

Plan On It

A Dutchess County Planning Federation eNewsletter



September/October 2017

Accessibility Isn't a Special Interest: *Creating Equitable Spaces for All*

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What does accessibility mean in the context of placemaking, and why should it matter in your community? In the planning world, accessibility is the idea that everyone, regardless of age or ability, has a right to universally access the built environment. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 established standards of equity for persons with disabilities. True accessibility, however, goes above and beyond simple compliance with ADA requirements. Planning for accessibility becomes a way of thinking about issues of inclusion and universality, and encourages thoughtful and deliberate decision-making to that end. Almost everyone will, at some point in their lifetime, experience a temporary or permanent physical disability or have a loved one who does. Accessibility planning, or the lack thereof, will likely affect us all at some point in our lives.

Experiencing Accessibility Challenges Firsthand

In June 2017, the Dutchess County Planning Federation welcomed Mary Beth Bianconi from Delaware Engineering, and Patrick Muller and Jeanine Byrnes from Taconic Resources for Independence, for a unique program focused on shifting our collective perspective to both experience and plan for accessibility. During the first part of the program, participants took turns using wheelchairs, canes and blindfolds, sound suppressors, and special vision-altering goggles that mimic certain conditions such as glaucoma or macular generation. With their gear in place, participants attempted to traverse a typical built environment with sidewalks, crosswalks, curbs, doors, ramps, etc. This exercise gave participants the opportunity to experience some of the sensory and ambulatory challenges that many individuals face every day. Overwhelmingly, participants commented that they found the experience to be enlightening. Many expressed their shock at how challenging it can be to navigate from one side of the street to the other, through a parking lot, and into a building with a physical disability. Key takeaways included:

- Small bumps, large potholes, and uneven pavement on a sidewalk, parking lot, or road seem much larger and are more jarring from a wheelchair or when visually impaired.
- When the path to and between buildings is circuitous and does not follow a logical route, it results in unnecessary challenges for people with physical disabilities who have to exert a high level of energy getting to and from their destinations.



Participants experienced firsthand the challenges of navigating the built environment with vision impairment.

- What seems like inconsequential gravel or brush to the able-bodied person may be critically dangerous to someone in a wheelchair or to someone who experiences vision impairment.
- It is critical to clearly mark areas of transition (e.g. from a sidewalk to a crosswalk) where pedestrians are vulnerable to traffic.
- Ramps and other inclines/declines can be quite challenging to traverse in a wheelchair even if they don't look steep. Although the ADA allows up to an 8% grade, anything above 4-5% can be functionally prohibitive.
- Getting to a building is the first challenge, but then getting into the building is another one – opening a door (especially a large or heavy one) while in a wheelchair is not an easy feat.

We all know the old adage, “You can't really understand another person's experience until you've walked a mile in their shoes.” While participants didn't exactly walk a full mile in another person's shoes, they did get a sense of the kinds of challenges faced by someone with a physical disability. Since we will all likely experience a physical disability at some point in our lives, it's in everyone's best interest to plan for accessibility.

Site Plans & Accessibility

Now that we know just a few of the accessibility challenges that individuals may face in the built environment, how can local planning boards attempt to mitigate these types of design issues? As planners, our main tool to influence the built environment is a [site plan](#). During the second half of the program, participants learned what to look for on a site plan, from things you may already be thinking about such as ramps and disconnected sidewalks, to less obvious challenges such as drainage issues, landscape barriers, and building entrances.

Sidewalks

Sidewalks are a pedestrian's main access route through a community. It is very important for sidewalks to not only be depicted on a site plan, but for the sidewalk details to also be included. Without knowing the length, width, slope, and material of the sidewalk, it would be very difficult for a planning board member to adequately assess the appropriateness of



Poorly maintained infrastructure can have a negative impact on the accessibility of our communities. Assuring that crosswalks are clearly delineated and devoid of barriers, such as gravel or debris, will go a long way to ensuring accessibility.



Ramps are only positive tools for accessibility when constructed to the appropriate standards. Participants were hard-pressed to either go up or down this steep ramp in a wheelchair.

the sidewalk on the site. Details matter; for example, a concrete sidewalk will fare much better over time versus an asphalt or bluestone one, and may be easier to maintain. A 5-foot wide sidewalk allows a wheelchair and another pedestrian to travel along the path together, while a 4-foot wide sidewalk does not. Planners can also request sections or profiles of sidewalks to get a better sense of the proposed slope and how the sidewalk will integrate into the existing infrastructure. Sidewalks are all about connectivity and they can make or break a community's accessibility – it is vital to ensure that new sidewalks are built to accessible standards and that existing sidewalks are improved over time.

Crosswalks

Crosswalks provide a visual cue to both pedestrians and drivers that people may be crossing the street, a driveway, or a parking lot. Accessible crosswalks may include features such as high-visibility markings, audible signals, properly-sloped ramps, and detectable warning strips (bumpy, rubberized mats that indicate a change in setting to visually impaired individuals). Crosswalks allow pedestrians to safely transition from one area of a community to another. Their depiction on a site plan, and the associated details, is critical in determining how a pedestrian can safely and efficiently navigate a community. For example, be sure any parking lot drainage grates are not located in the crosswalks as they can create a tripping hazard.

Parking

To meet ADA requirements, parking lots must include a defined number of accessible (handicapped) parking spaces. But just the provision of these spaces is often not enough. It is also important for them to be designed in context, making sure they connect to sidewalks and buildings in a safe and logical manner. When reviewing parking lots for accessibility, take a careful look at the flow of where and how pedestrians will traverse the site, taking care to include things such as drop-curbs and well-placed sidewalks, while eliminating other hazards.

Landscaping

When planning for accessibility, the varieties of trees being planted in public areas matter. Some tree species will drop pods, pinecones, or acorns before the winter. These kinds of ephemeral changes in context can be very challenging for individuals with a physical disability because they are impermanent and hard to anticipate. Trees of a smaller stature or a low hedgerow may make it challenging to see people using a sidewalk or crossing a parking lot. When planning the landscaping for a particular site, be sure to ask about the various features of plant materials to ensure they won't create new accessibility barriers.

Stormwater and Snow Management

Being residents of the northeast, we all know the havoc that snow can wreak during the winter months. Snow can have an equally impactful effect on accessibility. Issues such as black ice, fractured sidewalks from the freeze-thaw process, and ponding on a parking lot can make navigating a community nearly impossible for any person, and especially one with a physical disability. Planning areas of snow storage that are located away from walking areas, trying to anticipate how pervious pavement will actually function, and properly locating catch basins will help to mitigate some of the inevitable consequences of living in a snow- and ice-laden climate.

Making Accessibility the New Standard

While universal accessibility is worth striving for, this mission is not without its challenges. Ms. Bianconi explained that site context is critical when planning for accessibility. Sometimes translating two-dimensional site plans to the built environment can result in unintended consequences. In other cases, site plan provisions that meet ADA standards may not be adequate within the context of the site, and may not result in the most

accessible site plan. It may be necessary to go above and beyond ADA requirements, and it is important to remember that your specific location and community has specific accessibility challenges and opportunities – planning for these needs should be done on a case-by-case basis, just as you would do for any other element of site planning.

Accessibility is for every person – every age and every ability. Communities have a vested interest in being accessible and ensuring that any challenges in the built environment are minimized to the greatest extent practicable. This standard of equity is closely aligned with Dutchess County Executive Marcus Molinaro’s [ThinkDIFFERENTLY initiative](#) and [Dutchess County’s Complete Streets Policy](#), both of which underline the value and importance of inclusion in our community.

More Information

[Shifting Your Perspective: Experience and Plan for Accessibility Challenges](#)
(PowerPoint presentation from June 2017 DCPF Short Course)

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Info:

- ADA Accessibility Guidelines ([ADAAG](#))
- Public Rights-of-Way Accessibility Guidelines ([PROWAG](#))

NYS DOT Highway Design Manual: [Chapter 18 – Pedestrian Facility Design](#)

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This newsletter was developed by the Dutchess County Department of Planning and Development, in conjunction with the Dutchess County Planning Federation.

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