



# BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

Exploring the Accessible Community

## DIALOGUE REPORT

A Dialogue on Community Accessibility Presented by SPARC BC  
in cooperation with Simon Fraser University, Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue

April 22, 2005



The Social Planning and Research  
Council of British Columbia  
[www.sparc.bc.ca](http://www.sparc.bc.ca)



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BEYOND THE OBVIOUS: Exploring the Accessible Community

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# Introduction

**T**his report documents the SPARC BC project which featured the holding of the “Beyond the Obvious: Exploring the Accessible Community” dialogue on April 22, 2005 in cooperation with Simon Fraser University’s Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue. The dialogue was attended by over 100 participants.

The Background section of the report begins with the vision of SPARC BC. This is followed by an exploratory description of community accessibility that is designed to create an expanded understanding of the importance of planning to meet the needs of everyone in society. Next there is an introduction to the dialogue process. The section concludes with the purpose and objectives of the Beyond The Obvious project.

The Methodology section first introduces the process of organizing a community dialogue. It then describes the design of the Beyond The Obvious Dialogue. It also describes the Supported Participation Program that was an additional feature of this Dialogue.

The Dialogue Discussion section provides a summary of the presentations that were made and the findings that were gathered during the breakout sessions. The Dialogue Recommendations section presents a number of recommendations made by participants for improving community accessibility and inclusion that were generated during the Beyond The Obvious Dialogue.

The Conclusion section consists of a brief evaluation of the “Beyond the Obvious: Exploring the Accessible Community” dialogue.

It is the hope of SPARC BC that the report of this project will encourage communities and service providers to embrace the idea of exploring accessibility within their own community so as to promote and improve community accessibility and inclusiveness.

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## Background & Objectives

**S**PARC BC, the Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia, is a non-partisan, independent charitable organization whose members and Board of Directors are drawn from across the province. Since 1966, SPARC BC has worked with communities in building a just and healthy society for all.

SPARC BC's vision includes the following fundamental values:

- » **EQUITY:** The recognition that some individuals or groups require more or less than others to flourish, and that some individuals are capable of contributing more than others to address social deficiencies and promote fair distribution of services and resources.
- » **SOCIAL INCLUSION:** The recognition that both the right and the opportunity to participate in all aspects of human life enable individuals and communities to celebrate their diversity, and recognize their responsibilities.
- » **SECURITY:** The recognition that individuals and communities flourish when they have confidence in their communities as safe, supportive, and stable environments.
- » **ADAPTABILITY:** The recognition that sustainability requires resilience for both individuals and communities, and the ability to respond creatively to change.

SPARC BC believes in the importance of creating and improving conditions for social and economic inclusion of people with disabilities in BC. We work to ensure that the needs of all of the citizens are acknowledged and met, through delivery of a variety of effective accessibility-related, community supports, public education projects, and research materials.

## WHY EXPLORE THE ACCESSIBLE COMMUNITY AND WHY NOW?

An accessible community benefits us all and works to ensure that everyone in society, including people with disabilities, live independent, comfortable, and fulfilling lives. Inclusive communities are able to meet the needs of their members and to foster equity in opportunities, and active community participation.

A significant percentage of the British Columbia's population has a disability. Approximately 11% of British Columbians have some form of mobility impairment, 3% have visual impairments, and 5% have hearing impairments. Of the entire population with disabilities approximately two thirds are over the age of 65 (Urban Futures, 2005).

With the senior population in British Columbia increasing, as baby boomers age, the number of people with disabilities in British Columbia will continue to rise. This aging population will require communities to become increasingly accessible, and so it will become increasingly important for communities to acknowledge the need for improvements in accessibility.

Furthermore, creating inclusive communities benefits not only people with disabilities. For example, pregnant women and new parents can benefit from curbs that have been cut, ramps, and accessible trolley busses as well as people with disabilities. Anyone carrying a heavy load or rolling luggage can use an electronic door opener. The majority of people will need accessibly designed programs and infrastructure at some point in their lives.

Also there is the need to recognize that accessibility entails more than the obvious issues commonly associated with disability—wheelchair ramps, Braille, and elevators, for example. Access to adequate resources and services for people with disabilities must be recognized as being an essential component of our health care and service provision systems. Moreover in order to provide a truly accessible society, we must examine the persistent and underlying discrimination that many socially excluded people face, and address the value of a strong equal opportunities policy.

Without a clear definition of disability in Canada, it is often left to individuals to decide how to address access issues, and for whom. Consequently, much is often left out and services are fragmented, leading to tension between service providers and the people who use them, as well as amongst people with disabilities themselves. Thus, we must all strive towards the goal of an inclusive community where all members can have equal access to employment, a good standard of living, recreation, transportation, and most importantly, the opportunity to participate in every aspect of public life. People with disabilities provide society with a unique set of skills, enabling it to be diverse and complete. Without diversity, society would not be whole.

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*“Accessibility is not just a disability issue. Because in many ways it’s about an issue for seniors, for the diverse community, people of colour, people of different sexual orientation, they experience exclusion in a way that’s just as hurtful as some of us with more obvious disabilities.”*

## WHY A DIALOGUE PROCESS AND WHY NOW?

A public dialogue process attempts to provide communities with a new way to promote public engagement and participation processes where all citizens are able to influence decision mak-

ing and have a real impact on community development. The process instills in communities a sense of cooperation and provides the opportunity to participate in civic activities and a chance to influence community planning.

Citizens are increasingly demanding that public policy and community planning decisions be made in an open forum where processes are transparent and open to public analysis. They are becoming more engaged in the processes that determine how their communities function and

the local opportunities that will be created. Local governments and communities must now find ways to harness and respond to this interest.

There are a number of tools that can be used to promote citizen engagement including deliberative polling, study circles, conferences, and forums. The public dialogue process, however, moves beyond these traditional consultation processes and is an ideal way to truly engage communities and their citizens. In dialogue, citizens are encouraged to determine underlying values, think about all facets of an

issue, and work towards creating a common group.

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*“The dialogue process gives us the opportunity to share in a thoughtful way the things that we value and to really listen carefully to the things that others value.”*

## PROJECT PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

It was with the above background that SPARC BC decided to hold a public dialogue on accessibility. The intent of the dialogue was to promote, encourage and expand the discussion on accessible communities, and to increase awareness of accessibility issues among a diverse group of participants. By bringing together those who plan for accessible communities, and those who benefit from accessible communities, it was felt that knowledge and experience would be shared and a new level of understanding created. Furthermore it was hoped that new relationships would be built focusing on accessibility.

The overall purpose of the Beyond The Obvious project was to take participants beyond the traditional definition of community accessibility and lead them to the creation of a more holistic and inclusive view of what accessibility means. The integration of people from the disability community, representatives from private companies, public and non-profit service providers, academic institutions, and city urban and social planners, sought to ensure that all interests would be acknowledged in the discussion and that future progress would move the entire group forward, leaving no one behind.

The objectives of the Beyond The Obvious project were:

- » To expand on the understanding and awareness of accessibility issues beyond physical barriers
- » To draw on the first-hand experiences of participants to share knowledge and foster opportunities for connection and exchange
- » To inspire the initiation and expansion of activities to promote accessibility
- » To explore community accessibility on the themes of Living, Working, Moving Around, Participation, and Playing.

# Methodology

The design of a methodology for organizing a community dialogue was a component of the Beyond The Obvious project. It was determined that the key organizational entities in a community dialogue are the host agency, in this case SPARC BC, an advisory committee that oversees the structural design of the dialogue, diverse participants including lived experience speakers, an overall moderator/facilitator, small group facilitators and note takers, and lastly dialogue weavers. The methodology including roles and activities is documented in the companion report *Organizing a Community Dialogue*.

## DIALOGUE DESIGN

Within the topic area of Exploring the Accessible Community, the Beyond The Obvious dialogue looked at the concept of community accessibility through the lens of five themes:

- 1 LIVING:** housing, support services, personal and health care
- 2 WORKING:** education, entrepreneurship, workplace, employment
- 3 MOVING AROUND:** accessible building design, transportation, technology, signage
- 4 PARTICIPATION:** public service, leadership and advocacy, community involvement
- 5 PLAYING:** recreation, arts and culture, travel

The dialogue began with a series of panel presentations on the definition and meaning of community accessibility from the perspective of community members from a range of disability



groups. In particular, eight young adults with developmental disabilities, who had participated in the 3D Supported Participatory Training Program (refer below), gave a special presentation on what the concept of accessibility meant to them.

Following the presentations, dialogue participants were divided into small groups, each of which represented one of the five themes on community accessibility. During the group discussions, facilitators guided each group through a series of questions in an effort to formulate a cohesive interactive dialogue discussion. Participants were encouraged to:

- » Look at how they experience or define accessibility through their particular perspectives within the theme of that particular group
- » Put forth ideas for improvements in this area
- » Identify the current barriers to the ideal
- » To put forth suggestions for the future of their community.

Throughout the dialogue process, participants were encouraged to share their ideas, opinions and experiences with one another. They were also actively involved in presenting the information generated from the small group discussions to the larger group towards the end of the dialogue.

The Agenda package for the Beyond the Obvious dialogue is attached as Appendix 1.

## SUPPORTED PARTICIPATION PROGRAM

In order to ensure the full inclusion of youth with developmental disabilities in the Beyond The Obvious dialogue, a supported participatory training program was a component of the project. Created by SPARC BC in partnership with the BC Association for Community Living, the project was known as the 3D Pilot Project. It resulted in eight young adults with development disabilities meaningfully contributing to the discussions on community accessibility.

The 3D Pilot Project began with the hiring of an educational consultant to assist in creating a vision for the process. The consultant was responsible for developing an appropriate program and worked with 3D group members to complete a series of 5 training sessions to prepare them to engage fully in the Beyond The Obvious dialogue.

An advisory group, comprised of individuals with a range of pertinent professional and personal expertise, was created to ensure that the process would be guided and implemented by a well-rounded knowledgeable group. Advisory group members worked with the educational consultant to generate the resources that were necessary to participate in the dialogue process and were successful in adapting the workshop content and dialogue themes to reflect the needs of the 3D Group.

The advisory group prepared an outline of the project. Service agencies within the community were then contacted to seek their assistance in recruiting the appropriate candidates to participate in the supported participatory training program and the dialogue.

A dress rehearsal was organized prior to the dialogue to walk 3D group members through the dialogue process and to ensure that they were comfortable and familiar with the venue and the day's agenda. Guests of the 3D group members were invited to attend, acting as an audience, to simulate a real dialogue atmosphere. Group members were given the opportunity to

practice their presentations, within the allotted time frame that they would be making during the formal dialogue process the next day.

The 3D group did a special presentation to launch the dialogue, where they presented their views of accessibility and shared their experiences of living with developmental disabilities through each of the lenses of the dialogue. Then during the dialogue each of the 3D group members participated in one of the five theme break out groups. Each 3D member was paired with an Advisory Group member or another break out group member during the discussion. Prior to the dialogue, facilitators of the break out groups completed a training program to ensure that they were able to fully assist the inclusion of the 3D group members in their small group's discussion process.

The 3D Pilot Project resulted in the development of a program that can be used to assist other groups and communities in developing and in completing similar programs. The complete program, which includes a curriculum, lesson plans, a participant manual and community guide, informs communities about how to set up an appropriate system that prepares and empowers people with developmental disabilities to participate in a dialogue discussion in their own community. The entire 3D Project is available through SPARC BC to communities who wish to enhance the participation of youth with developmental disabilities in community dialogues and decision making processes.

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*"We must believe in each of our gifts, that each of us is a gift is key. When we believe it, the rest of the world will too."*

## Components of an Accessible Community

The “Beyond the Obvious: Exploring the Accessible Community” dialogue enabled the over 100 participants from a range of sectors, service agencies, and backgrounds to share their understandings of accessibility, to put forth ideas for improvements, and to identify the current barriers to the ideal. The following is a summary of their perspectives, by the five components of an Accessibly Community.

### ACCESSIBLE LIVING

The theme of living was concerned with the resources and services available in communities to provide an adequate range of housing options and support services. This theme also addressed the extent to which community members could access personal and health supports and services. Accessibility in community living goes beyond the provision of basic services and sustaining life. Accessibility ensures that people with disabilities have the resources, tools, and choice to access local essential services that allow them to live independently. Social Development Canada (1999) reported that 39% of people with disabilities in Canada, who need some form of assistance with everyday activities, are unable to acquire such services.

Dialogue participants were asked to describe what a good accessible living environment would look like, the services that would be available, and what future living ideals would include. They responded that living well meant that all people would have the option to live in a location where they felt free, safe and comfortable, where they had the ability to live independently with no physical barriers, and where access to reliable safe living assistance was available. Achieving and maintaining the balance between independence and the availability of proper

assistance was essential.

Many dialogue participants stated that genuine participation and independence were essential in maintaining a balanced life. The ability to freely choose the type and range of services they require enables all community members to have more control over their life. It also enables them to make choices that ensure that their needs are met where they live.

Moving forward to promote, plan and implement accessible community living requires a great deal of cooperation. Strong advocacy, service agencies, and politically engaged representatives ensure that progress continues. Participants recognized the efforts of these groups and felt that their work played a significant role in ensuring that their voices were heard. Dialogue participants predicted, however, that true change would only come about if the political will of the community directs attention towards improved community accessibility.

Finding accessible and affordable housing was a challenge for many disabled dialogue participants. Availability was limited, and what did exist was inconveniently located, far from the facilities that one would require. It was particularly important for accessible housing to be located near town centers for people with disabilities to feel connected to the community; however the majority was located a significant distance away from the core.

Discussion participants pointed out that the accessible housing that was available could often be inappropriate and inadequate. For example, although seniors' housing was accessible, it was prohibited to others. This did little to improve the housing stock available to the significant portion of people with disabilities who were not seniors. Services to assist people with disabilities in attaining proper housing and advocate for increased development of accessible housing are necessary in realizing accessible community living.

The provision of affordable accessible housing is affected by a number of factors including government funding, policy, and available housing subsidies. Participants felt that the cost of living for people with disabilities could be high as they might have to acquire personal assistance services and purchase resources that are expensive, while at the same time struggling to find employment opportunities where they were fairly and sufficiently paid. People with disabilities were at a higher risk of becoming homeless, as the costs associated with their daily tasks and needs could be expensive, and the proper supply of accessible and affordable housing was very limited.

## ACCESS TO WORK

The working theme addressed community accessibility by looking at the ease with which people were able to access local educational institutions and the opportunities available in the community for adequate employment. Workplace accessibility, employment choice, and access to entrepreneurial opportunities were important contributors to one's self esteem and financial security. Working provides a sense of purpose and accomplishment, integrates people into the daily routine of society, and better ensures that they have the financial resources to acquire the services and resources needed to sustain a reasonable standard of living.

Social Development Canada (1999) reports that employment rates for people with disabilities between the ages of 25-54 is substantially lower, 51.2%, than for people without disabilities, 82.3%. Additional information shows that persons with disabilities between the ages of 25-54

are almost three times as likely, 27.9%, to fall into the low-income bracket than people without disabilities, 10.2% (Social Development Canada, 1999). These statistics become increasingly polarized between people with disabilities and those without as age increases. Seniors with disabilities face particularly significant challenges in trying to maintain or acquire a sufficient income.

An essential component of community inclusion is the provision of meaningful employment. Equal participation in employment opportunities is an essential component in ensuring that people are able to participate equally. It is often challenging for people with disabilities to find appropriate and stimulating work opportunities. More often than not, finding any kind of employment is difficult, as employers lack the knowledge of how to accommodate their accessibility needs in the workplace, and are unaware of the unique skills and potential that people with disabilities bring to the job market.

There is a false assumption that making the workplace physically accessible is costly. In fact, research shows that the costs associated with failing to do so are more significant. Employers need to be made aware of the available adaptive tools, such as speech technology, that assist people in adapting to the workplace. Small adjustments and investments to the current environment can make significant improvements in workplace accessibility. People with disabilities constitute a significant portion of the current working age population in Canada but the possibilities of their potential contributions have not been fully acknowledged.

In Canada, adults with disabilities have lower education levels than adults without disabilities (Social Development Canada, 1999). Among the population with disabilities 6% have completed a university degree, whereas 14% of those adults without disabilities have attained similar education. This has an impact on the ability of a person with disabilities being able to acquire employment, and influences the types of employment that they are able to access. Education levels are, however, continually improving for adults with disabilities particularly among the younger population. Participants felt that ensuring that the older population has the skills they need to attain sufficient employment and income is necessary; and promoting increases in skill among the younger population should always be encouraged.

Employers present during the dialogue suggested that employers need to be more aware of their role in improving workplace accessibility. They should take the lead in adapting workplaces, and everyone would benefit from these changes. Staff needs to be trained to better work with and support co-workers with disabilities. Disability awareness training in the workplace would help the retention, as well as recruitment, of staff. People with disabilities should be given the capacity to more efficiently market themselves in order to acquire and maintain appropriate employment. Teaching a person with disabilities how to articulate their strengths and employable skills and how to take advantage of networking opportunities in order to gain employment is a vital step.

Many people with disabilities possess the skills and knowledge to perform successfully in the workplace. However, we must break down the assumption that there are significant or costly barriers to supporting them. The public needs to become more aware of the diverse skills and experiences that people with disabilities offer. Participants pointed out that challenging the stereotypes of helplessness through a comprehensive education campaign would be a good step forward in dismantling the attitudinal, social, and physical barriers of the contemporary

workplace.

Moreover, the concept of traditional employment needs to be re-evaluated. Flexible working arrangements, such as part time work, job sharing and flex-time, would ensure that people with disabilities have a variety of options to meet their needs. Other forms of working, such as volunteerism, should be encouraged and recognized as valuable forms of contribution to society.

## ACCESS TO TRANSPORTATION—“MOVING AROUND”

An important dimension of accessibility is moving around. This discussion centered on the need for accessible transportation, the importance of accessible building design, the integration of technology into daily activities, and the usage of appropriate signage. Moving around goes beyond access to transportation, to also look at the variety of strategies that ensure that all facets of daily life are accessible. The ability to move around includes the ability to navigate freely throughout our homes and communities, providing both independence and interaction with the world around us.

Proper access to public and low cost transportation, mobility devices, and buildings helps people with disabilities to access the places and services they need locally in order to contribute to society and lead fulfilling lives. Participants pointed out that mobility and transportation in any community went hand in hand. Without proper building access, providing accessible public transit service was meaningless. Public transit providers have made a commitment to improving services, yet now public education and awareness must also be a goal.

Participants believed that an effective marketing campaign could make the general public more aware of the barriers that people with disabilities face when using public transit. Commuters in general should be more sensitive towards those who may need a particular place on a bus or require a few extra moments to get onto public transportation. Additional barriers to transportation included the lack of places in public buildings for scooter riders to recharge their batteries, as well as the lack of automobile design standards that acknowledge the needs of people with disabilities.

Dialogue participants frequently commented on the absence of proper consultation with people with disabilities before final design and program decisions are completed. Consulting with people with disabilities during all phases of program development would assure universal access.

Providing adequate designated accessible parking spaces throughout communities is essential in ensuring full community access. Initiatives such as the parking permit program administered by SPARC BC contributes to community accessibility by administering parking passes to people with disabilities. It also develops and implements projects that enhance communication and knowledge on the need for greater community accessibility around the province.

Barrier-free mobility also impacts the accessibility of many other components of community living. For instance, insufficient transportation limits access to recreation. Frequently, leisure facilities are located far from main roadways or bus routes. The need for special equipment often makes this even more challenging. Flexible options should be available so that getting to recreation facilities is simple.

Discussion group participants pointed out that the implementation of mandatory accessible building codes could ensure that all new developments are accessible. Government legislation supports the implementation and monitoring of universal accessibility design. The participants also suggested that a provincial accessibility review committee should perform accessibility audits to ensure continued progress. Designing for accessibility is more efficient than attempting to retrofit a building years after construction. Adaptable housing designs should also be made available so that when retrofitting needs to be completed, it is done correctly.

We still have a great deal to do to enable all community members to move around freely in the community. The provision of accessible public transportation services would benefit everyone - new mothers, children, seniors, and people with disabilities are just a few of the groups who would have a better quality of life. Without proper provisions for accessible transportation, people with disabilities are denied the means to participate.

## ACCESS TO PARTICIPATION

The discussion on accessible community participation considered the overall accessibility of a community by focusing on the degree to which people were able to become involved in civic activities. Equal opportunities to participate in the community ensure that everyone is able to gain and develop valuable leadership and advocacy skills, to contribute to public service agencies, and to freely and independently access public events.

For many dialogue participants, the ideas of accessibility and participation were strongly interrelated - without accessibility, participation was not possible and yet if people were not able to participate, then accessibility was not possible. Accessibility was described as being fragile, disjointed, and highly responsive to outside forces. Participation was seen as multifaceted, representing a significant range of activities, incorporating social and political involvement in the community. A holistic view of participation must be used when describing accessibility so that people are able to contribute in a variety of ways and in the manner best suited to their abilities.

Dialogue participants felt that there should be stronger community systems in place to encourage participation. In particular, participants with disabilities wanted to be able to take part in the same range of activities as the able-bodied. While formal access systems were provided in places such as schools, a more comprehensive system was felt to be needed to support people with disabilities through all stages of their lives. Education should play a role in promoting greater tolerance and understanding among the general population, as well as in assisting people with disabilities to develop adaptive skills and creative ways to harness the unique talent and life perspectives they possess. New channels of advocacy needed to be explored and coalitions built and strengthened, in order to promote people working together towards a common goal.

Attitude was paramount in addressing future change and in working towards improving community accessibility. Whether organizing activities and services or accessing them, participants discussed the need for an open-minded, caring and realistic attitude. Although there should be strong leadership among advocates for accessibility services, the responsibility for providing these services must be shared by the whole community. Community mobilization must start at the grassroots level bringing everyone together, and must then enlist service providers, private



companies, social agencies, and policy makers - in fact representatives of all community sectors. A positive and open attitude to accessible community development would ensure that this occurs. Participants believed that in order to improve accessibility, we should move beyond addressing mobility issues and look towards identifying the wide range of additional barriers that are still present.

Promoting access to participate in community life will require progressive thinking in order to expand people's perceptions and ensure that they look beyond the current practices and attitudes.

## ACCESS TO PLAY

During the discussion on access to recreation, dialogue participants focused on the value of ensuring that communities provide opportunities for access to recreation facilities, arts and cultural events, and ensure ease of travel. Playing addressed the fitness and social benefits, as well as the importance of improving participation rates.

Leisure activities enhance the quality of people's life, providing an enjoyable way to improve health through exercise, opportunities to socialize with others, and the means to acquire a sense of accomplishment, independence and belonging. "Playing" acts as an equalizer, enabling people with disabilities to overcome challenges and feel more connected to the world and others around them. It levels the playing field and can break down barriers and promote improved community accessibility.

Through play, people with disabilities are able to access an important component of community living. The challenges associated with accessing community recreation and leisure activities can often be immense and seem insurmountable. Access to play may require that people with disabilities to take the necessary steps to change their perceptions of what "play" really is. Participants felt that although the competitive nature of many sports activities can discourage or participation, a wider range of activities could be implemented so that there are opportunities for all. Ideally, everyone in the community should be able to access the same activities in the same way. However, when this is not possible, adapted integration is necessary to ensure that people with disabilities can play in their own communities.

Dialogue participants pointed out that creating more inclusive and accessible communities would require barriers such as poverty to be addressed. Accessing these activities can be costly and difficult for people with disabilities, some of whom live on a restricted budget. Addressing poverty is important as it is not only a reality for people with disabilities, but for the whole community. These improvements can also benefit seniors who may struggle to participate in leisure activities due to the costs. Participants felt that people should not have to make a trade-off between essential needs and needs normally considered less important but equally necessary to emotional health. Places that offer free recreation services, such as public libraries, are good examples of best practice.

Dialogue participants felt that there should be a greater appreciation of the benefits of recreation, particularly for people with disabilities. It should be one of the priorities in people's lives, rather than something they do after they complete everything else. The benefits of play and accessible community recreation should be discussed widely and integrated into all communities.



## Dialogue

**A**s participants were sharing their visions of what an accessible community would ideally look like, a number of over-arching themes emerged about how this ideal could be achieved. Participants discussed these themes, identifying potential for improvements and challenges to future progress. The following recommendations encompass the ideals and goals envisioned.

### CREATE AN INCLUSIVE DEFINITION OF ACCESSIBILITY

A universal definition of the term accessibility has not been established. Determining such definitions is challenging as the range and type of disabilities that need to be represented are extremely diverse. The application of such definitions is necessary, as currently services and resources are allocated to individuals on the basis of whether or not they fit into a particular group with a particular definition of the term “disabled”. This requirement creates a cycle where service provision is controlled by definitions and labeling, not by the needs of individual people and cases. By using labels we may exclude many who fall outside of this narrow definition from accessing places and services, as well as create tension among competing needs and resources. If the overall goal is to create an inclusive society, then separating community members into groups works directly against this. Ideally, the needs of all people with disabilities would be acknowledged and assistance granted based on need rather than societal definitions and current perceptions of living with various disabilities.

The need for established definitions becomes significant when service provision and availability is based on a person being categorized within a particular defined group. Once labels

are required to access services, understanding exactly what is meant by accessibility becomes very important. Barriers are created when individuals are excluded from traditional or narrow definitions and are therefore unable to access the services they require. Tension is then created among individuals in the community with disabilities as some people have access to more resources than others.

Dialogue participants recommended that an inclusive and holistic definition of disability and accessibility needs to be determined and a system of service provision focused on individual need created.

## INCREASE PUBLIC AWARENESS OF ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES

The importance of making communities universally accessible for all citizens begins with a genuine understanding of inclusive communities and the recognition that it is the responsibility of society to ensure that everyone is provided with the resources and services they need in order to be included. Dialogue participants felt that considerable work still needed to be done to achieve this end and that public education would play a significant role. Participants suggested that the lack of accurate knowledge and public education materials about the circumstances, needs, and preferences of people with disabilities had impeded real understanding.

Overcoming the fear of the financial repercussions of improving access and explaining the benefits of adapting services and making communities more accessible was a particular area identified for public education and awareness raising. Dialogue participants suggested that the costs associated with adapting buildings and services would in fact be offset by the increased number of people who would be able to use them. With the growing senior population and the present population with disabilities, increased community accessibility would benefit both service providers, who would gain clientele and employees, and users, who would be able to access a wider range of resources.

People with disabilities do not form a homogenous group displaying common characteristics. In fact, the population with disabilities in Canada is very diverse. Severity and type of disability vary widely from person to person and the supports and services that are required by every individual are unique. Dialogue participants noted that the public was often unaware of how heterogeneous the group of people with disabilities is and were often able to identify only visible disabilities.

Initiatives to improve community accessibility should go beyond the elimination of physical barriers and ensure that improvements target community attitudes and levels of acceptance. People with disabilities must feel safe in order to navigate confidently within their communities. With improved community acceptance comes an increased confidence among people with disabilities, which will enable participation and contribution to their communities to the true extent of their abilities.

## CHOOSE INDEPENDENCE

Dialogue participants with disabilities commented on the lack of choices in terms of their daily needs. They reported that options were often or non-existent. Participants with disabilities felt that they were frequently given only a single option and no access to other choices.

Independence is promoted through the availability of a range of options. With limited selection, the freedom of choice is severely hindered. An increased selection of alternatives would allow people with disabilities to choose and to be able to lead a more independent and fulfilling life.

## EDUCATE THE SOCIAL AND CIVIC PLANNERS

Dialogue participants agreed that in general, social and civic planning professionals did not possess a clear understanding of the daily challenges facing people with disabilities. Often, services provided - while meeting the necessary accessibility design standards - were inappropriate or not entirely functional. This was described as a result of the lack of real understanding of challenges to accessibility. Increased education and awareness among the general population has been addressed previously, but the specific improvement of knowledge and communication among

planners and providing services for people with disabilities was repeatedly called for throughout the dialogue.

There were strong recommendations for community planners to develop a better understanding of disability and accessibility issues. Mandatory education courses on disability issues should be part of a professional planner's qualification requirements. Professionals working in this sector would move beyond providing adequate basic services and towards more well-rounded accessibility provisions.

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*"The definition of good life: living in the place you belong, with the people you love, doing the right work, on purpose. We need to choose our purpose powerfully."*

## COOPERATE AND SHARE KNOWLEDGE BETWEEN PROGRAM PLANNERS AND SERVICE USERS

Dialogue participants strongly advocated for an inclusive approach to the planning and implementation of accessible community living. Accessibility should be integrated into all aspects of the design and implementation of programs, services and resources. The current system was criticized for creating a gulf between those who planned services and those who were actually using the services. Ideally, politicians, policy makers, service providers, advocacy groups, and people with disabilities should work together to create a system of service provision where all interests were considered.

Knowledge-sharing among agencies planning for accessible communities can be promoted through the use of dialogues such as this. Working together to improve accessibility ensures that the current system avoids becoming fragmented and continues to work from each other's successes. A database of information and resources available to service providers could ensure that accessibility is promoted in the most efficient manner possible. Such resources are available, e.g. *Access Links* by SPARC BC, but a wider distribution should be aimed at.

The active participation of people with disabilities in advocating for community awareness is key. Dialogue participants representing people with disabilities suggested that a community resource book and involvement manual be available to increase their inclusion and involvement. Providing a forum for discussion would also allow people to share their daily challenges, to provide essential peer support, and to work with other individuals who share similar experiences.

It is this type of collaborative and supportive partnership that will promote genuine community inclusion.

## CREATE AND STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIPS

The lack of integration of organizations and agencies serving people with disabilities was reported as being a significant barrier in the creation of more supportive and accessible communities. Dialogue participants felt that many organizations were working independently of one another and there often was a breakdown in communication among them. Encouraging agencies to partner and work collaboratively would reduce the duplication of services, bringing about higher quality programs and more efficient service delivery, and ultimately increasing community accessibility.

Inclusive communities ensure access to the whole community. One group working alone to provide accessible services will not be sufficient; it takes an entire community to coordinate services and share resources. As financial support for accessibility dwindles, communities will have to find new solutions.

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*“We need to connect decision makers to the life of individuals and allow these individuals and their families to make powerful choices. Trust the people with disabilities—they are the experts.”*

## INCREASE RESOURCES

Making a commitment to improving community accessibility requires specific allocation of funding and resources. A commitment to providing financing for community accessibility will be necessary if significant changes are to occur. Most service providers and agencies are unable to improve their services without an increase in funding.

## ADDRESS THE EFFECTS OF POVERTY ON COMMUNITY ACCESSIBILITY

People with disabilities are considerably more vulnerable to threats (and causes) of poverty than other Canadians. Among all Canadians with disabilities, 43% have a personal income of less than \$10,000, and approximately 26% earn less than \$5,000 a year (Social Development Canada, 1999). The costs associated with living with a disability are often significant, depending on the severity of the disability, and without an adequate income, acquiring necessary and appropriate services and resources can be difficult. Statistics collected by Social Development Canada (1999) found that between 1993 and 1998, 55% of people with disabilities were living in poverty.

A significant cause of poverty among people with disabilities is the difficulty in acquiring a job. Finding and retaining employment is a challenge for all, but it is especially difficult for people with disabilities. Social Development Canada (1999) found that people with disabilities were twice as likely to be unemployed than those without disabilities. Unemployment directly restricts a person’s ability to acquire an income that can sufficiently support his or her lifestyle.

Dialogue participants frequently commented on the financial burdens that are experienced by, and placed upon, people with disabilities. Access to community living, working, moving around, participation, and playing, is reduced for many due to barriers caused by lack afford-

ability. The combination of having to support a lifestyle that requires expensive health-related services, and the inability to find adequate employment, contributes to a high level of poverty among people with disabilities. Reductions in government spending to the social services sector have exacerbated this reality. Dialogue participants felt that obtaining and maintaining even an average quality of life is difficult under these circumstances. The stigma attached to receiving social assistance and income assistance is also perceived as being a concern.

The effects of poverty will have to be recognized and addressed if we wish to create genuinely accessible and inclusive communities. This would require concerted efforts on the parts of service providers to ensure that communities take responsibility for becoming more inclusive, and that people have the skills and training to leave the poverty trap.

## Conclusion & Next Steps

The “Beyond the Obvious: Exploring the Accessible Community” dialogue sponsored by SPARC BC brought interested stakeholders together to share their individual experiences and visions of inclusive and accessible communities. Participants had been encouraged beforehand to come with open minds and work together to create a dynamic environment where honest dialogue and exchange of ideas could happen.

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*“Let us choose accessibility, let us choose acceptance, and let us do it on purpose. We need to look within ourselves, offering solutions in a way that they’ll be heard, accessing our hearts and reaching the hearts of others.”*

- Leila Rahemtulla, Dialogue Weaver

### THE COMMUNITY THAT CAME TOGETHER

Dialogue participants expressed their sincere enjoyment of the idea and event, and support for the process. Dialogue organizers were successful in recruiting a well rounded mix of participants, resulting in the attendance and participation of a wide range of community sectors and interests. Participants felt that a truly honest and fruitful discussion took place as a diverse array of opinions and viewpoints were represented.

The dialogue process was successful in encouraging thoughtful and meaningful conversations regarding the importance of community accessibility. The recommendations generated by the dialogue will support further discussion concerning accessibility and stimulate future action.

**Appendix 1: Beyond the Obvious: Exploring the Accessible Community — Agenda Package**



**SPARC BC (SOCIAL PLANNING AND RESEARCH COUNCIL OF BC) IN COOPERATION WITH  
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY'S DIALOGUE PROGRAMS, CONTINUING STUDIES**

*presents*

# **Beyond the Obvious: EXPLORING THE ACCESSIBLE COMMUNITY**

Friday, April 22, 2005  
9:30 am – 3:30 pm

Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue  
580 West Hastings Street, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada



**SIMON FRASER  
UNIVERSITY**  
AT HARBOUR CENTRE  
DIALOGUE PROGRAMS  
CONTINUING STUDIES

**DIALOGUE SPONSORS**





## PROGRAM

### Beyond the Obvious: EXPLORING THE ACCESSIBLE COMMUNITY

is designed to

- expand on the understanding and awareness of accessibility issues beyond physical barriers
- draw on the first-hand experiences of participants to share knowledge and foster opportunities for connection and exchange
- inspire the initiation and expansion of activities to promote accessibility
- explore community accessibility on the themes of Living, Working, Moving Around, Participation, Playing

The insights, inspiration and ideas that participants generate will contribute to a Legacy project intended to foster the creation of inclusive, barrier free, and accessible communities.

#### MODERATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

**Dr. Nancy Hall** is a consultant with a PhD in medical sciences. She has developed provincial health care strategies for women and children, seniors, youth and people with disabilities. Her focus is on the individual and healthy public policy – a theme she continued while serving as BC's first Mental Health Advocate from 1998-2001. Currently she is working with the Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network on a national policy project to advocate for a Registered Disability Savings Program. She is also working with the Canadian Mental Health Association and Ministry of Children and Family Development.

**9:30 am**

**WELCOME, GUIDELINES FOR DIALOGUE, INTRODUCTIONS**

**Nancy Henderson**, Executive Director, SPARC BC

**Dr. Joanna Ashworth**, North Growth Management Director of Programs, Dialogue Programs, Continuing Studies, Simon Fraser University

**9:40 am**

**THE SHIFTING CONTEXT OF ACCESSIBILITY**

**Dr. Nancy Hall**, Moderator

How has the traditional definition of accessibility shifted over a generation?






**9:45 am**

**INSPIRATIONAL STORIES**






**Lived Experience: Disability and Accessibility**  
3D Program

**10:00 am**

**EXPLORING THE MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF ACCESSIBILITY**

-  **Living** – Walter Lawrence
-  **Working** – Glenda Watson Hyatt
-  **Moving Around** – Stephen Lytton
-  **Participation** – Vincent Miele
-  **Playing** – Derek Lunden

#### DESCRIPTION OF THEMES

-  **LIVING** · housing · support services · personal and health care
-  **WORKING** · education · entrepreneurship · workplace · employment
-  **MOVING AROUND** · accessible building design · transportation · technology · signage
-  **PARTICIPATION** · public service · leadership and advocacy · community and civic involvement
-  **PLAYING** · recreation · arts and culture · travel



**10:45 am** BREAK

**11:00 am** DIALOGUE

Facilitators:

**Living** — Rob Bromley and Paul Gauthier

**Working** — Wendy Keenlyside and  
Dr. Bonnie Sawatzky

**Moving Around** — Graeme Masterton and  
Lynn Meredith

**Participation** — Jeanette Andersen and  
Arlen Johnson

**Playing** — Janet Palm and Stephen Regan

#### Core questions for this dialogue

1. Define the theme: How do you currently understand accessibility in relation to this theme? (e.g., What did the inspirational story mean to you? What does this theme involve?)
2. What are the ideal ways to cultivate accessibility in this theme?
3. What are the barriers to the ideal and who and/or what are the key change makers for “going beyond”?

**12:30 pm** LUNCH

**1:30 pm**

DIALOGUE GROUPS REPORT BACK

**3:00 pm**

DIALOGUE WEAVERS — SUMMARY OF  
KEY THEMES

**Beyond the Dialogue — The Legacy  
Evaluation  
Group photo**

**3:30 pm** ADJOURN

**3D program:** SPARC BC recognized that participants with developmental disabilities may be particularly challenged with the dialogue process. In order to assist in their participation, the 3D program was initiated by SPARC BC in partnership with the BC Association for Community Living’s Pathways to Citizenship project and sponsored by Social Development Canada. It was established to allow participants with development disabilities to form a self-support group where they would explore the issue of accessibility, learn about the dialogue process, develop the skills necessary to participate, and communicate what accessibility means to them. This training raised many issues about inclusion and accessibility, and further reinforced the value and significance of the dialogue process and its acknowledgement of all members of the community.

**Walter Lawrence** was injured in 1968 by a C2-3 spinal cord lesion. Fifteen years ago, GF Strong invited him to develop a spinal cord injury program. Since then he has served as a director on many non-profit boards and continues to work with GF Strong as a peer mentor, counselling newly-injured individuals and their families about life post-injury including: home adaptations, driving a car where possible, home care aids, etc. He serves on the boards of the BC Paraplegic Association and BC Rehab. Lawrence addresses many audiences locally, nationally and internationally and is a consultant for hospitals around the country that are developing programs aimed at spinal cord injuries. He is married, and has adopted two girls from China.

**Stephen Lytton** was born in Lytton, BC in 1955 with cerebral palsy, which has affected his mobility from the waist down. It is his goal to ensure that Aboriginal people with disabilities have greater opportunities to play an active role in community planning, decision making, and personal development. Lytton comments, “I feel that every person with a disability, Aboriginal or other, must be involved in the community. This involvement not only benefits the individual, but also strengthens and promotes the health of each community....”

**Derek Lunden** In early 1991, Lunden was a 35-year old father to his seven-year-old son Rob, had a new business, and was preparing for a wedding. In July the words, “Progressive Multiple Sclerosis” and “there is nothing more that I can do for you” were heard for the first time. Six months later he was using a wheelchair. Lunden chose to accept the diagnosis of a disease where there is no known

## BIOGRAPHIES CONTINUED

cause or cure. Derek believes that attitude plays a huge part in how one overcomes adversity and this combined with a new faith in Jesus has enabled him in many ways to recover from Multiple Sclerosis. Instead of being forced to do different things because “you can’t do that anymore” Lunden chooses to do the things he loves differently.

**Vincent Miele** has been involved in the disability movement for over 33 years. He sustained a spinal cord injury that left him a paraplegic in 1972. For 29 years, he worked with the Canadian Paraplegic Association (BC Division) and currently he works at the Neil Squire Society. His passion for disability related advocacy extends to his volunteerism where he has served on numerous committees and boards including SPARC BC’s. In 1999, Miele was awarded the Canadian Association

of Rehabilitation Professionals Fellowship award “In Recognition of Outstanding Services in the Field of Rehabilitation.”

**Glenda Watson Hyatt** is Principal of consultancy at Soaring Eagle Communications, a company specializing in web accessibility, enabling all users to access websites, regardless of capability or technology used. She recently wrote the Simplified Web Accessibility Guide, and developed iWAT (Individualized Web Accessibility Training) to introduce the concepts involved in making websites accessible to everyone. Watson Hyatt is also a career issues writer specializing in disability-related issues. She has written for various perspectives, including career practitioners, employees and employers. Her experience comes from an extensive and firsthand knowledge of disability-related issues.

**SPARC BC** (the Social Planning and Research Council of BC) is an independent not-for-profit organization founded in 1966 that has worked on accessibility issues for over 20 years. SPARC BC conducts research, education, and advocacy in social policy in the areas of accessibility, community development, and income security. The mission of SPARC BC is to work with communities in building a just and healthy society for all.

Through research projects, educational programs, consultations and planning activities, **Simon Fraser University’s Dialogue Programs** offers expertise to diverse organizations, communities and individuals on the use of dialogue-based inquiry for the exploration and understanding of complex public issues.

### DIALOGUE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Angie Allard, Human Resources and Skills  
Development Canada, Community Initiatives and Policy  
Jeanette Andersen, BC Coalition of People with Disabilities  
Halldor Bjarnason, Access Law Group  
Rob Bromley, Force Four Entertainment Inc.  
Paul Gauthier, PACT Consulting  
Bruce Gilmour, Active Living Consultant  
Arlen Johnson, Disabled Individuals’ Association  
Wendy Keenlyside, Langara College  
Graeme Masteron, TransLink

Lynn Meredith, Multiple Sclerosis Society, Committee  
to Promote Accessible Conventional Transit  
Vincent Miele, Neil Squire Society  
Janet Palm, Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada  
Kathy Porter, Sequoia Consulting & Mediation  
Stephen Regan, Tourism Vancouver  
Andrea Reimer, Vancouver School Board  
Dr. Bonnie Sawatzky, University of British Columbia,  
Department of Orthopaedics  
Kirsten Williams, Squamish Nation

### 3D GROUP ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Kathy Porter, Sequoia Consulting & Mediation  
Leila Rahemtulla, Parent  
Lori Seay, BC Association for Community Living  
Erlene Woollard, Society for Children and Youth

### DIALOGUE TEAM

Dr. Joanna Ashworth and Esther Rausenberg, Simon Fraser  
University, Dialogue Programs, Continuing Studies  
Nancy Henderson, Emese Szucs, and Betty So, SPARC BC

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