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Report 2024-035

Report Title: 2023 Accessibility Annual Status Report

Committee Name: Corporate Support

Committee Meeting Date: March 4, 2024

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Approved by: Jennifer Moore, CAO

Council Meeting Date: Select Council Meeting Date

Strategic Plan Priorities: ☐ Innovate for Service Excellence
☐ Ignite Economic Opportunity
☒ Foster a Thriving Community
☐ Propel Sustainable Growth
☐ Champion a Vibrant Future

Recommendation

“That the Corporate Support Committee, having considered Report 2024-035 ‘2023 Accessibility Annual Status Report’, recommend that County Council approve the ‘2023 Accessibility Annual Status Report’.

Purpose

This report is the County of Northumberland’s annual update on the measures taken during 2023 to improve accessibility for people with disabilities and to report on the progress made to meet the requirements under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA).

Background

The County is committed to accessibility and meeting or exceeding the legislated requirements.

Statement of Commitment to Accessibility

The County of Northumberland is committed to ensuring that people of all ages and abilities enjoy the same opportunities as they live, work, visit and invest in our community. The County is guided by the four core principles of dignity, independence, integration and equal opportunity, and supports the full inclusion of persons as set out in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

Accessibility Legislation in Ontario

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 sets out a road map for creating an accessible Ontario by 2025. The Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation (IASR) under the AODA provides the standards that businesses and organizations in Ontario must follow to identify, remove and prevent barriers. In addition to the General Requirements, which include the development of accessibility policies and plans, procuring goods, services and facilities and requirements for training, the IASR contains mandatory and enforceable standards in five key areas:

- Information and Communications
- Employment
- Transportation
- Design of Public Spaces
- Customer Service

The Design of Public Spaces Standard focuses on removing barriers in areas not covered by the Ontario Building Code such as exterior paths of travel, on and off-street parking, recreational trails, pedestrian crossings and service counters. It applies to new construction or redevelopment of existing spaces. It does not require organizations to retrofit in order to be compliant.

The Ontario Building Code (OBC) regulates the minimum building standards for the construction of all new buildings and buildings that undergo a significant renovation. The OBC includes requirements for minimum accessibility within buildings. In 2015, the OBC was amended to include enhancements to accessibility in buildings. Most new construction and extensive renovations are subject to these amendments; existing buildings where no work is planned are not affected by the amendments.

Consultations

The 2023 accomplishments outlined in this annual status report were determined by the County's Human Resources and Accessibility Coordinator in collaboration and consultation with the County departments.

The Northumberland Accessibility Advisory Committee (NAAC) has reviewed and provided input on this Accessibility Annual Status Report and will continue to provide input on the County's accessibility plans on an on-going basis to ensure the County is meeting the needs of people with disabilities. At its January 18, 2024, meeting, the NAAC endorsed the 2023 Accessibility Annual Status Update and recommended that Council accept and approve the 2023 Accessibility Annual Status Update.

Legislative Authority / Risk Considerations

To meet the legislative requirements of the AODA, the County must comply with the Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation (IASR). Therefore, the County must establish, implement, maintain, and document a multi-year accessibility plan which outlines the County's strategy to prevent and remove barriers and meet its obligation under the IASR. In addition, the County is also required to prepare an annual status report on the progress of measures taken to implement the multi-year accessibility plan. (O. Reg. 191/11: Integrated Accessibility Standards, Section 4.)

Discussion / Options

This Accessibility Annual Status update outlines the County's accessibility achievements for 2023, including the accomplishment of goals set out in the County's 2022-2025 Multi-Year Accessibility Plan. Some of the 2023 goals have been adjusted to continue in 2024.

Northumberland's Accessibility Advisory Committee

The Northumberland Accessibility Advisory Committee (NAAC) is a citizen-based committee that provides advice, recommendations and support to County Council and all County departments regarding the development, implementation, and maintenance of the County's Accessibility Plan in accordance with the AODA. The NAAC advises on the identification, removal, and prevention of barriers to people with disabilities when accessing County goods, services, and facilities.

Each member of the NAAC is a volunteer and the majority of NAAC membership is held by people with disabilities. The NAAC members bring a wide range of personal and professional experiences and perspectives related to the challenges faced by people with disabilities. They provide invaluable advice and support as we continue to work toward a barrier-free community.

The NAAC is supported by the Accessibility Coordinator and the Corporate Services Department.

Under the AODA, the NAAC reviews site plans and drawings described in section 41 of the Planning Act, and the County consults with the NAAC on other projects related to the design of public spaces. The NAAC members continued to provide input and feedback to County staff and Council based on their knowledge, expertise and lived experience.

In 2023, the NAAC also:

- Endorsed the 2022 Accessibility Annual Status Report.
- Awarded Helping Hands certificates to County employees who championed accessibility.
 - Bill Smith (Housing Services, Community and Social Services)
 - Janet Trull (Corporate Services, HR/Payroll)
 - Mike Muldoon (Corporate Services, Natural Heritage)
- Supported the awareness activities for National AccessAbility Week (May 28-June 3, 2023) and International Day of Persons with Disabilities (December 3, 2023).
- Provided recommendations to support people with disabilities who use Community Recycling Centres.
- Updated the Committee's Terms of Reference to align more closely with the Committee's requirements under AODA and IASR.
- Welcomed a member of County Council to the Committee Membership

- Provided feedback and recommendations on the site plans for the County's 2022 Enabling Accessibility Fund grant project for accessible emergency exits at 555 Courthouse Road.

Accessibility Governance/Compliance

The Accessibility Coordinator acts as a resource for all County service areas and facilitates compliance with the AODA. To ensure that the County continues to meet or exceed the requirements of the AODA, the Coordinator continued to stay informed about legislation and participated in accessibility networks such as the Ontario Network of Accessibility Professionals (ONAP).

The Accessibility Coordinator facilitates the inter-municipal accessibility advisory committee meetings 3 times a year, bringing the County and member municipalities together to support AODA compliance by sharing information, discussing issues, problem solving and collaborating.

In 2023, the Accessibility Coordinator supported County departments by consulting and educating staff in a variety of areas including: best practice for signage (including font size, style, colour contrast, reflectivity and use of braille), assistive technology for museums, recreational trails, and accessible parking.

In addition, the Accessibility Coordinator:

- Acted as the liaison with the funder for the Employment and Social Development Canada's Enabling Accessibility Fund 2022 grant award for the County headquarters accessible emergency exits project, to ensure that all elements in the funding agreement were met (project runs until end of 2024).
- Met with the Accessibility Advisory Committees (AACs) of member municipalities to explore interest in and ideas for a possible future learning and sharing forum for AAC members.
- Coordinated the installation of assistive listening technology at 2 of the lower counters at customer service desks.
- Provided coaching and support to the County's digital and document accessibility specialist.
- Participated on the Web Content Accessibility Steering Committee.
- Coordinated awareness activities for National AccessAbility Week and International Day of Persons with Disabilities in consultation with NAAC and Communications.
- Monitored the 2023 goals within the 2022-2025 Multi-Year Accessibility Plan, liaising with County departments.
- Responded to resident and staff inquiries related to accessibility.

Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation

General requirements

The County has an overarching accessibility policy in place along with several operational policies related to accessibility.

The County's Multi-Year Accessibility Plan 2022-2025 outlines how the County will continue to meet its legislated obligations under the AODA and address the accessibility needs of our community. The Multi-Year Accessibility Plan is posted on the County's website.

The County continues to include accessible design, features and criteria when purchasing goods, services, or facilities. If the County is not able to purchase accessible goods, services or facilities, the County provides an explanation as to why, upon request.

We continue to ensure that training is provided on the requirements of the accessibility standards and the Human Rights Code as it pertains to persons with disabilities to all employees, volunteers, persons who participate in developing policies and persons who provide goods, services, or facilities on behalf of the County. Training is appropriate to the duties of the employees, volunteers, and other persons.

In 2023, the County:

- Continued to monitor the status of and work towards the goals within the County's 2022-2025 Multi Year Accessibility Plan.
- Conducted an annual review of the Multi Year Accessibility Plan and updated the Plan as required (ongoing).
- Submitted a 2023 Accessibility Compliance Report to the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility.

Information and Communications

Northumberland County's main website and microsites have been developed to ensure WCAG 2.0 Level AA compliance. The County regularly monitors websites and web content to identify and remediate any areas of non-compliance.

The County's website features ReachDeck assistive technology software. ReachDeck has several tools to further enhance accessibility such as: highlighting, reading out loud, text magnifier and language translation.

The Web Content Accessibility Working Group members continue to support web compliance within their business units. To support ongoing document accessibility, all employees responsible for creating documents have received accessible documents training and new employees are assigned accessible documents training appropriate for their roles. The addition of a digital and document accessibility specialist in late 2022 has increased the support available to the working group in 2023.

In some situations, the County may not be able to post web content due to the format. When information is not accessible to a person, County employees work with the person to find a suitable accessible format. We encourage individuals who find a document inaccessible to contact us to request it in an alternative format.

The County reported non-compliance for the requirements for accessible websites and web content under section 14 of the IASR when submitting its 2021 Accessibility Compliance Report to the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility. Staff efforts over the past 2 years enabled the County to report compliance when submitting its 2023 Accessibility Compliance Report.

In 2023, the County:

- Continued accessible documents training for all new employees, as appropriate.
 - 44 employees completed Accessible Word and PowerPoint Documents training.
 - Held 11 Accessible Word and PowerPoint Documents training sessions.

- Introduced Plain Language workshops.
 - 52 employees were trained to use clear straightforward expression to allow the reader to understand the message easily.
 - Held 3 Plain Language workshops.
- Completed a compliance plan to bring the County into compliance with AODA standards for accessible websites and web content.
- Conducted Web Content Accessibility Working Group focus groups to identify pain points in the remediation process and improve the accessibility and efficiency of our procedures.
- Developed a web content auditing plan to review remediated documents and images and ensure that best practices are implemented across all the County's web platforms.
- Began conducting monthly audits on select webpages and documents posted on the County's website(s) to ensure WCAG2.0 AA compliance.
- Began testing auto-captioning and closed-captioning for Committee and Council meetings.
- Organized an accessible documents training session for member municipalities for January 2024 delivery.

Employment

The County of Northumberland remains committed to accessible and equitable hiring practices and continued to meet the Employment Standard requirements under the AODA. All job postings include a statement about the availability of accommodations for applicants with disabilities throughout the recruitment process.

Offers of employment notify successful candidates that job accommodations are available for people with disabilities. All employees are informed of policies regarding job accommodations. The County continues to provide workplace and emergency response information in accessible formats to employees who require it. The County provides accessible formats and communication supports in consultation with the employee, upon request.

The County continues to share job postings with local organizations.

In 2023, the County:

- Began using Discover Ability Network, a portal that helps job seekers with disabilities match with meaningful employment opportunities and offers employers resources to help them hire and retain persons with disabilities, foster inclusive workplaces, and benefit their bottom line.
- Reviewed HR policies and practices to ensure applicants and employees with disabilities receive the supports they need.
- Updated the County's Accommodating Disabilities Policy.

Transportation

The County of Northumberland does not provide or operate conventional or specialized transportation services, school transportation or ferries, nor does the County license taxicabs; therefore, the transportation standards do not apply to the County.

Design of Public Spaces

The County continues to ensure that all new and redeveloped public spaces meet or exceed the requirements of the Design of Public Spaces Standard. The County continues to meet the

consultation requirements when carrying out the construction or redevelopment of public spaces, such as when new recreational trails are developed. Although the County is not required to retrofit public spaces under the AODA, we continue to make accessibility improvements.

In 2023, the County:

- Received a grant from Employment and Social Development Canada's Enabling Accessibility Fund to improve accessibility of emergency exits at 555 Courthouse Road (Cobourg) and completed design plans. Project completion is expected 2024.
- Completed the development of the Porcupine Trail, a new universal trail within Northumberland County Forest.
- Completed railway safety improvements at the Prince Edward Street crossing in Brighton, which included the following features that improve accessibility: wider sidewalks, pedestrian railings and gates, and tactile warning indicator surfaces (tactile plates).
- Completed retrofit project for supportive housing at 152 Cockburn Street (Campbellford) by adding an accessible ramp (1/12 pitch), creating a barrier-free first floor and full barrier-free washroom and bedroom. The project period was 2022-2023. 152 Cockburn Street was transferred to the Northumberland County Housing Corporation (NCHC) in 2023.

The County worked with the Northumberland County Housing Corporation (NCHC) to make accessibility-related improvements including the following:

- Completed design work for new accessible entrance, ramp, patio and railing at 12 A Meade St (Brighton). Project completion is expected 2024.
- Replaced accessible lifts at 6 Percy St (Colborne) and 111 Front Street (Campbellford) with new accessible lifts (lift modernization due to age).

Customer Service

The County of Northumberland continues to comply with the Customer Service Standard. When accessing County goods, service and facilities, individuals may use their assistive devices. Service animals are welcomed in all areas that are open to the public unless the animal is otherwise excluded by law. People with disabilities can access their support person when accessing County goods, services, and facilities.

We continue to train all new employees and volunteers on Accessible Customer Service, including how to communicate with people with disabilities in a manner that takes into account their abilities. We work with the person with a disability to determine which methods of communication work best for them.

We continue to offer a variety of ways for customers to provide feedback on the accessibility of our facilities, programs and services.

In 2023, the Accessibility Coordinator received, tracked and ensured responses to customer feedback, including:

- 1 compliment from a family with a child with a disability regarding waste collection crews honking and waving at child each collection day and the positive effect they have on the child.

- 1 concern related to accessible parking. The customer had to park in an accessible parking space at the back of the County Courthouse because the 3 accessible spaces at the main entrance were occupied.

The following accomplishments improved customer service in 2023:

- Accommodated 143 households through the Accessible Recycling Collection Program (increase of 23%).
- Accommodated 159 households through the existing Medical Waste Subsidy program (increase of 8%).
- Installed assistive listening technology with integrated hearing loops at 2 customer service desks to improve communication and support customers with hearing loss and those who use hearing aids.
- Reception and community and Social Services low counters (555 Courthouse Road)
- Provided training for staff on how to use the assistive listening technology and interact with customers with hearing loss.

Other initiatives

- The County continued to participate the following initiatives in 2023:
- Recognized National AccessAbility Week (May 28 – June 3, 2023).
- Awarded Helping Hands certificates to County employees who championed accessibility.
- Recognized International Day of Persons with Disabilities (December 3, 2023).

Financial Impact

There is no provincial funding to support the implementation of the regulations under the AODA. Ongoing costs to administer and manage the implementation of the AODA requirements and accessibility improvements are integrated as a part of general operations.

There is a financial risk for O. Reg. 191/11: Integrated Accessibility Standards non-compliance. The County may incur administrative penalties of \$500.00 up to \$100,000.00 per day, based on the impact of any contravention of the IASR.

Legal risks may occur if the County does not afford reasonable accommodations to people with disabilities, under AODA, the Ontario Human Rights Code and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Member Municipality Impacts

The County continues to collaborate with all member municipalities through the Inter-Municipal Accessibility Advisory Committee.

Conclusion / Outcomes

It is the recommendation of staff that the Council of the County of Northumberland receives and approves this 2023 Accessibility Annual Status Report.

Attachments

1. Report 2024-035 ATTACH 1 '2022-2025 MYAP - 2024 Update'