

The ESSEX FREE PRESS BUSINESS

Workshop focuses on making businesses more accessible

BY DANIEL SCHWAB

Many businesses across the province are missing out on potential customers because their stores are not accessible to people with disabilities, said a speaker at the 4th Annual Accessibility Workshop Oct. 25.

John Kiru, executive director for the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas (TABIA), told an audience gathered at Holy Name of Jesus Parish Hall that there is a lot a storeowner can do to improve accessibility and bring in customers with disabilities.

TABIA has recently initiated the Accessible Mainstreet Program to assist its members in making adjustments to their businesses and make it easier for a disabled person to visit.

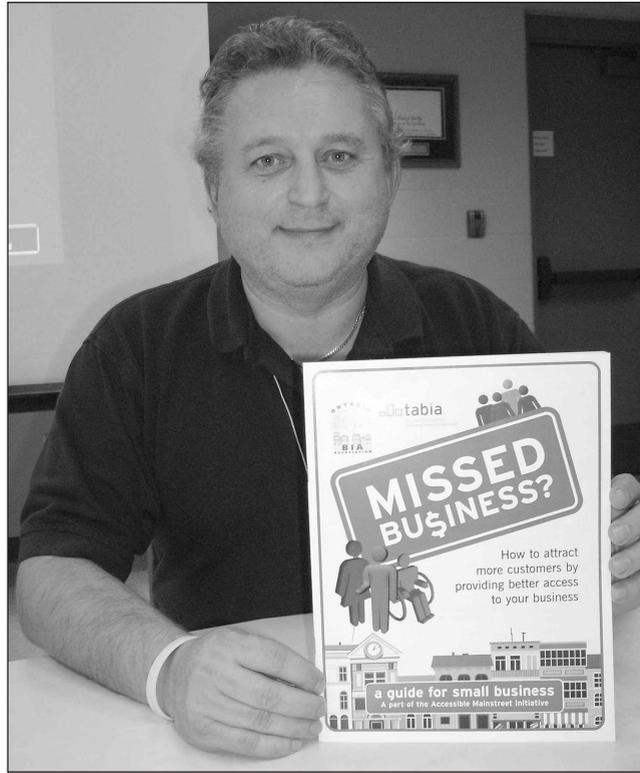
Currently, many businesses are set up in such a way as to make it difficult for people with disabilities, Kiru said.

About 3.6 million people in Canada have a disability, making them a "growing market," Kiru said.

Simple changes such as establishing bathrooms on the main floor instead of in the basement can help bring them in, Kiru said.

Having a chair in the store for people to sit on, or for restaurants, having menus with large print would help those suffering from vision problems, he added.

Other TABIA strategies



John Kiru, executive director of the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas, holds a guide that explains how small businesses can attract more customers by providing better access for disabled people. Kiru spoke during the 4th Annual Accessibility Workshop entitled Opening Doors and Minds at Holy Name of Jesus Parish Hall Oct. 25. The business portion of the workshop focused on providing suggestions to merchants about how to increase their customer base by making their stores more accessible.

include adding wider entrance doors and ramps leading to storefronts.

"While we're trying to educate, I'm sure there will still be resistance even though legislation has passed," Kiru said of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, which passed last year.

The AODA requires the province to work with both the disabled community and the private sector to form

accessibility standards in the next five years.

Within 20 years, the goal is to remove barriers for the entire range of disabilities, including sensory, physical, developmental and learning disabilities.

Kiru said TABIA has also initiated the presentation of awards for businesses that make the most effort to comply with the new standards.

"When we started, many business owners feared they

would go out of business," Kiru said. "But most of our businesses have embraced it. There are many no-cost, low-cost solutions."

For now, Kiru said the goal is to continue to educate businesses and remind them they are bringing in a new market by making changes.

Another speaker during the workshop, Linda Ciebien, said it's important for businesses to be prepared when someone with a disability stops in.

"Many people come into a business with vision loss and aren't carrying a white cane," said Ciebien, an orientation and mobility specialist with the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.

"A blind person often travels by public transit," she said. "As a business owner, do you know where the nearest public transit stop is?"

Ciebien said it's also important for businesses to have walkways free from obstacles and wide enough for two people and a guide dog.

Dean La Bute, a member of the Accessibility Standards Advisory Council of Ontario, said that as a blind person, he expects businesses to be able to comply with provincial standards.

"It only makes sense," La Bute said. "Many disabilities are tied in with aging."

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