Falls, Welland and St. Catharines are that majority.

Lori questioned if there are any spots designated as same day booking and what constitutes “no service” and how that can even be possible.

9) New Business, continued

1) Transit On Demand Changes, continued

Ashley read a message she received regarding a teacher at GFESS that purchased tickets for students that had co-ops and they were unable to secure rides. It was also noted that the local drivers now have to travel out of Town to get the vehicle and return it where before we had vehicles, both specialized and OnDemand local. The previous OnDemand provider has offered space to house buses in Fort Erie and they were declined.

Bev questioned what type of booking system is being used and if there are designated vehicles for Fort Erie or if they are just part of the entire Region's pool of available bookings. Bev noted that in 2023 we had over 86,000 OnDemand trips but the Customer Service Unit is receiving a lot of complaints about the unavailability of bookings or rides that are taking too long.

Councillor Noyes advised that the Mayor has written letters and told of someone being left at a senior's day care. The Mayor and Council passed a resolution to re-introduce a dedicated route (Green Line) between the Municipal hub and north end of Town.

Gary advised that he left for an out of town appointment last Friday and there was an individual waiting for the bus when he left and when he returned later that individual was still waiting to get picked up so he drove him. Language may have been a barrier.

Many have heard of people being stranded once they are dropped off or are very late getting picked up. Many users may not have data on their phone to check on their ride status or if they are being bumped or delayed.

It seems that, like accessible taxis, the Region can say we have service but there is no local provider meeting the needs of the growing community.

Bev advised that as part of the Strategic Plan she has requested ridership stats on a monthly basis and was told that numbers would be released to the public once the Commission receives them, most likely on a quarterly basis. Bev checked the website and there has been no postings in 2024 that she was able to locate.

It was agreed that when the Town had dedicated buses and dedicated drivers the service worked well. Bev questioned how the booking system works, if there are allotted times for the entire Region and once they are filled that is it? Ashley described the booking system she used to use when working for Regional Limousine and how she was able to check on reporting of late, missed, on time, etc. and she would accommodate additional rides by putting more vehicles on the road when needed.

AAC members advised that they wanted to pass a recommendation that would require detailed answers from the Niagara Region Transit. AAC members also questioned if someone from Voyago or the NRT could attend a meeting to discuss the AAC concerns. Lindsay noted, "Now that transit is Regionally sourced/run, we're (Fort Erie) part of a very delicate chain reaction. If we can't escape it - we can only work together to try and strengthen it".

The CAO also noted that we would be receiving an additional 23% charge for additional service hours in 2025, which amounts to approximately \$1 million.

9) New Business, continued

1) Transit On Demand Changes, continued

It was agreed that the Committee would pass a recommendation or resolution to Council requesting that they invite the Niagara Region Transit and transit provider to a Council meeting to respond to questions and concerns from the public. The Chair and other members of the AAC would be available to respond to questions when the AAC Minutes are on the agenda (October 21, 2024 at 6:00 p.m.)

The following resolution was passed by the Committee:

Recommendation No. 4:

Whereas: The Accessibility Advisory Committee has been made aware of many service concerns since Niagara Region Transit took over service provision in Fort Erie; and further

Whereas: There are no longer dedicated vehicles in Town to provide transit services, both OnDemand and Specialized; and further

Whereas: The service hours only allow booking until 10:00 p.m., rather than the advertised 11:00 p.m. like other areas in the Region; and further

Whereas: The Transit service provision does not seem to support the service needs of the community; and further

NOW THEREFORE:

THAT: Council be requested to invite the Niagara Region Transit and service provider, Voyago, to attend a future Council meeting to explain:

- **the service provisions for Fort Erie including:**
 - **how many spots per day are available to be booked in Fort Erie and if this is a fixed number; and**
 - **how bookings in general are allocated; and**
 - **how many vehicles are available for OnDemand and Specialized and if there is a fixed number for Fort Erie,**
- **performance standards and policies for abandoned ridership;**
- **complaints received specific to Fort Erie riders and how they have been addressed;**
- **ridership numbers for Fort Erie including the number of bookings that were attempted but no rides were available,**
- **and address concerns shared by the Accessibility Advisory Committee related to dedicated vehicles, booking times and hours of service.**

(CARRIED)

9) New Business, continued

2) Online aid for CDB regulations and draft

Marilyn and Lindsay had circulated the September 23, 2024 online event as well as the regulations and draft.

3) Set out service as information

Lori had noted that she recently learned about a service for persons with disabilities that would allow assistance with garbage removal. She required a doctor's letter to submit the application and noted that there are many instances where a doctor's note is required and it would be nice to have that information available so people are aware. Bev provided a copy of the Fort Erie Service Providers pamphlet that outlines service provision, which is also on the Town's website and can look at adding another column related to services that require a doctor's note. Bev shared the previous AAC pamphlet that had local numbers and information that was in the past distributed throughout town. Dennis agreed to review the pamphlet and update the information available.

Keegan also advised that he was recently asked about grants for accessibility ramps in the home and Marilyn and Dave advised that March of Dimes and Easter Seals provide funding but they are all income based. Keegan advised that Niagara Renovates also provides funding but it too is income based.

10) Date for Next Meeting

The next AAC meeting has been scheduled for Tuesday, October 29, 2024, 2024 at 4:00 p.m.

11) Adjournment

Recommendation No. 3:

Moved by: Adam McLeod

Seconded by: Gary Kooistra

THAT: The September 24, 2024 meeting of the Fort Erie Accessibility Advisory Committee does now hereby adjourn at 5:56 p.m.

(CARRIED)

Minutes recorded and prepared by:

Minutes approved by:

Bev Bradnam, DPA, CMM III
Manager, Strategic Initiatives

Lori Brant
Chair