

Region's playgrounds should be accessible, councillor says

BY DAWN LIERSCH
Staff Writer

Believing all children should have equal opportunities for play, a York Region councillor is demanding all new playgrounds be fully accessible to children with special needs.

Newmarket Regional Councillor Diane Humeniuk is requesting all playgrounds at child-care facilities run by the region be made accessible.

'When you see these playgrounds, you do not see a difference, but the children... will see a difference.'

She also hopes for the region to pass a resolution that would require all municipalities ensure their playgrounds are accessible.

Her request will be discussed at the region's health and social services committee today.

Many current playgrounds already need to be dismantled or updated to comply with new safety standards, so Humeniuk said this is a perfect opportunity to make them accessible.

"It is recognized that accessibility for playgrounds is the next frontier for community improvement," Humeniuk wrote in a letter to regional council.

"When you see these playgrounds, you do not see a difference, but the children using the playground will see a difference."

Humeniuk said some U.S. communities are already farther ahead than Canada in building accessible playgrounds.

For instance, Maryland has already announced a \$1.75-million public-private partnership to provide 10 accessible playgrounds.

Several York municipalities are also working on accessible playgrounds.

The Aurora Highview Community Millennium Project, a fully accessible and integrated playground serving more than 1,300 children, opened June 14.

A similar structure is being built in Keswick near R.L. Graham Public School. And plans for the Newmarket Accessible Adventure Playground are under way.

The committee organizing the project is in the process of shortlisting several municipal sites where a playground could be built and planning fundraisers for the project.

The committee has received about \$20,000 for the \$300,000 project from local businesses and service groups, such as the North Newmarket Lions Club. The province may agree to kick in another \$10,000 through a funds-matching program.

In addition, the group is hoping the province may adopt the project as a model for other communities.

"Some people see a playground as nothing more than a physical structure. For a child, it's a medium of expression — a family meeting ground," said Steve Granger, the project chairperson.

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