

REPORT

DEVELOPMENT SERVICES DEPARTMENT

To: Mayor W. Wright and Members of Council in Committee of the Whole Date: February 8, 2010

From: Lisa Spitale, Director of Development Services File: #126539

Subject: Wheelability Assessment Pilot Project Update

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council receive this report for information.

PURPOSE

This report provides an update on the Wheelability Assessment Pilot Project, which is designed to improve mobility and enhance active transportation options for people who are reliant on wheelchairs, scooters, walkers and other mobility aids.

SUMMARY

The project, which involved close to 200 mobility aid users and their companions, has resulted in a baseline of information related to wheelability, which will inform City policies, practices and design decisions related to accessibility and wheelability. It has also resulted in a proven audit tool and approach which can be successfully applied to other neighbourhoods in New Westminster.

The project has empowered mobility aid users, documenting their concerns, both in text and video, while providing them with information as to how to register a concern and who to contact at City Hall. It has also informed City staff and elected officials, through involvement in the assessment days and at the public forum, which will create advocates and champions for enhanced wheelability within City Hall.

The project has received considerable attention in the media, including by a national publication. It has also received interest by several post-secondary institutions, including the Gerontology Research Centre at Simon Fraser University and the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of British Columbia. Regarding the latter, it is looking at using New Westminster as a site to conduct research dedicated to improving the wheeled mobility of older Canadians.

EXISTING POLICY/PRACTICE

The City of New Westminster has established a Special Services and Access Committee and a Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety Committee to advise Council on matters which affect people with disabilities and pedestrian safety. Regarding the former, its mandate states: “To assess improvements which enhance the mobility and comfort of the disabled within the City and its public buildings.”

The City of New Westminster, through Development Services, is working on an Age Friendly City Initiative for New Westminster. More specifically, an age-friendly city encourages active ageing by optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security to enhance quality of life as people age. In practical terms, an age-friendly city adapts its structures and services to be accessible to and inclusive of older people with varying needs and capacities.

ANALYSIS

Collaborative Model

The project involved two City Departments (i.e., Development Services and Engineering); two Advisory Committees to Council (i.e., Seniors Advisory and Special Services and Access); and the Seniors Services Task Force. The latter body is comprised of older adults and agency representatives and its mandate is to coordinate and communicate the needs of an aging population.

The project was guided by a working group which was primarily comprised of mobility aid users. It also involved over 30 mobility aid users and their companions in the two assessment days and the follow-up debriefing sessions. Additionally, it was informed by survey responses from 121 mobility aid users.

As part of the working group questionnaire (see attachment #1), members felt that one of the strengths of the project was that it was community driven. More specifically, it was noted that mobility aid users were involved all aspects of project development and implementation. It was also noted that the project, through such means as the forum and video, provided mobility aid users with a voice, which was very empowering.

Audit Tool and Map

An audit tool was developed, piloted and refined (see attachments #2 and #3). This tool, which was used as part of the pre-assessment and assessment, was instrumental in documenting and mapping information related to accessibility and wheelability.

The pre-assessment audit tool was used by City staff and recorded more objective information (e.g., gradients, location of accessibility infrastructure, pedestrian crossing times, width of curb ramps and sidewalks, etc.). The assessment audit tool was used as part of the two assessment days with mobility aid users and recorded more subjective information (e.g., convenience of push-buttons at pedestrian crossings, potential obstacles in the built environment, surfaces that present catching, slip or trip hazards, etc.).

Based on the assessment information, a map was produced (see attachment #4) which was designed to inform mobility aid users about possible routes prior to them setting out on their trip. It also contained information as to how to register a concern and who to contact at City Hall.

Results

Based on the two assessment days, which involved over 30 mobility aid users and their companions, City staff and elected officials, the following issue areas were identified:

- **Design** – e.g., different surface treatments, lack of consistency and poor design of curb ramps, presence of cross slopes and decorative inlaid brick in sidewalks, etc.
- **Maintenance** – e.g., cracking, lifting and settling sidewalks, over-reliance on filling, grinding and patching, etc.
- **Guidelines** – e.g., people with walkers and walking sticks experience difficulty in safely crossing at signalized pedestrian crossings within prescribed times (i.e., one metre per second).
- **Enforcement** – e.g., location of sandwich boards and sidewalk merchandising, presence of overgrown or overhanging vegetation bordering sidewalks, etc.
- **Other** – e.g., aggressive and impatient drivers, placement of utility infrastructure, etc.

For more detailed information related to these issue areas, as well as suggested actions to address identified issues, refer to attachment #5.

Based on the community survey, with involved 121 mobility aid users, the following public realm barriers and obstacles were identified. Please note that the bracketed number after a response indicates the number of respondents with a similar response.

- **Poor design of curb ramps** – e.g., central location and slope forces users out into traffic. (19)
- **Presence of steep slopes, especially in the Downtown.** (13)
- **Too many different surface treatments** – e.g., asphalt, brick, cement, cobble, etc. (12)
- **Poor construction practices** – e.g., inadequate notification and signage, lack of alternative routing, etc. (11)
- **Issues related to SkyTrain accessibility** – e.g., crowded cars, inoperable elevators, etc. (9)
- **Lack of snow removal on sidewalks** – e.g., need to more strictly enforce bylaws. (7)
- **Numerous cross-slopes on sidewalks** – e.g., driveways crossing sidewalks. (7)

- Placement of sandwich boards which can block or limit freedom of movement. (6)
- Use of decorative inlaid brick – e.g., cracking and lifting over time. (5)
- Inconsistency in curb ramp configurations – e.g., each intersection is different and presents its own set of challenges. (5)

For more detailed information related to the survey, including a profile of survey respondents, refer to attachment #6.

Community Awareness

A public forum was held to build community awareness about wheelability and support for initiatives to enhance it. This forum, which was attended by over 40 people, included an open house, a panel discussion, a presentation, a video screening, and a question and answer session. After the forum, participants were requested to complete a brief survey regarding the forum, the project and the video. Based on the survey results, 72.2% of participants reported that the forum was “very good,” with the remaining 27.8% reporting that it was “good.” Additionally, 94.4% of participants reported that the forum was “informative,” with a similar percentage reporting that the video was both “compelling and engaging.” For complete survey results, refer to attachment #7.

In addition to the public forum, efforts were made to work closely with the media, which resulted in a number of stories in the local newspapers, including a feature article. The project was also featured in the 'Tenth to the Fraser' on-line magazine and 'Momentum Magazine,' which is a national publication (see attachment #8). A video was also produced. This video, which was based on the two assessment days and debriefing sessions, highlighted the challenges faced by mobility aid users in moving about the public realm.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

The project involved members (both staff and community) of the Seniors Advisory and Special Services and Access Committees, which advise Council on a range of issues, many of which relate to wheelability. Additionally, presentations will be made to both committees, which will build awareness about and support for enhanced wheelability.

The project results will inform transportation infrastructure improvements which will enhance wheelability. In fact, funding for sidewalk and accessibility improvements is provided for in the Capital Budget for 2010 and beyond. Additionally, some deficiencies have already been addressed as a result of the project. For example, the replacement of the sidewalk on the north side of Carnarvon Street between Eighth and Tenth Streets.

The project video will be used for education, orientation and training purposes for staff in both Development Services and Engineering. The project results, including the audit, debriefing notes and survey results, will also be used for such purposes. As such, both existing and new staff will benefit.

The project has captured the interest of the Gerontology Research Centre at Simon Fraser University and the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of British Columbia. Regarding the latter, it is looking as using New Westminster as a site to conduct research dedicated to improving the wheeled mobility of older Canadians.

There is considerable interest among working group members in continuing their involvement. There is also interest by this body and survey respondents in expanding the wheelability assessment project to other neighbourhoods.

OPTIONS

There are two options for Council's consideration; they are:

Option #1: That Council receive this report for information.

Option #2: That Council provide staff with other direction.

Staff recommend option #1.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON

Development Services worked closely with Engineering to develop and implement the Wheelability Assessment Pilot Project. Staff from both Departments took part in the two assessment days and the public forum.

CONCLUSION

The project has resulted in a baseline of information related to wheelability and a proven audit tool and approach which can be successfully applied to other neighbourhoods in New Westminster. This information will inform City policies, practices and design decisions related to accessibility and wheelability. The project has also empowered mobility aid users, documenting their concerns, both in text and video, while providing them with information as to how to register a concern and who to contact at City Hall. Finally, and significantly, the project has created advocates and champions for enhanced wheelability within City Hall.

City of New Westminster

February 8, 2010

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Senior Social Planner

Approved for Presentation to Council

Lisa Spitale,
Director of Development Services

Paul Daminato,
City Administrator

Attachment #1: Participant Evaluation Survey Results

Attachment #2: Pre-Assessment Audit Tool

Attachment #3: Assessment Audit Tool

Attachment #4: Wheelability Assessment Map

Attachment #5: Assessment Day Debriefing Summary

Attachment #6: Community Survey Results

Attachment #7: Public Forum Survey Results

Attachment #8: Media Articles and Stories