

August 8, 2023

Dear Members of Arran-Elderslie Council,

My name is Whitney Bonnett and I live just East of Burgoyne with my husband, Andrew, and my two daughters, Flora and Annie. I write to you as an ally to the disability community and as a parent of a child with a physical disability. My 4-year-old daughter, Flora, is a full-time user of mobility aids including a walker and a wheelchair.

I'd like to voice my support and encouragement for the creation of an Inclusion and Accessibility Committee in Arran-Elderslie. I understand that this is not something required of our municipality as we do not meet the population numbers that would obligate us to have an Accessibility Committee. I believe creating this committee would show proactive consideration and true care for everyone in the community. An Inclusion and Accessibility Committee would mean a great deal to families like mine who often feel excluded from infrastructure and events due to accessibility issues. As a non-disabled person, before we learned of Flora's disability, I rarely noticed accessibility issues. Now I see them everywhere; buildings, businesses, events, and playgrounds are minefields of inaccessibility.

With all the new builds and upgrades occurring in Arran-Elderslie, this is the perfect time to start an Accessibility Committee. Generally, in other communities, these committees are comprised of people with disabilities and their allies. They provide a perspective that non-disabled people do not have. They see things and experience things that non-disabled people do not notice. People with disabilities can provide information on accessibility from their lived experience. Often, "accessible features" are not truly universally accessible and leave significant portions of a community excluded from fully participating in a public place. This is because the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) accessibility requirements occasionally do not provide universal accessibility. It is people from the disabled community who will be able to illustrate this through their lived experience. Not only would an Accessibility Committee be invaluable, but so would the perspective of the members of the disability community who belong to it. This committee could prevent the need for further renovations on structures that were designed to be accessible but just don't meet the mark for all people using them.

I believe that no one designs a community event, building or recreation equipment with the intention of excluding someone with a disability. I trust that people have the best intentions in these circumstances. Unfortunately, oversights happen. It can be difficult to discuss accessibility issues with non-disabled people. Lack of accessibility isn't a barrier to them, so inaccessible infrastructure will often go unnoticed. As I said earlier, before we had our daughter, I had zero concern for accessibility because I am not currently disabled. In my journey parenting Flora, and in listening to the disabled community, I have come to learn that almost every human, whether through accident, illness, or aging, will experience either temporary or permanent disability in their lifetime. This is not meant to be scary or seen as a threat, because disability shouldn't be scary or threatening. Disability is a normal variation of life and it's a normal part of being human. Installing fully inclusive, accessible design guarantees that everyone, at any point in their lives, can access their whole community and participate meaningfully and with dignity. No one loses with universally accessible design. An Accessibility Committee would make this a reality.

I sincerely thank you for allowing me to participate in this meeting through this letter.

- Whitney Bonnett

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