



COUNCIL – AGENDA REPORT

Meeting Date: 19 November 2024
Subject: Accessibility Audit Report
Directorate: Strategic Growth and Investment

Issue:

Council is being provided with information regarding the purpose and scope of accessibility audits.

Policy / Council Direction:

At the Council meeting on June 18, 2024, Council directed Administration to:

1. Return to Council with an understanding of what an 'accessibility audit' is and what it might achieve toward the Council focus area for a Caring Community.
2. Describe for Council the current best practices for accessibility audits and the options for the depth of review of public and private facilities.
3. Research private sector and public sector grants available to fund an accessibility audit and/or implementation work from such audits.
4. Provide Council with an estimated range of the time and the resources required for the type(s) of accessibility audits, and the ability to offset them with grants for Council to consider before December 1, 2024.

Background:

Accessibility Audit Overview

Conducting Accessibility Audits in municipal facilities is essential for fostering a "caring community" as defined by the Council. These audits help identify and eliminate barriers that prevent residents, particularly those experiencing social vulnerability, from fully participating in community life. By ensuring that public spaces are accessible to all, the municipality promotes a sense of belonging and inclusivity. This aligns with the Council's focus on enhancing social well-being, supporting residents to access local resources, and providing equitable opportunities for all. Additionally, it reflects a commitment to equity,

diversity, and inclusion, ensuring that every resident can live with dignity, value, and purpose. Embracing these principles strengthens the social fabric of the community.

Best practice accessibility audits assess buildings and spaces using the [Seven Principles of Universal Design](#) to evaluate their inclusivity. The *Accessible Canada Act* defines disabilities as impairments or functional limitations that, when combined with barriers, prevent full and equal participation in society. Disabilities include physical/mobility, sensory, intellectual/developmental, cognitive, learning, communication and mental health challenges. A comprehensive accessibility audit addresses all disabilities and barriers to promote inclusivity.

Barriers to Accessibility

The *Accessible Canada Act* identifies barriers across seven key areas:

1. Employment
2. Built environment (physical spaces)
3. Communication
4. Information and communication technologies (e.g., websites)
5. Procurement
6. Programs and services
7. Transportation

Cost and Scope of Accessibility Audits

Accessibility audits always encompass all 7 of the Barriers to Accessibilities to ensure inclusivity. That said, the cost of a consultant led audit for a single building or area is relatively low. The audits performed at Genesis Place and the Ron Ebbesen Arena cost \$5,300 and \$10,000 respectively. This expense includes an onsite visit to view the property and then the creation of the deficiency report and recommendations. The recommendation list of improvement is where most of the expense is found. As a result, audits can be time-consuming and costly for municipalities to implement due to the diversity of infrastructure, services, technology, and transportation modes that may require improvement. As well, If an audit on a facility is completed but there are delays in implementing audit recommendations, that delay could result in increased costs and raises public expectations for timely improvements; deferrals may negatively impact public perception.

Estimating the costs of implementing design recommendations from an audit can be challenging. For example, the [Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification™ \(RHFAC\) Retrofits and Upgrades Cost Study \(January 2024\)](#) found that achieving RHFAC™ Gold certification can be estimated at 0.5% of an office tower's replacement cost, or approximately \$1.50 per square foot for office buildings (ranging up to \$9.00 per square foot for other building types). For comparison, the City engaged a consultant to conduct an RHFAC Assessment of the Ron Ebbesen Arena in August 2023, pegging the recommended accessibility improvements at a minimum cost of \$500,000. This comes in about \$7.38 per square foot, reflecting the degree of magnitude of change for public

buildings. The improvements to the Ron Ebbesen Arena are expected to be phased in over ten years.

Private Commercial Buildings

Municipalities cannot mandate private building owners to enhance accessibility beyond the minimum standards set by building codes during new construction. However, new safety codes introduced in 2023 have increased accessibility requirements, advancing the goals of the *Accessible Canada Act*. For existing buildings, municipalities can encourage private businesses to improve accessibility by offering grant funding and promoting equity and inclusion through marketing campaigns.

Measuring Success

Given the sensitive nature of accessibility, it is crucial for the municipality to adopt a recognized and credible system for measuring success. Administration's research identified the Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification™ (RHFAC) as a holistic, practical and people-focused framework that helps building owners and operators assess meaningful access, create improvement roadmaps, and celebrate commitments to accessibility through various certification levels for both existing and future buildings.

Grant Funding Opportunities

In October 2024, City Administration submitted a grant application to the Green and Inclusive Community Building fund. This grant is offered through Infrastructure Canada and if successful, would be used to support the lifecycle upgrades scheduled to begin at Ron Ebbesen Arena in 2025. Although the grant outcomes are closely tied to GHG emission reductions, accessibility improvements are critical to eligibility and grant success. The planned accessibility improvements at Ron Ebbesen Arena will significantly reduce or eliminate many of the accessibility barriers that exist in the facility today. Automatic doors, improved washroom access and accessible bleacher seating are three of the most notable upgrades to improve inclusivity.

Administration will continue to monitor for funding opportunities for accessibility in public and private spaces. Information will be shared as soon as it becomes available to ensure the City or eligible community members/business owners can apply for funding. In recent years accessibility has been a key theme of several funding streams and future additional intakes in these programs may reopen if initial funding has not been allocated.

Notable accessibility funding programs in 2022:

- Accessible Canada Contributions funding
- Enabling Accessibility Fund
- Social Development Partnerships Program – Disability
- Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities

Other Municipal accessibility initiatives

Many municipalities have conducted independent accessibility audits, with varying costs and degrees of success in implementing changes. Administration has also observed that numerous municipalities have overarching accessibility policies.

For instance, the City of Edmonton has an Accessibility for People with Disabilities Policy, which “commits to accessibility and continuous improvement across all City services and programs to ensure all Edmontonians have equitable access and opportunities to participate in their city.” Following this, they developed and implemented a three-year Corporate Accessibility Plan.

Similarly, the City of Calgary has established Access Design Standards (ADS), which are mandatory for the design and construction of all new and renovated municipal infrastructure on City-owned land, including public spaces operated by the City of Calgary.

City of Airdrie Initiatives

The City of Airdrie has made notable progress in enhancing accessibility within its projects and continues to integrate accessibility considerations into future developments and capital projects. During every retrofit project at an existing facility, an audit is done for incremental completion of accessibility gaps.

This proactive approach not only promotes inclusivity but also helps manage costs over time. The City currently has multiple projects, including plans for an accessible park and the Draft Active Transportation Master Plan has accessibility recommendations to improve many crosswalks and pathways for greater inclusivity.

To reduce technological barriers to online municipal services, the redevelopment of the City’s website and myAirdrie portal include a wide range of accessibility enhancements for a variety of potential user experiences. Design and built functionality include optimized color contrast, font sizing, descriptive text, button sizing and user generated actions (no popups) for users with visual impairments and those who may be using supportive devices such as a screen reader. Extensive efforts were made to achieve accessibility levels in alignment with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) wherever possible.

Council Committee Routed Through:

Administration is returning directly to Council in response to the direction from the Notice of Motion.

Administration Recommendation:

Administration seeks direction from Council on the following options:

Option 1: Maintain Current Efforts

- Continue upgrades at Ron Ebbesen Arena and Genesis Place, while seeking opportunities to enhance accessibility in every new infrastructure project.
- Investigate an incentive program to enhance accessibility in private buildings.

Option 2: Create an Accessibility Policy and implementation Plan

- Direct administration to develop a comprehensive Accessibility Policy. Following the establishment of this policy, direct administration to create and implement a detailed Accessibility Plan.

Option 3: Comprehensive Accessibility Facilities Audit

- Conduct a thorough audit of all existing facilities to identify requirements for accessibility certification.
- Implementation costs are estimated at \$9 per square foot, with total costs ranging from \$3 to \$6 million.

Option 4: Integrated Accessibility Initiative

- Develop a large-scale Accessibility campaign capital project encompassing all past, present, and future accessibility upgrades, including auditing and implementing improvements in current municipal buildings.
- Establish a fund for private businesses to apply for grants to enhance accessibility in their buildings.
- Estimated costs range from \$6 to \$8 million.

Option 5: A Hybrid approach

- Council chooses buildings that they would like to see an accessibility audit completed.
- Provide an incentives program for private business owners to tap into funding for their own accessibility audits.
- Establish a budget based on the \$9 per square foot for implementation costs for municipal buildings and/or grants of equal value for the degree of desired change in private buildings.

Alternatives/Implications:

Administration seeks direction from Council on the presented options.

Budget Implications:

Previous Accessibility Audits of municipal facilities have ranged between \$5,300 and \$10,000. Implementation costs vary based on the audit recommendations, estimated at \$7.38 per square foot for the Ron Ebbesen Arena.

To align with the Council's objectives under the Caring Community focus area, initiating a comprehensive accessibility audit program will require considerable time, resources, and financial investment. The recent audit of Ron Ebbesen Arena highlights the financial and scheduling demands associated with upgrading individual buildings for accessibility.

Expanding similar audits to all City-owned facilities may shift attention and resources from other critical infrastructure projects. While reallocating funds to support accessibility efforts could demonstrate commitment to all Council priorities, the tangible impact of such an approach remains uncertain and warrants further evaluation. Given the limited availability of grant funding, financial responsibility for extensive audits would likely fall on the City.

Although private building owners are not obligated to surpass existing accessibility standards, the City can encourage enhancements through initiatives like the proposed accessibility incentive in the upcoming Downtown Incentives Program. With the program set to continue in 2025, Council has the chance to emphasize accessibility within downtown improvements.

Communications and Engagement:

N/A

Recommendation:

That Council provides Administration with direction to the presented options.

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Staff Presenter:	Mike Korman
External Presenter:	N/A
Department:	Advocacy and Investment
Reviewed by:	Stephen Utz, Director of Strategic Growth and Investment
Attachments:	#1: 7 Principles of Universal Design
	#2: Rick Hansen Retrofits and Upgrades Cost Study