

Watertown Commission on Disability

October 23, 2024

In attendance: Kim Charlson, Naomi Ridge, Cindy Wentz, Lisa Feltner, John Hawes, Patrick George, Stefanie Farrell (CART)

Absent: Megan O'Halloran, Carol Menton

Guests: Erika Oliver Jerram, Paul Johnson (Building Commissioner and ISD Manager for City)

Discussion with Paul Johnson

Kim: How does the process work for you when checking out an office building?

Paul: Permit and plans come in, and we start review. Start with bathrooms, entrances. Check out tables or other things that are accessible. Parking onsite that is accessible. Different facets on placement and availability. Part of my job is educating people: a lot about doors. Sometimes I have to repeat education. Everything is case by case basis. Existing buildings are a lot different than new buildings.

Naomi: Happy to hear about doors. I cannot get into many buildings with my wheelchair. Can we do more than code since that does not get me into the building?

Paul: Advocate at Planning Board or Zoning Board meetings. Ask the developers. They may be more inclined to do it coming from the CoD. I can't make them do it. Also anyone can propose a code change to the [BBRS](#). [521CMR](#) is due for another addition. It could be another 5-10 years before it happens. If multiple boards can go to BBRS there may be more success.

Cindy: What is BBRS?

Paul: Board of Building and Regulation Standards. It is a state entity. I can't enforce ADA regulations. I can only enforce state of Massachusetts regulations.

John: I was on the Planning Board for many, many years. In the last 15 years of working, I ran the ADA program at MIT as an architect. Our best plan would be to work with the [AAB](#) or [MAB](#). They would be likely to move along on the process as they are people who have seen the virtue of universal design. Doors has been a big concern for us. The use of power doors we'd like to communicate with access boards. How do we have the city take a position on power doors? We and the city can't change the board. We tell this to developers of all scales this is important. But we would emphasize this for the bigger developers with more money. We have been impressed with Alexandria. We want to know how and what we can do legally.

Paul: When it gets to me, it's ready to go. This process needs to happen at the beginning with the planners/developers.

John: I review plans, but there's no detail. Parking at Arsenal Yards has been an issue with garages and hidden accessible spots.

Paul: I'm not the zoning officer, so I don't review plans and parking.

John: It would be great if we can spot things before they are built.

Paul: If drawings don't have measurements, I send them back.

John: Riverworks, there was a complaint. I wrote it up. Are you the person who gets those?

Paul: I am involved if the project has a building permit. I can go back if it's done but recent. But for older buildings, I'd go to the AAB. They are pretty responsive. When parking lots serve multiple buildings, spots need to be evenly distributed near the sidewalk, rather than near the accessible entrance. But as long as it is on an accessible route.

Lisa: Question about when you're involved with regard to certificate of occupancy. What about parks/landscape areas?

Paul: I'm not involved in open spaces and parks. If they pull a building permit for something there, then I get involved. Parks and sidewalks fall under DPW. I am the last one to sign certificate of occupancy.

Discussions with Erika Oliver Jerram

Erika Oliver Jerram, Director of Community Design, under Steve Magoon. This is not a position many communities have. I'm a generalist planner: I don't get into the weeds of doors handles etc. I work with an open space planner (Michelle Moon) and an economic development planner (Erin Rathe) and Liz Helfer (Arts&Culture planner). Planning and implementation. I'd love for you to tell us if there is something wrong. We also want to get things early in the process. Also if there are places that are doing it right, let me know that too!

Cindy: Watertown is doing a lot of modifications to parks. I saw there's a meeting for the second phase of Victory Field. Is accessibility automatically being brought in?

Erika: Yes. There may be things that we miss. Go to the meetings and make sure we're doing it right! Ask if you see things we should think about.

Kim: We don't always know what you are working on, but I expect we would have an opinion. If you have projects on the drawing board, let Patrick know so we can put you on the agenda. You can make a difference for people who don't always get thought about.

Erika: I can do that!

Lisa: There was a lot of design done for Victory Field many years ago, but there was no input from CoD. There may be questions about lighting and fence openings near the sidewalk.

Erika: There is a benefit of you coming to community meetings so not only we hear, but the whole community hears.

Kim: It would be great for Paralympic/disability teams to have a place to play with appropriate facilities for participants and observers.

Lisa: There may be a question about access to storage [at Victory Field].

Erika: Have you had some input into parks under construction right now?

Kim: We gave a lot of feedback to the Open Space Plan. We went through all the parks and helping to prioritize with the recreation department.

John: We had quite a bit of input into the How Park. It didn't come to us through any real city process.

Erika: How do we incorporate these specifics into design guidelines?

John: It seems to be a different process for parks vs buildings vs public vs private. We were not formally involved in the building of the schools, but we were invited as a courtesy.

Kim: I like the ideas of guidelines/best practices. That's where we can add automatic doors! This could be a standard question. What about the Parker?

Lisa: there's an entrance in the back, but it is not fully ADA compliant.

Rachel: I went to the park event at the library a few weeks ago and I was impressed.

Erika: It's a balance of needs to accommodate as many people as possible.

Patrick: Michelle and I have communicated about Bemis/How/Sullivan parks recently.

Chair's Report

Mt Auburn Street: Milling is beginning. We don't know how this will impact Irving/Summer with the curb cuts too far from the walk signal. Patrick will check it out.

Faire on the Square recap: More people came than expected given the weather!

Lisa: A map in advance would be helpful as well as keeping us away from potholes. Thank you for setting up the tent, Patrick. Most comments were about curb cuts, pot holes, walk signals. And Katherine Clark came by.

Rachel: Commanders Mansion is hostile toward making an advance map.

Kim: It would be helpful if people could have a list or map, especially low vision people. Tammy had also talked about providing a guide that someone could call and request in advance. Knowing the map, they could plan for the sighted guide.

Patrick: I'll communicate this in advance with Tammy.

Kim: It was a difficult year because of the weather, but next year can be better.

Snow removal update:

Cindy: I didn't see anything about the new ordinance for resident snow removal. Called Tyler Cote and things are still being worked out. I haven't seen anything about applying for exemptions.

Kim: there was an advertisement from the recreation department, but they may be behind schedule. We should make sure they are advertising people with disabilities as well as seniors. This year fines will not be levied. This will be the year to inform and educate. It will go into effect with fines 25-26.

Lisa: There's been very little publicity or education.

Patrick will check in with recreation and council on aging as far as sign up. This may fall under the new Human Services department.

BBS: Postpone to another time. We should read language that Lisa sent us from Methuen. Patrick attended to training by AAB. Any variance to a uniform code makes it no longer uniform. Discussion about what our options are.

ADA Self-Assessment funding: they are in the process of making decisions. Before the winter.

Belmont St intersection: they will get back to us.

Francis Food Mart: Is this something Paul does? Not sure.

Kim: It's not a building problem. It's the occupants have created a problem.

John: Riverworks is a bigger problem.

Kim: Let's send the details to Paul via Patrick.

Request for funding for CART/ASL at Unity Breakfast.

Kim: we can finalize our support next month.

Laurie Garden joins! Laurie had talked with Carol Menton about this last year, along with Dan Hogan (WCA-TV). But we are going to be in person this year! In the Hellenic Center. CART has an incredible impact on our English language learners. You can see and hear at the same time! It's so much easier.

Cindy: Can you add some language in your advertising telling people who need reasonable accommodations to request them by a certain date? Cindy will send language to John to give to Laurie.

Kim: We will take an official vote next month. Carol or Patrick can help you schedule CART/ASL.

New: Event December 10th evening at the library World in Watertown welcomes the Human Rights Commission. They would like to have CART/ASL. Patrick, let Nicole Gardner to go ahead and schedule. We will vote officially next month.

November 2nd awareness event:

Cindy: all set! We got 2 ASL interpreters. Darien Gambrell from Deaf Inc got us the interpreters. Six or seven organizations will have tables. Can someone else come to help people get seated? Naomi will attend so can help. We would like to draw people in who do not know a lot about disability.

Rachel will be there to table. Patrick will connect to get everything ready.

Library should also have a disability-related books on display.

Mass Area Planning Council: no one was able to make it.

John: we haven't been able to connect.

HHS Meeting was this past Monday. Report is being refined. Right now it is just a draft.

Lisa: Manager is now including a language service in the budget, including ASL/CART. Is it feasible to have this on demand? Also reports assume limited language (aka not English). DEI/ADA coordinator may become full time position.

Kim: This is a bigger issue for our next meeting.

Patrick: We'd love to have someone beta test it who uses ASL. I could reach out to Deaf Inc.

Cindy: We have video relay in Massachusetts. Why wouldn't you use that instead of ASL?

Kim: It may not be ASL. We should wait for Carol for this conversation.

Lisa: Will the Commission budget be asked for funding for this?

Minutes: Rachel will do full time.

Minutes for September: John moved to accept. Cindy seconds. Accepted 6-0.

Budget: our account has \$60,093.40 as of today. We will have CART and ASL costs coming up for these meetings and November 2. We are nearing time for donations at end of year.

Kim: WE can follow up with other things next month.

Patrick: worked with Cindy on language about reasonable accommodations. It is being run through city attorney, then can be added to website/agendas, and it will be baked in.

Lisa: can we suggest shorter timeframe than 14 days?

Patrick: this is pretty common. We may need 14 days for some services.

Cindy: finding a meeting agenda can be hard. Will the language be on that agenda or will it be on the general notices?

Patrick: Happy to talk about ideas for where to add it.

Kim: This is a first step. Then we can encourage departments to add it on flyers, etc.

Patrick: Budget expectations with city manager: these accommodations need to be part of the city budget. More discussions to be had.

Plans

Lisa: *9 Boyd Street*. Day care center building (goes with medical center). State may have delayed requiring elevator.

John: Watertown Boys and Girls and First Path have reached an agreement to stay longer. They wanted an exemption for 1 inch on the elevator doors, but were denied. But it's going through whatever course it means.

Lisa: They're planning to move early November.

Next Meeting: November 20th at 7 pm.