

INTRODUCTION

This report documents “Let’s Talk: A Facilitated Discussion on Making Your Community More Accessible” which was held in Smithers, BC in October 2007 in conjunction with SPARC BC’s annual Board Meeting. This dialogue attracted 45 participants from Smithers, Hazelton, Houston and other communities of the Bulkley Valley. The event’s attendees included civic politicians, urban planners, health care providers, representatives from the school district and community college, recreation service providers, and several persons from the Aboriginal community.

At the accessibility dialogue, participants were given an opportunity to convene with other community members from their region and discuss the issue of accessibility. Specifically they were asked to present their own thoughts on accessibility in their community and listen to the views of fellow community members.

This report provides background information on the accessibility dialogue and its objective, an outline of SPARC BC’s history in relation to accessibility dialogues, a description of the dialogue methodology, a summary of the event’s discussion and some recommendations generated at the dialogue.

We hope that this dialogue will provoke an ongoing discussion on accessibility in the Bulkley Valley and hopefully other BC rural communities and encourage community members from a variety of sectors to work together to identify barriers to accessibility and explore options for removing those barriers in the region.

BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES

SPARC BC's mission is to work with communities to build a just and healthy society, and to advance the following values: equity, social inclusion, security and adaptability. An integral part of SPARC BC's mandate is to address issues of accessibility. SPARC BC has worked to promote accessibility since 1969.

PREVIOUS DIALOGUES

In April 2005, SPARC BC held a major community dialogue in cooperation with the Simon Fraser University's Dialogue Program entitled "Beyond the Obvious: Exploring the Accessible Community." This event was attended by over 100 participants. The dialogue concentrated on barriers to full participation in community life for people with disabilities, and made recommendations for how these barriers could be addressed.

In June 2006, SPARC BC held an international dialogue on accessibility at the World Urban Forum 3 in Vancouver, which provided a unique opportunity to discuss accessibility issues at the international scale and bring together existing discourse from around the world. The objectives of the "Accessible Urban Space" dialogue were to: increase understanding of accessible urban space in different cultural and economic contexts; identify the links between best practices in accessible urban design and social inclusion; facilitate connections between ordinary citizens and organizations focusing on accessible communities; and to inspire the initiation and expansion of activities to promote community accessibility.

“LET’S TALK:” ACCESSIBILITY DIALOGUE IN SMITHERS

SPARC BC’s plan to hold their annual board meeting in Smithers in October 2007 provided an opportunity for the organization to organize its first accessibility dialogue in rural BC. The decision to hold this event in Smithers was made based on some prior connections through our Community Development Education program in the community. SPARC BC partnered with the BC Aboriginal Network on Disability Society and BC Transit to connect local community members of the region on the issue of accessibility. Invitations were sent to individuals from Smithers, Hazelton, and Houston as well as other communities from the Bulkley Valley region. We invited local representatives from government, disability related groups, the Aboriginal community, the educational community, the arts community, disaster response services, transportation providers, seniors groups, the business community, sports and recreation providers, and organizations serving children and families.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The objectives of “Let’s Talk: A Facilitated Discussion on Making Your Community More Accessibility” were:

- To increase understanding of community accessibility in the Bulkley Valley;
- To increase awareness of accessibility issues in the region;
- To draw on the firsthand experiences of participants to share knowledge and foster opportunities for connections and exchange;

- To explore community accessibility in Smithers and nearby communities on the themes of Access to Civic Engagement, Accessible Transportation, and Accessibility Issues Relating Specifically to the Local Aboriginal Communities;
- To inspire initiation and expansion of activities to promote greater community accessibility.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in the organization of “Let’s Talk” was based on a process that was developed for “Beyond the Obvious” and built upon for the “World Urban Forum 3” in Vancouver. The methodology is documented in a SPARC BC report entitled *Organizing a Community Dialogue*.

The SPARC BC project team was assisted by a local facilitator, Shelley Worthington, and several persons from the Aboriginal Friendship Centre during the organization of the event. The project advisory team consisted of Doug Donaldson from Hazelton City Council, Frazer Smith from the B.C. Aboriginal Network on Disability Society, and Steve Harvard from BC Transit.

DIALOGUE DESIGN

The “Let’s Talk” event was a dialogue-style meeting which centered on the following three components of an accessible community:

1. **TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE:** Accessibility is demonstrated through the ease with which people can move around their homes and communities, through accessible building design, signage, and transportation

2. PARTICIPATION: Accessibility increases the degree to which people can become engaged in the political process and civic and social activities of their community
3. ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY: This dialogue was an attempt to broaden SPARC BC's understanding of the accessibility issues that are specific to the Aboriginal Communities—an area of research that has been under explored; and to create an opportunity for the Aboriginal community to share their unique issues in their community.

The dialogue was opened with presentations from Frazer Smith, the president of the British Columbia Aboriginal Network on Disability Society (BCANDS), and Glenda Watson Hyatt, a SPARC BC board member.

Then the dialogue was divided into three themed discussion groups. Attendees were free to choose which group to participate in, and were encouraged to move throughout the groups if they wanted to. The three themes were: Access to Transportation, Access to Participation, and Specific Accessibility Issues Relating to the Aboriginal Community. Participants in all groups were asked:

- What has your experience been with this discussion group's specific community accessibility issue? (Transportation, Participation or Aboriginal Community)
- How could this region become and stay more accessible—what is the ideal?
- What are the barriers to the ideal and who and/or what are the key change makers for "going beyond"?

Following the group discussions there was a “dialogue weaving” review that summarized the main ideas generated during the dialogue.

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Upon registration, each participant was provided with a package of materials. Three key SPARC BC publications were included: “Everybody’s Welcome: A Social Inclusion Approach to Program Planning and Development for Recreation and Parks Services,” “Pointing the Way: A Community Activity Guide for Access Awareness Day,” and “Let’s Talk Access Resources.” A number of SPARC BC resources provided background information on SPARC BC as an organization including: “About SPARC BC,” “Accessibility,” “Access Awareness Day,” “Research and Consulting,” and “SPARC BC Dialogues.” In addition, participants were provided with a number of resources that were specific to the event including: an agenda, the session’s goals and objectives; the speakers’ bios, an explanation of the dialogue approach, and a dialogue matrix.

DIALOGUE DISCUSSION

This dialogue attracted 45 participants from Smithers, Hazelton, Houston and other communities of the Bulkley Valley. There was broad representation as attendees included persons from local government, the urban planning profession, disability related groups, transportation, seniors care providers, the community college, and the Aboriginal community.

BARRIERS TO ACCESS

Throughout the course of the discussion, participants identified many barriers to accessibility in the region. Their ideas are summarized below.

LIMITED TRANSPORTATION

The lack of accessible transportation emerged as a key issue, as it was identified by all three groups to be a major barrier to accessibility. Participants indicated that not only is there a lack of accessible transportation in the region, but there is also a lack of public transportation in general.

In communities where public transit is available, its service is limited. Participants mentioned that public transit generally only runs during regular business hours and that there are no transit options on weekday evenings and on weekends. Bus routes only serve some of the major routes in communities; thus, streets that are not served by public transit are inaccessible. The accessibility issue is exacerbated by the fact that inadequate snow and ice removal makes some bus stops inaccessible for persons with mobility impairments in winter. Participants also mentioned that some of the buses which serve seniors and persons with disabilities do not have proper lifts; as a result, seniors and persons with disabilities find them unsafe. Many of the smaller communities do not have any public transportation within their communities. Some have a bus that will run from the smaller community to a larger centre once or twice a week, while other communities are not served by public transit at all.

IMPACT OF PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION BARRIERS ON SAFETY, AND ON ACCESS TO COMMUNITY AND HEALTH SERVICES

The lack of access to transportation has large implications for safety, and access to community and health services. Since some small communities do not have public transportation connecting them to the larger services, many of their most vulnerable residents are dependent on hitchhiking to other communities and back. This puts community members at physical risk. Also some of the smaller communities rely upon larger centres for essential services such as groceries, health care appointments, education and other programs. Persons who cannot drive, or do not have access to a car, would be unable to access these services without the help of a third party.

Access to services is also a problem within communities that have community and health services. A person only has access to services through public transportation when they live on a bus route, the service is located on a bus route, and they are traveling to the service on a time and day where public transportation is provided. Another barrier to accessibility is the lack of accessible taxis for persons with disabilities. Participants pointed out that local seniors and persons with disabilities sometimes have to resort to booking a costly ambulance ride to attend routine medical appointments. The lack of accessible public transportation is also having an impact on the volume of services provided. Both the expansion of senior's programs and children's play groups are said to be contingent on the supply of transportation.

LACK OF AWARENESS AND ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS

Dialogue participants pointed out that poor attitudes constitute a barrier to accessibility, as some individuals view promoting

accessibility to be catering to a special interest group. There needs to be widespread belief in the community that persons with disabilities have a right to mobility and full participation in mainstream society. Currently, persons with disabilities are limited in their ability to be visible, participating members of society because there is no physical access in our communities.

There also needs to be increased awareness of the impact of policies and the built environment on accessibility. Problems arise when we construct new environments without considering the needs of persons with disabilities. For instance, the new hospital in Prince George is inaccessible because not enough focus was paid on accessibility during the design stage. There is also a lack of awareness about diversity in terms of the needs of persons with disabilities. There is a tendency to just consider the mobility needs of a person in a wheelchair, and it is common to overlook the needs of other types of disability groups such as persons with invisible, auditory, visual, and cognitive impairments, to list a few. Also when considering providing access to persons with disabilities it is not sufficient to just consider the needs of a single age group—seniors. It is also important to recognize that other age groups have different needs. For instance, children with disabilities need access to accessible playgrounds.

ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

The Aboriginal community has the same access issues listed above, but the challenges are more pronounced due to the remoteness of some Aboriginal communities, income security issues, and jurisdictional challenges. Because many Aboriginal communities are isolated, smaller settlements, their residents are often reliant on amenities and services located in the larger communities. Aboriginal

persons are more likely to have to leave their home community to access basic services such as grocery stores, medical appointments, dental care, and educational opportunities. This poses a challenge for persons with disabilities who cannot drive or do not have access to a car. In some cases there is no accessible public transportation between the Aboriginal community and larger centre, in other instances a bus will only run to town and back once or twice a week. In situations where a person needs to travel to town to access a service and does not have a friend or family member to drive them or access to public transportation, they are forced to hitchhike. One of the Aboriginal dialogue participants shared her personal experience of hitchhiking to be a risky experience where she has been threatened with physical exploitation. Low income also serves as an access barrier as individuals cannot afford cars, taxi fare, medical/dental fees, and recreation programs.

Aboriginal persons also face jurisdictional challenges. Aboriginal participants reported that there is a slow bureaucratic process involved in asking for funding for simple home modifications, such as installing a grab bar in the shower for stability. It is unclear which organization should be held responsible for funding such adaptations. Aboriginal persons are told to contact five different organizations. If all five are slow to respond, it can take up to a year. Conversely, off the reserve, there is only one organization to call. In this case, it is clear which organization has jurisdictional responsibility and which organization is accountable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The magnitude and number of existing barriers in rural communities coupled with limited resources, can make the goal of community accessibility appear unattainable. Nonetheless, in each discussion group, participants identified feasible and workable solutions that could have a significant impact on levels of access in the community. Their recommendations are summarized below.

LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Dialogue participants suggested that local governments and Bands have an important role to play in improving accessibility in the region. It is important for local governments and Bands to play a leadership role in identifying the local accessibility concerns and working with the community to develop a plan of action.

BUILD PARTNERSHIPS

All three discussion groups identified that there was a need for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between different stakeholders on the issue of accessibility. When community stakeholders are acting in isolation, their ability to improve accessibility is limited. However, if different groups work as a team, substantial progress can be made. Dialogue participants suggested that it would be beneficial to create a team comprised of local community leaders, organizations, Bands, and persons with disabilities to follow up on accessibility issues. This would help identify existing barriers to accessibility, and potential solutions.

This team should partner with other groups that are working towards complementary goals. Participants pointed that the Highway of Tears Committee is also working towards developing safe

transportation options between communities. In addition, environmental groups would support an improved public transportation network. Because of the key role that public transit plays in regards to accessibility, it was suggested that an accessibility team partner with BC Transit. The representative from BC Transit suggested that accessibility advocates begin to attend regional BC Transit meetings.

IDENTIFYING LOCAL NEEDS AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

Many dialogue participants indicated that they were unaware of the number, magnitude, and variety of accessibility barriers in the community that inhibited the mobility of persons with disabilities. Thus there is a need to consult with persons with disabilities and undergo research to determine what accessibility barriers exist in the community. This accessibility assessment needs to take into consideration a variety of disability types and age groups. Once the barriers are identified, this information should be disseminated to the broader community, as most persons are simply unaware of the multitude of barriers to accessibility. According to dialogue participants, a variety of community stakeholders have a role to play in regards to educating the community. It was suggested that: local governments should use Town Council newsletters to educate the general public; the Chamber of Commerce should educate the business community; and the college should educate planners and administrators and students.

BUILD ON EXISTING SERVICES

Dialogue attendees pointed out that it would be possible to have a substantial impact on levels of accessibility in the region through building on existing services and infrastructure. For instance, the

community could enhance an existing bus service by expanding the hours of operation to include evenings and weekends. Different options for enhancing existing services should be explored.

EXPLORE FUNDING OPTIONS AND ENCOURAGE VOLUNTEERISM

Dialogue participants mentioned that there is provincial and federal funding available for accessibility initiatives. For instance, the Province has invested money in “Let’s Play,” which funds the development of accessible or barrier-free play spaces throughout the province for children. Service Canada’s New Horizons for Seniors program could also be used to fund accessibility projects. In light of the fact that there is funding available for accessibility projects throughout BC and Canada, it is advantageous for stakeholders to work together to identify funding opportunities and apply for funds.

Dialogue attendees pointed out that utilizing volunteers in accessibility projects would be beneficial as it would reduce both the start up and operational costs of services. For example, one community has a public transit service that is entirely run by volunteers. Some community members may not be able to offer their time to accessibility projects; however, they may be willing to donate funds. Thus, it is important to fundraise as well as recruit volunteers.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The accessibility dialogue was well-received by dialogue participants from throughout the Bulkley Valley. Feedback forms indicate that participants found it to be a good opportunity to connect with other people and organizations focusing on accessibility (95%),

and an opportunity to learn more about barriers and best practices in community accessibility (89%). Most participants felt that they were exposed to new ideas or perspectives on accessibility (89%). The fact that only 74% participants thought that they were able to exchange ideas on accessibility is probably related to the short duration of the session, and the need for ongoing dialogue on accessibility issues in the community.

Some specific comments on the feedback forms were:

- "Thank You. We need more of these dialogues"
- "Great topics but not enough time to explore them all"
- "Only wish that the workshop could have been a bit longer than the time provided"
- "Nice to see people in the region connecting with one another"

NEXT STEPS

The dialogue discussion suggested that not only were the dialogue participants aware of a number of accessibility barriers in their communities, but they were also eager to have an opportunity to share their ideas and recommendations with the broader community. In particular, participants valued an opportunity to gather with other community leaders and connect on the issue of accessibility. There was consensus that there are substantial barriers to accessibility in the community that prevent seniors and persons with disabilities from being full participants in community life, and it will take a collaborative approach to address these issues.

It is recommended that the dialogue participants continue to discuss accessibility issues with community leaders, service providers,

and business owners, ideally through the development of a task force or committee that meets on a regular basis. People with a range of disabilities should be encouraged to participate. Tasks of the group can include:

1. Conduct an accessibility audit, with the participation of local residents with disabilities
2. Raise awareness of accessibility issues in the wider community
3. Prioritize accessibility issues and develop an implementation strategy to address the barriers to accessibility that are identified through the audit
4. Work with BC Transit Authority to address transportation issues
5. Work together to access funding for accessibility initiatives