
Toronto Lakefront Community

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Jennifer Lin, Toronto Accessibility Advisory Committee Administrator

Toronto City Hall

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Re: 2024.DI10.2 - Beach and Toronto Island Accessibility

Dear Ms. Lin,

Toronto Lakefront Community (TLC), is a volunteer advocacy group focused on the safety, cleanliness, and accessibility of Toronto's Lakefront. While our primary focus is on the eastern waterfront, our outreach extends across the entire lakeshore where relevant.

We would like to offer a few comments on the presentation by PF&R, and raise a couple of questions for consideration as the City moves forward with improving beach accessibility.

1. Interdepartmental Coordination and Access

We are encouraged that the City is prioritizing beach and water accessibility. However, as mentioned in the presentation, ensuring true accessibility goes beyond beach design—it requires accessible transportation and pathways to and from the beach. For example, at Woodbine Beach, although there is a TTC bus stop, individuals with mobility challenges face barriers like traffic islands without tactile guidance, a parking lot in need of repair, and inaccessible pathways. Moreover, accessible parking is limited, with no on-street parking available between Woodbine and Kew-Balmy Beach, which makes it challenging for people with disabilities to access popular areas like the Leuty Lifeguard Station or the Dog Off Leash Area.

At present, the City does not provide Wheel-Trans service to the Islands, and there is a lack of continuous, uninterrupted access from parking areas to the water's edge, as recommended in the TADG guidelines. Addressing these barriers requires coordination across multiple departments, not just the Parks Department. We would like to ask: who will lead these cross-departmental discussions to ensure we create truly accessible beach experiences?

2. Public Engagement and Stakeholder Input

While the City is committed to universal accessibility, it's essential to engage directly with the disability community to ensure the solutions meet real needs. TLC recently hosted a fundraiser in support of the Rick Hansen Foundation, during which we observed accessibility features at five Blue Flag Beaches. The feedback from individuals with disabilities was invaluable. Notably, none of these beaches currently offer adequate access to the water, and the beach mats at Woodbine Beach were criticized for their lack of effectiveness.

Toronto currently uses hard plastic HDPE mats at our beaches, which, while initially useful, have significant limitations. These mats tend to warp and create uneven surfaces, making them a tripping hazard, and create challenges, particularly for individuals using canes or wheelchairs. In contrast, other municipalities—both within Canada and internationally—use purpose-built, porous, recycled plastic mats. These mats are more durable, provide a smoother surface, and are designed to accommodate individuals with low vision and mobility challenges.

We suggest that the City conduct focus groups with the disability community to test and compare different types of mats and other accessibility solutions before making decisions about procurement. This approach will ensure that the City invests in the most effective, user-centered solutions. Could PFR provide transparency on the procurement process for the 2025 beach mats? Were stakeholders from the disability community consulted?

3. Funding and Broader Strategic Considerations

We understand that the City's resources are not unlimited, but improving accessibility at Toronto's beaches is a priority that requires investment. While the City can take significant steps with affordable solutions, we urge the City to seek funding from provincial and federal governments to support these initiatives, particularly given the requirements of the AODA and ACA.

The ongoing review of the Parkland Strategy provides an ideal opportunity to integrate beach accessibility improvements. The strategy focuses on removing barriers across parks, but beaches—by their nature—require specialized consideration. We suggest that the City either update the Parkland Strategy to include a specific subsection on Beach Management or consider developing a separate Beaches Strategy. This would ensure that beach accessibility is considered in a holistic, coordinated manner, aligned with other parkland planning efforts.

We also recommend that the City prioritize accessibility improvements in phases, starting with high-impact initiatives, such as continuous access from parking areas to the water's edge and more accessible transportation options, including expanded Wheel-Trans service.

In Conclusion

We believe that improving beach accessibility is both an urgent need and an opportunity to demonstrate leadership in inclusive urban planning. The impending 2025 AODA standards and the federal goal of a barrier-free Canada by 2040 emphasize the importance of timely action.

To summarize, we ask for:

1. Transparency on the procurement process for beach mats in 2025—who was consulted, and what types of mats are being considered?
2. The development of a separate Beaches Strategy that complements the Parkland Strategy and prioritizes continuous access to the water's edge.
3. Focused community engagement, including consultations with the disability community, to ensure that solutions are effective and meet real needs.

According to the Rick Hansen Foundation, “People with disabilities still face social and physical barriers that stop them from being a part of their communities”. We appreciate the City's efforts thus far and the momentum building around beach accessibility. Thank you to the staff for their ongoing work, and to TAAC for raising this critical issue. Let us work together to create a truly accessible waterfront for all Torontonians.

Sincerely,

Jane Anderson, Co-founder Toronto Lakefront Community
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