

Commission on Disability Meeting
Minutes from Tuesday, November 26, 2013
Worcester City Hall, Levi Lincoln Room, 3rd Floor

Attendance:

Members Present: Herbert Cremer, Paul Keister, Elizabeth Myska, Stephen Stolberg, Susan Swanson, Nancy Garr-Colzie,

Members Absent: John Nah, Lynne Towler, Charles Hiamah, Rachel Shannon-Brown,

Staff: Pam Callahan, Dawn Clark

Guests: Francis Pedone and Adam Roson, Worcester Art Museum and Taskin Padir, WPI

1. Call to Order: 4:37 PM. The Chair welcomed guests and commission members; each member introduced themselves.

2. Minutes: The vote to accept the minutes of July & September's meeting was tabled for December's meeting due to members who attended in July and September were absent and not able to vote. Minutes of October meeting were approved by unanimous vote, no abstentions and no oppose.

3. Worcester Art Museum Front Entrance Accessibility Plan: Mr. Pedone and Adam Roson presented future plans for creating accessibility to the front entrance of the Worcester Art Museum while keeping the structure as aesthetically appealing as possible. Mr. Pedone explained that the building is currently accessible in the back; however the front entrance is the most majestic and gives the visitor the most dramatic and beautiful experience. They affirmed their commitment to

involving the community to be part of the Worcester Art Museum so it could be shared and enjoyed with the best possible vantage view by all.

Future plans include a bronze bridge to act as a ramp to the front door of the Museum. Artist rendered pictures were presented to the Commission which showed an artistically designed bridge equipped with lighting and handrails to serve as ramp so that the front doors could be accessible.

Phase I includes four handicap parking spaces to be added to the front of the building.

Pictures showed a slope off the walkway to the bridge that could present a challenge to sight impaired persons. The front doors will be open during all hours of operation and the glass doors behind them are accessible. Plans are dependent on fund raising and the museum welcomes input from the Commission during all phases of the plan. Mr. Pedone and Mr. Roson affirmed that their voices and the voices of the community will be heard for many years to come. The Commission commended Mr. Pedone and Mr. Roson for their commitment to disabled persons, the community as a whole and the work being done to make the Worcester Art Museum a very real rival to other museums in larger cities.

Commission members asked for a copy of the plans that were presented along with the actual measurements of the parking spaces and will make recommendations regarding future plans at the December meeting.

4. Smart Wheelchair Presentation: Dr. Taskin Padir presented work currently being done by his students at WPI to help improve the quality of life for persons using wheelchairs. The mission of Dr. Padir's team project is to equip existing smart wheelchairs with the hardware and software necessary to improve the overall quality of life for users, including paraplegics and those with 'locked-in syndrome' through the

use of a semi-autonomous wheelchair and body-brain interface. Locked-in syndrome refers to individuals whose voluntary muscles are paralyzed except for eye muscles and have retained cognitive abilities.

The design and development of the chairs necessitated interviews with many people from all over the country to assess users' needs, hopes and fears. The team shared information and connected with other researchers in the country to innovate, resulting in the development of 'smart' wheelchairs. The prototypes being developed use robotic technology to help users stay safe and independent by offering features such as sensors which will stop the chair from going down stairs or over any precipice, and installing a robotic arm so that the user will have access to things out of reach. Body-brain interface smart wheelchairs are being developed so that individuals with almost no mobility can use brain waves to engage the chair for multiple functions.

The Commission commended Dr. Padir and his students for their work in this area and offered to be test subjects for the next phase of the project. Dr. Padir stated that he would welcome feedback from the Commission regarding current challenges that face wheelchair users. The Commission will offer feedback at the December meeting. The Commission also commended Dr. Padir for educating new engineers to consider the needs of disabled persons for future designs.

The Commission also expressed interest in the WPI robot contests. Dr. Padir noted that the next competition would be held on December 14, 2013 at the Campus Center at WPI and the next NASA sponsored robot competition will be held at Institute Park on June 11, 2014.

5. Membership: The chair expressed concern over membership and Commission absenteeism that could potentially affect future quorums

and asked that the rules be investigated to find out how to move alternate members into full memberships.

6. ADA Consultant: The City has hired a consultant to assist in the updating of the ADA Evaluation and Transition plan. The Institute for Human Centered Design (IHCD) was contracted for their services to update the vertical aspects of the plan.

7. WRTA Response: While the Commission reviewed a rapid response to their concerns brought up in the October 15, 2013 meeting, they voiced concerns over the following items and expressed a sense of urgency due to the approach of winter weather:

- Bay assignments: By not having bay assignments for buses, users must go back and forth along the platform to find their bus when it comes in. Commission members stated that users with sight or mobility issues have missed their bus because they could not find the correct bay in time and expressed concern that this problem will be compounded during severe winter weather.
- The response letter from Mr. O'Neil did not respond to the request of a digital display at the bays.
- The Commission expressed concern that the attendants randomly announce the bay when a bus comes in a once it is spoken the information is gone and the bus is only there for 3 minutes, not enough time to get out the door to the bus.

The Commission respectfully requests that following recommendations for the WRTA be presented to the City Manager for consideration: To ensure safe accessibility for all people whether audio, sight or physical disability by:

- Providing reliable audible announcements which will be repeated with enough time to get to the bus during all hours of operation.

Announcements should be clear and consistent, repeated more than once and made for all buses arriving during all hours of operation.

- Providing digital displays inside and outside during all hours of operation.
- Replacing current track strips with strips that will alert a passenger of where they are on the platform by feeling it with feet.

8. Request Tour of DCU Center: Mike Kennedy requested that the Commission officially recommend him to tour the DCU center. Mr. Kennedy stated that he had visited a suite at the DCU center and reported that the bar area had both high and low tables, however the cut-outs in the wall to view the arena were not accessible, they were too high. He also stated that in order to be in the suite with a wheelchair, a staff member must unbolt a section of the seating to make room. He stated that he would like to tour the center, specifically the arena section, before final renovations are completed. The Commission expressed interest in recommending that Mr. Kennedy be given a tour along with any interested Commission members. It was also recommended that the ADA consultant revisit the issue of accessible drop-offs for the arena portion of the DCU center.

9. Winter Sidewalk Snow Removal Requirements: The DPW has distributed flyers describing the City's policy for property owners to remove snow from sidewalks, stairs, fire escapes and emergency exits. Disabled or elderly homeowners may call the DPW & P Customer Service Center for a list of agencies who can provide help clearing snow: 508-929-1300. To report un-cleared sidewalks or other problems call 508-929-1300.

10. AAB Notices and Applications: Review of current violation notices sent to the following properties:

- 894 Grafton St.- 1st Notice of violations regarding accessibility
- 256 Main St. – 1st Notice of violations regarding handicap parking and van parking
- 21 Harley St. – 1st Notice of violations regarding handicap parking spaces
- Application for Variance for repair work at 369 Burncoat St. Commission member can call to support or non-support of the variance by calling AAB at 617-727-0660

10. Announcements: The WRTA Transportation Planning Advisory Group (TPAG) meets the third Wednesday of each month from 1:00-2:30 PM.

Rights, Equality and Dignity for Disabled (REDD) meet the 2nd Monday of the month at 5:30 pm at the Center for Living and Working, 484 Main St. Suite 345. Vice Chair Stephen Stolberg encourages all to attend; both members of the public and Commission members. He said that they were trying to recruit more interested persons to attend to look at issues and concerns facing the disabled community.

11. Public Comment Period:

- Scott Ricker gave positive comments regarding the City’s hiring of the ADA consultant, Institute for Human Design. He said the Institute for Human Design was an excellent organization.
- Scott Ricker stated that the WRTA still had ineffective tackle strip on the walkway of the platform and some had been removed from the platform itself. He stated that the strip could not be felt through a shoe and expressed concern that the strip would be rendered even more ineffective with snow.
- Jackie Norton suggested that the WRTA include Union Station waiting area for audio announcements and digital signage in case

inclement weather results in an over flow of riders going there for shelter.

- Scott Ricker stated his support for the variance requested by property owners at 369 Burncoat St.

7:20 Meeting adjourned

Respectfully submitted by Pamela Callahan