

WHEELABILITY ASSESSMENT PROJECT

Debriefing Summary

Introduction:

Following the Wheelability Assessments of the Uptown (September 12) and the Downtown (September 26), participants were asked to comment on their assessment experiences and to identify any specific issues. Based on the discussion, a number of participants also cited suggested actions. In total, over 50 people took part in the assessments, including people with mobility aids, companions, City Councillors and staff. The following is a summary of the two debriefing sessions.

General Observations:

- People face different challenges and issues depending on the mobility aid being used. Those people using manual wheelchairs, walkers and walking sticks tend to have a more difficult time moving about the built environment than people using motorized wheelchairs and scooters.
- People that are new to a mobility aid face a number of challenges, including learning to use the device; becoming familiar with its capabilities and limitations; and developing an awareness about the built environment (e.g., location of accessibility infrastructure, inclines and potential barriers).
- People using mobility aids need to be educated as the proper use of their mobility aid and community members, particularly drivers, need to be more informed about the challenges and issues faced by mobility aid users, especially when crossing intersections.
- People using mobility aids face far greater challenges in the Downtown than in the Uptown, given aging infrastructure and steep topography. Some areas are ‘inaccessible’ given the inclines, which speaks to the need for ‘preferred’ routes and signage.
- People with mobility limitations are more prone to falling. In fact, an Occupational Therapist, who sits on the Wheelability Assessment Project Working Group, estimates that between 65% and 75% of admissions of seniors to acute care are the result of falls. Regarding problematic accessibility infrastructure design and poor maintenance, this could raise issues related to liability.

Specific Issues:

- Issues Related to Design:
 - The lack of consistency in curb ramp design – i.e., within and between intersections.
 - The presence of curb ramps that direct mobility aid users out into vehicular traffic.
 - The misalignment of push-buttons (at pedestrian crossings) and curb ramps which reduce the time that mobility aid users have to ready themselves to safely cross at intersections.
 - The presence of cross slopes on sidewalks.
 - The use of tree well grates which can act as catching, slip or trip hazards.
 - The wide variety of surface treatments – e.g., brick, cement, cobble, paver, pebble, tile, etc.
- Issues Related to Maintenance:
 - The problems associated with aging infrastructure – e.g., cracking, heaving, lifting, settling, etc.
 - The ‘over-reliance’ on filling, grinding and patching for problematic sidewalk segments. At times, the repairs can present their own set of challenges.
- Issues Related to Guidelines and Standards:
 - The use of guidelines or standards which may meet the needs of the majority of pedestrians but not frail seniors and mobility aid users. For example, people with walkers and walking sticks experience difficulty in safely crossing signalized intersections within the prescribed times – i.e., one metre per second.
- Issues Related to Bylaw Enforcement:
 - The location of sandwich boards which act to reduce the width of sidewalks.
 - The presence of sidewalk merchandising and seating which act to reduce the width of sidewalks.
 - The presence of overhanging or overgrown vegetation which act to reduce the width of sidewalks.
- Other considerations:
 - The lack of accessibility to the waterfront for mobility aid users.
 - The increasing number of aggressive and impatient drivers, which place mobility aid users at risk when crossing intersections.
 - The need to balance issues related to aesthetics, environmental sustainability and street vibrancy with accessibility – e.g., decorative paving and permeable surfaces can often result in catching, slip or trip hazards.

Suggested Actions:

- That examples of ‘good’ accessibility infrastructure design, both in New Westminster and elsewhere, be documented and that these examples be used to inform design decisions. For example, the ‘cut grove’ sidewalk¹ and curb ramp at the southeast corner of Begbie and Columbia Streets was cited for its good design as part of the Downtown Wheelability Assessment.
- That accessibility infrastructure design be discussed with user groups and that it be piloted or tested prior to its adoption. In some cases, this infrastructure may be in use in other jurisdictions, which would enable piloting or testing to occur. Where it is not in use, limit infrastructure installation to one site and pilot or test. This would help to avoid costly infrastructure replacement or retrofitting.
- That guidelines and standards be used to inform design decisions and to establish minimum acceptable standards; however, they also need to take into consideration demographic and environmental considerations, including topography.
- That maintenance guidelines – e.g., an one inch lift in a sidewalk is used to trigger repairs. Given that people with walkers and walking sticks have a higher centre of gravity, an half-inch lift in a sidewalk can often result in a tripping hazard.
- That pedestrian crossing times be reviewed at key intersections, especially in those areas where large concentrations of seniors and/or mobility aid users live or congregate – e.g., in the vicinity of Century House, the Public Library and Royal City Centre. For those people who use a walker or walking stick, the crossing times at certain intersections are insufficient to enable the user to safely cross.
- That the Seniors Advisory and Special Services and Access Committees play a more influential role in informing public realm (e.g., public plazas, sidewalks, etc.) design decisions. This could include making presentations to these two bodies and seeking feedback and input from members related to City and neighbourhood plans and major development projects.
- That key accessibility routes be developed between the Downtown and the Uptown neighbourhoods. These routes would be designated and sign posted;² would be fully accessible; and would provide ‘allowances’ for mobility aid users (e.g., benches and rest areas, electrical plug-ins, longer pedestrian crossing times at key intersections, etc.).
- That bylaws regulating the use and location of sandwich boards, sidewalk merchandising and temporary street furniture be vigorously enforced. Additionally, that property owners be informed of the importance of trimming overhanging or overgrown vegetation bordering sidewalks.

¹ Use of shallow and narrow joints between cement pads or sections.

² Include information as to distance, elevation gain, gradient or incline, and minimum sidewalk width.

- That developers be informed of the need to create safe and accessible routes through construction zones and that they be required to provide adequate notification and signage as to sidewalk closures. For example, on the day of the Downtown Wheelability Assessment, construction was occurring on both sides of Carnarvon Street between Tenth and Eighth Streets, which meant that participants with mobility aids had to use the street and traverse a number of obstacles to connect to the sidewalk on the other side of the street.