

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Tuesday, February 5, 2019

Committee Room

Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Mr. Keith Irving, Chairman
Ms. Rafah DiCostanzo, Vice-Chairman
Mr. Ben Jessome
Mr. Bill Horne
Mr. Gordon Wilson
Mr. Keith Bain
Mr. Larry Harrison
Ms. Lenore Zann
Ms. Susan Leblanc

[Ms. Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin replaced Mr. Keith Bain]

In Attendance:

Mrs. Darlene Henry
Legislative Committee Clerk

Mr. Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage

Ms. Dawn Stegen, Director of Regional Services
Mr. Wayne Matheson, Program Officer

Department of Justice

Mr. Gerry Post, Executive Director of Accessibility Directorate



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2019

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN

Mr. Keith Irving

MR. CHAIRMAN: Good morning everyone. I would like to call to order the Standing Committee on Community Services. Welcome everyone, members of the Legislature, as well as our guests this morning. My name is Keith Irving. I am the MLA for Kings South and the chairman of this committee.

Today we will be receiving a presentation from Dawn Stegen, the Director of Regional Services. She is accompanied by Mr. Wayne Matheson, program officer with CCH; and Gerry Post, who I think everyone knows, will be participating in the Q&As.

I'd like to ask the committee members to introduce themselves to our guests and the gallery. Perhaps we'll start with Ms. Zann.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Welcome everyone. Just a reminder that outside to the left are washrooms, and coffee can be found there as well. In case of an emergency, we'll exit to the Granville Street entrance and proceed to the Grand Parade Square by St. Paul's Church. Just a reminder to everyone that have these electronic leashes, you can put them to silent or vibrate for the duration of the meeting.

Just a reminder to everyone that for the benefit of Hansard and the work that they do, we will be acknowledging through the Chair to speak. We'll proceed with the presentation and following that we'll have Q&As, and I'll keep track of a speaking order for those Q&As. I would like to suggest we start with one question and a supplementary - hopefully we can get through everyone - and if we get to a second round, maybe one question without a supplementary depending on time, if that is acceptable to everyone.

I think it's time to get into the meat of the issue today, so I would like to turn the floor over to Dawn Stegen for your presentation.

MS. DAWN STEGEN: The presentation is on the screen and you should have a copy of it in your package as well.

Good morning, my name is Dawn Stegen and I'm the Director of Regional Services for the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage. I am pleased to be here today to speak to the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program. I am joined by Gerry Post, Executive Director of the Accessibility Directorate, and Wayne Matheson, Coordinator of Facility Development with CCH.

As I am sure you are aware, in 2017 the Accessibility Act was passed and proclaimed, demonstrating the commitment to a more equitable, barrier-free province for all Nova Scotians. The Act recognizes accessibility as a human right and sets goals for an accessible Nova Scotia by 2030. Access By Design 2030 is a strategy for how we all work together as a province to accomplish this goal. Gerry leads the implementation of this strategy for government and can answer any questions on the Accessibility Directorate's work and the strategy.

As part of the Access By Design 2030, the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage administers the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program. I will now take you through the objectives and some of the key elements of the program.

Starting in 2017, CCH collaborated with the Accessibility Directorate and others on the design of the grant program. On December 1st, the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program was launched and it has been available to businesses in Nova Scotia for 14 months. Through this initiative, businesses can apply for cost share grants to make accessibility-related improvements and the program budget has a \$1 million annual budget.

The first category of the grant is called the Built Environment. The purpose of this category of funding is to remove physical barriers for persons to access business services, projects. Examples of projects could include the installation of automated door openers, ramps, curb cuts, or renovations to bathrooms.

The next category is Accessible Communication Services. This category supports consumers and employees to access information and to support communication between persons with disabilities and the commercial enterprise. Example of projects could include

accessible web design, accessible signage, communication in a business such as tablets or audio systems, and conversion of commercial documentation into braille.

The third category is assistive devices. Funding for this category enables persons with disabilities to have the devices they need to effectively do their jobs and to access places of business. Examples of projects could include the purchase and installation of specialized wheelchairs for places of business; cognitive aids, including computers and electronic assistive devices; voice recognition programs, and tools such as page turners. This category also supports the training of employees to use these devices.

The fourth category is accessible transportation. Funding for this category supports accessibility-related improvements to private transportation services. Eligible costs and projects could include costs of converting an existing vehicle to a wheelchair-accessible commercial shuttle or carshare service.

The final category is universal design capacity-building courses and workshops. The purpose of this category is to develop the universal design knowledge and skills and capacity of the business community as well as those in professional services like contractors, engineers, architects, project managers, and planners. Agencies, including non-profit groups, may apply in this category if they're offering universal design courses and workshops targeted to the business community.

Those are the five categories of the program and of course, spreading the word is very important to encouraging businesses in Nova Scotia to apply. We have focused on reaching businesses through existing networks. We are communicating with and working with chambers of commerce across Nova Scotia, the Accessibility Directorate, constituency offices, professional associations like the Restaurant Association of Nova Scotia and the Black Business Initiative, businesses navigators and Municipal Affairs, to name a few.

I would like to end by sharing an exciting example of one of the programs we were able to support last year. With the funding of the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program, the Nova Scotia Community College was able to offer the Rick Hansen Foundation's accessibility certification program. During the course, participants learned about the impact of the social and physical environment on people with disabilities; the relevant legislation, regulations, and standards; universal design principles; how to do assessments and how to do community and support assessment findings with clients; and much more.

We now have 43 trained assessors in Nova Scotia with the skills needed to support businesses and assess buildings and sites for accessibility. Having trained assessors in Nova Scotia is transformational change. It's a game-changer.

I thank you, and I would be pleased to take your questions on the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program. I will defer questions on Access by Design 2030 and the work of the directorate to Mr. Post.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Stegen. We have a bit of time here for questions. If it goes long, I'll probably cut it off at about quarter to 12:00 p.m., and that will allow our guests to perhaps provide a couple-minute wrap-up, and then we have I think one item of committee business to deal with.

First on my list here is Mr. Wilson.

MR. GORDON WILSON: Thank you very much. In my earlier comments with Mr. Post, I just personally have to make a comment about a good friend of ours that we lost in Claredon Robichaud, who should be here today too as part of this. He was one of the biggest drivers, I think, in accessibility, especially for people with disabilities across all the spectrum. I just wanted to get that in Hansard for Claredon's benefit.

I'll have other questions. I'll try and get it short here. To the Rick Hansen Foundation on the programming, I don't think we have seen anything about what the cost is to take that course. Also, what would you expect for businesses that take that to charge for giving that service?

MS. STEGEN: I could speak to the role the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program played with that. In the guidelines, that particular category is in the range of 75 to 100 per cent funding for workshops and capacity building. In the early stages of the grant program, we feel that it's very important to increase that awareness and knowledge, so we've been very supportive of any group coming to us that is willing to do and prepared to do capacity building.

Approximately \$160,000 was contributed to this initiative for two courses. The first course was 10 days long, and the second course that was offered by the Nova Scotia Community College was five days long, and it was targeted specifically at municipal planners, so we were able to do a condensed course.

One of the things that we're fortunate to have happened during the first two courses is a number of people were trained as trainers. We brought someone in from British Columbia to offer the first two courses - or I should say the Nova Scotia Community College did - and those folks have now been trained to be able to run the next course in Nova Scotia. In terms of the contribution the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program will make to that course moving forward, the costs should be reduced now that we have trainers available in Nova Scotia.

As it relates to the costs associated with doing an assessment for business, I believe the range that is promoted on the Rick Hansen Foundation website is somewhere between the \$1,000 to \$3,000 range. In the first category of our program, the Built Environment,

there is a component of funding support to businesses that needs financial assistance with design, permits, and doing the audits. They can also receive funding through the grant when they're at that audit stage. I hope that's helpful.

MR. WILSON: The \$160,000 for the two courses, am I going to assume it was \$80,000 or will the split be a little different because it was 10 days and five days?

MS. STEGEN: It was a little bit different. It was \$100,000 for the first course and \$60,000 for the second course.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. DiCostanzo.

MS. RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I know accessibility is also a federal thing that Canada is very famous for. I just wanted to know how much you are receiving through federal funding and how much is provincial that we're offering, and where we are as a province compared to other provinces.

MS. STEGEN: My expertise is in the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program so I'll start, and if I can, I'll defer some of your question to Mr. Post. As it relates to the federal government, there is no federal government funding coming into the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program, so the budget that we have is \$1 million each year. We've now had the program for two years, but at this time, if I could defer to Mr. Post to respond to the remainder of the question.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Post.

MR. GERRY POST: The federal government has just announced their own accessibility Act at the federal level. It's in third reading and hopefully before the election it will get passed.

With regard to what's going on around the country, we're the third province in Canada to have an Accessibility Act. Ontario led the way about 12 years ago, Manitoba followed, and then we came along. We learned a lot from those provinces. Quebec now is close to finishing theirs, as is Newfoundland and Labrador. Of course, they're contacting us and hopefully they'll better us. I think right now we probably have the best Act in Canada because we've learned from all the others.

On federal funding for accessibility, I think with the Act that's being proposed in Ottawa, along with it should come some federal funding so we're starting to position ourselves for that. That's something for us to watch.

MS. DICOSTANZO: As a supplementary, or a comment, I was not aware of how good Canada or Nova Scotia is for accessibility until I worked with the refugees that came. The comments that I received, that they felt they're human again because they can access. They can get on a bus, they can do things. To me, it just brought a whole new world of

how advanced Canada is when it comes to accessibility - maybe not in your eyes, but from the eyes of the newcomers we have a wonderful accessibility system, and I'm proud always that we are making it better. I just wanted to say that. Thank you.

[10:15 a.m.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Harrison.

MR. LARRY HARRISON: Certainly, this province has come a long way, and I know we have a long way to go still. Roughly how many applications would come in in the run of a year?

MS. STEGEN: That's a great question. As I mentioned in my opening, the program has been available for 14 months. We are, on average, getting around three inquiries a week and one application a week. It is early stages, and there's a lot more to do. Early on, when we were developing the program, we committed to the design of an evaluation plan. A key element of that evaluation plan, I guess as a target, is to focus on how we're doing with promotion and increasing awareness of the program. As well, there are some targets around the effectiveness of the grant program. Promotion is very important, and we're excited about what we're currently doing but also plans for next year, when we can do some videos and do some digital advertising to let businesses across Nova Scotia see the projects that have taken place and the difference that they're making in communities across Nova Scotia.

MR. HARRISON: Of those applications, how many would be accepted and how many would be rejected?

MS. STEGEN: I appreciate that question. In the work that we do at Communities, Culture and Heritage, we work with a proponent or a business that is interested in moving forward. We very rarely have an ineligible - it's sort of an ongoing process of working with them. When an application comes in, there may be a variety of reasons why they're not ready to advance at this time, so we'll give them options to either address those issues or to access further information and offer them the option of keeping their file open. Since the program has been open for the last 14 months, we have five projects that have not advanced at this point. Either they have been deemed to be not ready at this point or ineligible.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Leblanc.

MS. SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you very much. It's great to hear about this program and how it's advancing. Obviously, it's really important to our communities and for people with disabilities to be able to move around and access businesses and also to have more access to employment in those businesses. One of the places that I have been doing some work as spokesperson for Community Services is around homes and building accessible homes for people with disabilities. I have been paying attention to the work of

the Community Homes Action Group, which helped, I believe, establish the road map Choice, Equality and Good Lives in Inclusive Communities.

So far, I think that the Community Homes Action Group and we in the NDP caucus have been fairly disappointed in the progress of establishing small options homes for people with disabilities to live in the community, so I just wanted to ask Mr. Post, I think, in terms of your office, are you involved with the progress of providing small options homes for people? Do you have thoughts about it? Can you speak to it at all from your point of view?

MR. POST: We are not directly involved. That's the responsibility of Community Services. Certainly, we're tracking it and providing advice. My background actually is in city planning, and housing was my specialty. I have strong feelings regarding that, and I think we need to move quicker on that, in that there is a tremendous demand for it within our community. Plus, there's a strong business case for it. We have one NGO right now in our province developing that business case for government on advancing that particular cause.

MS. LEBLANC: It's great to hear that you are tracking it and paying attention. I know that it is a Community Services portfolio, but do you see in the future a place for your office taking a more active role in making sure we get back on track with building small options homes or providing them?

MR. POST: It's not just small options homes. It's accessible housing generally. Accessible, affordable housing is a huge challenge. The federal government has done some really good things on that just recently through CMHC and I think we can perhaps follow their lead on setting some targets regarding that. So that's something that I'm certainly advocating for.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Zann.

MS. LENORE ZANN: Thank you for your presentation today. Along that line, I just had a meeting with somebody from CMHC yesterday who I brought to my office last week and then we met with the Truro Town Council to discuss various options that could be available for some of our community groups, as well as some of the developers that are going to be developing new, affordable housing, so I'm very interested to see if the province will follow suit and make some of these offers as well to help us in our communities.

A couple of things I've noticed, for instance, is that in our homeless shelter, there is a woman who is in a wheelchair and she was told that there is no elevator, and so they had to put a cot for her on the ground floor, but then they said she couldn't stay there any longer because it's not really supposed to be for people staying there, and she was booted out, basically. So she found herself on the street again, and if it wasn't for our mayor who

put her up in a hotel for the next seven days - we've been trying to find her an apartment and things like this. It's very difficult for people.

Another woman in my community who has one arm and one leg, she has had terrible trouble trying to find work, but even having a wheelchair that works for her, we had to do a fundraiser for her just recently through the women's centre to afford a wheelchair. So it's good to see that this program is going ahead, but there are also very many accessibility problems that are happening in all of our communities, and I would like to see government putting more money towards helping these people.

On that note, I'd just like to ask - I notice that so far, about \$580,000 has been disbursed from your program this fiscal - do you actually expect to disburse the remaining \$420,000 before the end of this fiscal?

MS. STEGEN: Yes, we do.

MS. ZANN: So can you just tell us what businesses are interested and who've shown an interest and what other businesses other than the ones that are listed already are going to be receiving funds?

MS. STEGEN: Sure. Definitely the types of applications that we have seen come in are spanning from Cape Breton right to Yarmouth. We're seeing big and little projects in rural and urban Nova Scotia, and from a variety of sectors including the Restaurant Association, hotel industry, health services. Definitely the details on applications that are still being processed, we can get back to you with those details after today's meeting. What has been made available to the public are those that have been announced, but they would be similar to those that have come in in terms of a variety of different types and very pleased with the impact.

The final reports that we received - we're asking proponents how they are finding out about the program. What we're finding is that it's still through the regular newspaper route and through constituency offices, so thank you to the MLAs here today for promoting the program, but also through reachAbility. If I could just speak to that a little bit.

Under the fifth category of Universal Design, reachAbility is a provincial association focused on employment opportunities and employment services. We supported them to offer workshops across the province. They were three-hour workshops to the business community and 21 were hosted, and over 400 businesses attended.

The workshops were designed to talk about the value and the benefits of making accessibility-related improvements - that it makes good business sense - how to go about those kind of adaptations, what supports are available in your community now to help you navigate that. They promoted the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program and they ensured that someone who is trained in the Rick Hansen Foundation assessor certification

was present at every workshop to link the business community with someone who they could meet with.

As we do more of that type of getting out around the province and being available to the business community for these conversations, I think the diversity of applicants and business types will grow. Also, the range of approaches to making accessibility improvements will also grow as well because the range of disabilities is so large. So further details on the applicants that we are processing since our announcement in October, definitely we can get to you after the meeting today.

MS. ZANN: Thank you very much.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Wilson.

MR. WILSON: Through the Public Accounts Committee, the Auditor General did a review of the processes for the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage. We just recently had witnesses in with regard to that. It involved that period from April 2015 up until March 2017, I believe. I know that was before you came on board, but certainly there were a lot of good recommendations made in the Auditor General's Report in that regard.

Have you had a chance to consider or look at those? I see the head nodding. I'm curious, out of that report, what did you see as pertinent things that you feel could have improved your delivery of your product?

MS. STEGEN: That's a great question. As you know, CCH welcomed and accepted the Auditor General's Report that advanced recommendations on how we could improve accountability and the consistency in how we administer our grant programs.

The recommendations of the Auditor General's Report definitely were considered as we were designing the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program. It was actually an opportunity because we would have had the auditors in the office and starting to have conversations about our other grant programs.

There are two things I'd like to highlight that we were able to do right away - of course, committing to the development of an evaluation plan prior to launching the program. So the evaluation plan sets out our short term and immediate outcomes for the grant, and this allowed us to confirm what we wanted to include in the application and in the final report form to ensure we're collecting the data that we need to make good decisions moving forward. So that was one thing that we heard from the Auditor General - that outcomes and knowing that you're making a difference and the right difference with your program is important.

The other thing is, we've recently started to test a random site inspection on our infrastructure programs. With some advice from the Department of Internal Services,

we've created a tool and risk assessment so that the investments that we're making in infrastructure - whether they be trails or recreation or in this case Business ACCESS-Ability - we will do site visits to ensure compliance with the guidelines and the terms and conditions that we set out.

Those would be two immediate initiatives that we've taken to be in compliance with the Auditor General. Then we continue as a unit to work across the department to consider all the recommendations and to ensure that they're being approached.

MR. WILSON: Probably, as many of you know, I am a firm believer in the Public Accounts Committee having the Auditor General play a bigger role. What's interesting in your answer to that question is the fact that even though you weren't part of that review, there were things that came out of that review from that report that impacted.

What's interesting about that comment, those things don't get picked up within the Public Accounts Committee. We follow up on recommendations, but interestingly enough, there are things that ripple outside to try to improve. I can't over-emphasize the importance of the role that the Auditor General plays in the Public Accounts Committee in that respect.

One thing I am interested in, because I do believe it was buried within the recommendations a little bit in some of the comments - how do you engage with the disability community?

MS. STEGEN: That's a great question. I think I would categorize it in a few ways, and then I'd like to speak maybe in detail about the consultation that we did in the design. The first way is, when we were asked to design the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program, our collaboration started with the Accessibility Directorate. Our first conversation was about how we not only prepare guidelines and applications and advice on promotion, but also how we best engage the disabled community along with the business sector.

[10:30 a.m.]

During the development phase of the grant program, which was September to the end of November, the disabled community would have been invited to a consultation that we hosted in October. We were able to get their advice on how to design the grant guidelines and applications so that it would meet their needs. Of course, at the same time, we were hearing from the business community as well.

Then, during the implementation of the program, we have instituted a panel process for reviewing all applications. The Accessibility Directorate is represented on the panel, and that's a process. The panel meets every week, and if there are any applications in, there's a review that takes place and an assessment before a recommendation comes forward to CCH.

Of course, the other important connection with the disabled community is around promotion. We have been through those networks. We have reached out to the disabled community. In some cases, they have organized events where Mr. Post and I have spoken in the community to generate interest in the program.

Finally, it's about continuous improvement. In July, even though we were only six or seven months in, we formed a round table to look at the program, what's working well, what feedback we are receiving, and anything we should be thinking about as it relates to 2019-20 in terms of improvements and building on our success. Again, there's representation from the disabled community in that process also.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Horne.

MR. BILL HORNE: Along the same avenue, there are business association programs, ability programs and also the community one. Can you discuss those and why it's necessary to have two different programs?

MS. STEGEN: Yes, that's a great question. There are two grant programs. There's the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program and the Community ACCESS-Ability Program. Both programs have \$1 million annually. In Fall 2017, we were asked to develop the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program, but the Community ACCESS-Ability Program already existed, and it was transferred from Department of Community Services to CCH.

I can't speak in detail about the Community ACCESS-Ability Program because it's not one that I manage on a day-to-day basis, but we do collaborate and connect on a regular basis to ensure that those who are coming to us for financial support – that there are no gaps and sometimes we're sort of passing applicants back and forth, especially if you're in the area of social enterprise. Folks are trying to navigate the two programs.

What we try to do is make it easy for the applicant. If you go online, the two grant programs are a sort of a one stop shop. They're both listed next to one another. If you're community or business, you can click on one. I think at the early stages of the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program, it was important to have a distinct program for the business community to see and for us to then track the investments and the needs of the business community. I think both are working very well, but one is specific for business, and one would be specific for non-profits and municipalities.

If I can reflect back on a previous question about group homes and shelters or housing for persons with disabilities, if that particular entity is a non-profit, definitely we would be interested in hearing more about their interests because they would qualify under the Community ACCESS-Ability Program. It's something we would like to hear about a bit further if there's someone in your community who's interested. I hope that answers your questions.

MR. HORNE: It does. A supplementary similar to what you were just answering - what are the programs that might benefit from the community program over the business one?

MS. STEGEN: Really two categories or groups that are eligible would be any group that is non-profit and any group that is designated or a municipality. That's the easiest way to look at it. Then the eligibility is somewhat similar in that it's not just bricks and mortar on the community accessibility side. It's equipment, and under equipment would be assistive devices.

I was talking to my colleague in Communities Nova Scotia the other day about their program, and an example of a great initiative that would speak to assistive devices or equipment is the work that they did with the Pride Parade last year where they worked with the CIBC and the organizers of the Pride Parade to ensure that there was staging for those who had visual impairments to be able to experience the parade, interpretive signage, mobility mats to help those in wheelchairs - so there's an example. As a non-profit, they were able to support that equipment so that the environment was a positive experience for everybody and accessible.

Another example would be a program that's evolving as community brings their needs and interests forward - a recent partnership with the regional library in Pictou where they supported devices that are called DAISY readers; \$10,000 was given and they are devices that enable a user to access the free library services or to be able to enjoy a talking book. Again, the idea being that the public is able to come into a community library and have an accessible experience, but it's not necessarily the ramp or the opening of the door that we're thinking about, but it's the equipment that's available in the facility.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Harrison.

MR. HARRISON: The community program - I was associated with two rural churches and they both took advantage of the grants, and I must admit, it did make quite a difference for people accessing, especially functions that took place in the halls.

Another category is restaurants - a huge category these days. The human rights case back in 2018 - do restaurants get any kind of priority now, where a lot of them do not have accessible washrooms and so on?

MS. STEGEN: In terms of the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program, we're currently meeting the demand, based on the applications that are coming in. We've not had to get to that review of having over-demand, exceeding our budget, and having to either assess or recommend a change in terms of prioritization.

Let me just speak to the restaurants that are approaching us, and definitely if we had a huge demand on the program, we would work with our decision makers to adjust and determine how we can best support the Restaurant Association. Definitely to date, we've

had a wide range of restaurant types approach the program and make inquiries. That includes a bakery-type restaurant in Yarmouth, but also restaurants connected to hotels in Cape Breton.

In 2017, we had three restaurants supported through the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program, and in 2018-19 we were able to support 10 restaurants thus far. The investment actually is now representing around one-third of the funding that we're distributing to businesses across Nova Scotia.

We're pleased with the uptake, but again, it's early days and we have been having meetings with Restaurant Canada and the Restaurant Association of Nova Scotia about how to promote the program even more moving forward. But like any other business, a restaurant that is wanting to make an accessibility improvement to their bathroom, they can do so through the first category of the Built Environment, and they would be eligible up to \$50,000, and we would support the project at an eligibility of 66 per cent, so two-thirds of the funding could come from the province.

The work we've done in looking at the costs of meaningful accessibility-related improvements to a bathroom, usually the range of that cost is \$15,000. That's part of the way we can work and communicate to the Restaurant Association and to its members that in some cases it's not an overwhelming cost - that it makes good business, it is something they need to pay attention to because of the Human Rights ruling, but also there is a resourcing tool available to them now through the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program and we would like to meet with them and help them make that modification.

One thing that I would want to mention - again, it's like any business - the entrance and your ability to get into the space is key, so when we're talking to any business and specifically wanting to do a renovation to a bathroom to make it accessible, that would be the first conversation: is your entrance and your pathway accessible? If it's not, then we would talk to them about how they can apply through the grant program - again under that first category - to address the entranceway so that people can be in the space. So we look forward to the opportunities ahead in terms of supporting the commitment to restaurants having accessible bathrooms.

MR. HARRISON: Is the demand for them such that those that would not apply to the program or for that amount of funds - are they still required to do their own funding for getting that bathroom accessible?

MS. STEGEN: If I could defer that particular question to Mr. Post because I think it gets more into the requirements that they may have right now to move forward.

MR. POST: That Human Rights decision was a huge decision. In fact, it was leading the way in Canada on that. We have about 6,000 restaurants in Nova Scotia. We don't really know what percentage have accessible bathrooms, but from my experience, if

a quarter of them are accessible, I'd say that would be a generous number, so a huge task at hand.

So what we decided to do is to collaborate with the various stakeholders on implementing that decision, so we're setting up a whole collaborative process that includes both restaurant associations, the disabled community, municipalities because they play a key role as well - and as well as the building owners associations, because most restaurants are not owned by the people that operate them - to figure out a good way to implement that decision.

We don't want to close any restaurants and some restaurants will probably never meet the code because of their challenges, so what do we do with those? So we're just entering that process now and hopefully by June or July we'll have a whole implementation strategy developed with the community.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Jessome.

MR. BEN JESSOME: Thank you for your time this morning. I would like to ask a couple of questions about ongoing engagement. I guess to date, the stakeholder engagement seems as though it has been positive and consistent. Can you talk a little bit about, on a go-forward basis, how people in the disabled community will have an opportunity to provide feedback?

MS. STEGEN: Maybe I'll start by talking a little bit about the design process and the feedback we're receiving now, and then talk about our plans for 2019. As I mentioned earlier, when we were designing the program and we had draft guidelines and an application ready, we did do a consultation. The disabled community, along with property owners, professionals in the technical services and the business sector were invited to that consultation.

The kinds of questions we asked were: what challenges do businesses face in being fully accessible; how do you see this grant program helping; are there still gaps and challenges that will impede businesses moving forward; where should the grant program focus to have the greatest impact; does business see risks in the area that we should be aware of; and how do we successfully launch the program? Very important questions and we got some good feedback.

What we heard was that it was very important for the disabled community and the business community that we commit to using the grant program as a way to increase awareness of the range of disabilities and the range of challenges that are being faced, but also the range of opportunities that can be implemented to make meaningful adaptations or accessibility-related improvements, that there be a simple online process that was reviewed regularly and engaging those sectors and those communities was very important, and that the grant be made available to all businesses.

[10:45 a.m.]

If some of you recall, we launched the program as the Small Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program. It changed three months later to the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program, and it was based on that feedback, but also, we kept the word “small” when we launched but then realized there were some businesses not applying because they don’t see themselves as small. In their community, they’re big. We wanted to remove that confusion, so we approached the Accessibility Directorate and CCH and asked for permission, so it’s the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program and of course, to promote the program through existing networks.

So getting back to your question, that’s an important part of the engagement with the disabled community, how we can be working with them to promote the program and then also to ensure that the program complements existing grant programs that are already available. That has been our focus.

Then as it relates to the feedback that we have been receiving, I do want to speak to one in particular. It relates to an individual who approached us as an enterprise. The owner herself identifies as severely disabled. It’s Corvid Enterprises in Antigonish, and this particular business is in the culture industry. In her final report, she writes:

This grant allowed me to show a profit in my business for the first time in several years. It has provided me with equipment that should last a considerable time and document handling systems that I can use for future projects. It also allowed me to contribute to society as a disabled business owner, by providing an example and leadership to others on what can be accomplished with funding support to adapt a working environment in the cultural industry sector to be productive for a disabled individual.

The funding allowed me to complete an important cultural project that should hopefully bring pride to the province, which could not have been done without the assistance of the Business Accessibility program. There is every reason to believe my cultural industry business will even grow further, thanks to the new accessible working environment created through the grant program.

The feedback we’re receiving is very important. In many cases, we’re getting these testimonials, these great stories. They’ll also be about following up with clients.

I think, getting back to your question about the future, it really is about how we take the evaluation plan to the next level, which is not just looking at the final reports from the businesses but also interviewing people in the community, going to the sites and seeing how it’s being used so that we ensure that it did make a difference in the community, engaging the disabled community in that round table that I spoke about earlier on how we

can be continuously improving the program, staying connected to the Accessibility Directorate in a collaborative way and always in touch about where they're going with the 2030 strategy, and then of course working with the disabled and the networks on promoting the program at the community level. I really think the best way for us has been - whether it be through reachAbility or ourselves - to get out to constituencies and get out into the local area through a luncheon and talk to businesses about the program.

MR. JESSOME: Thank you, Ms. Stegen. I appreciate that. I'm not certain who I'm directing this follow-up to, but can one of you speak to any sort of definitive or pending plan for evaluation? We talked a little bit about the ongoing face-to-face and exit interviews, if you will, with respect to companies that have been through the program. Is there any type of goal setting or numbers that you are trying to attach with respect to uptake on the program or effectiveness of the program that you can speak to at this point?

MS. STEGEN: Definitely, I can make the evaluation plan available after today's meeting, if that's of interest to folks. It's early days, so I would describe the evaluation plan that we have right now as focused on two areas. One is building awareness for the grant program and ensuring that the program is effective. When we talk about effectiveness, we're paying attention to things like, is it meeting the needs of the business community? Are we ensuring that the grant program is resulting in improvements, and are they in place? Are they functioning well for the communities? So whether that be persons with disabilities who are employees or consumers, and to what extent has the program contributed to access and use for people with disabilities, and is the intake process for the business community timely and understood.

So those are the things that are kind of the key areas of this evaluation plan, but because it's early stages, when we're at that 15-month mark, which will be the end of this fiscal year, the idea is that we'll take the data from the final reports, we'll interview some of our applicants and we'll look at the 2030 strategy, and we'll re-evaluate. I think we'll be able to have some data from those final reports that will give us a benchmark, and we have a strategy now to be able to say, where are we going for the next two to three years and re-establish, but because it was early stages, we didn't get into specific quantitative targets at this point.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Smith-McCrossin.

MS. ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Good morning. I am curious if you could share with me what type or location of businesses are applying and qualifying for the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program, and specifically I'm curious about our buildings in downtowns across the province.

Many businesses or building owners in downtowns are small business owners with small to minimal profit margins. Even though they want to make the buildings accessible, sometimes the costs are prohibitive and it's just not affordable. I've seen this time and time again in downtown Amherst where we have many beautiful, old buildings, but they're not

accessible and they end up sitting on the market and either not selling or selling, but never being used for an active business. The Scotiabank right in downtown is a perfect example of that, and business owners have said we can't afford to make it accessible.

So we're seeing many old buildings being left vacant. In fact, recently even our own government moved the NSLC out of our downtown, even though there are many vacant buildings that they could have moved it to. So we're just assuming that the government didn't want to spend the money to make a building accessible for an NSLC.

Would you say that your program is addressing this need in downtowns in older buildings across the province? I'll ask that question first.

MS. STEGEN: Great question. Since launching the program, we funded a diversity of businesses from across Nova Scotia - rural and urban in downtown areas. As I mentioned before, they were seeing them in various services, whether they be health related, commercial, food and beverage, hospitality, the education sector, the automobile sector. So the investment to date in 2017-18 has been \$900,000, and there were 16 projects. In 2018-19, so far we've invested \$500,000, and 24 projects or close to \$600,000. Also, as I've spoken to, we expect that we will spend the \$1 million investment this year.

So when we look at some statistics in terms of where we're at, we are seeing that close to 13 per cent of the projects are in the south shore and most are in the downtown area. When I think about the south shore, there is a credit union right in Bridgewater, an old building, that has applied for funding so they would represent those five.

Around 8 per cent of the applicants were funded from the Valley, and 17 to 18 per cent are from the Halifax area - again, Halifax, including Dartmouth and the surrounding area. The greatest number would be Cape Breton - 40 per cent of the applicants funded have been from Cape Breton, and a variety from Inverness to Sydney - in the north Sydney area. Again we're seeing around 5 to 8 per cent for what I call Fundy, which would be the Colchester-Cumberland-East Hants area, and highland is around 8 per cent and that would be Antigonish-Pictou-Guysborough area.

That data is very important because, again, talking about where we're going for next year so a lot of interest from Cape Breton - what happened in Cape Breton? Well, we have some strong networks there, we launched the program there - they invited us to come to Sydney for a luncheon. Five of the workshops for reachAbility happened in Cape Breton. So how can we now do that in other areas and see those numbers rise so that we increase the awareness?

If I can continue on with the question, the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program is a great tool and resource for any business right now to make those meaningful accessibility-related improvements. There are five categories that support a range of options and a range of disabilities. The funding is in the range of \$50,000 for the first

category, the built environment; a maximum of \$30,000 for assistive devices, assistive communication; and for the transportation services, it would be up to \$40,000.

In all of the categories, they're eligible up to two-thirds from the provincial government, so it is a great opportunity and resource. If there are some of those older businesses or older buildings or if the chamber of commerce would like us to come down and talk about how we can support and make businesses accessible and what that could do for the community and the market, we would be pleased to do that.

I think that's my segue to the last point. For any community and for any business, making their businesses accessible is really good business sense. We look at the statistics of one in five Nova Scotians over the age of 19 self identifying as having a disability, and with the aging population, that number is going to increase, that percentage will increase. In terms of a pool of potential business owners, customers and employees, it's just a great opportunity for any rural community in Nova Scotia to consider.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: One of the last questions I had in relation was, if a business owner can't afford the co-pay or their portion, is there any ability for it to be 100 per cent funded through this grant if there is a need but the small business can't afford it?

MS. STEGEN: The first thing is that right now, we would have to request a variance to the guidelines if that was the need. We wouldn't want to not hear from a business if that was their issue or concern.

The first thing that I would encourage them to consider is in kind. In the guidelines, there is an opportunity for businesses to advance material costs, labour costs, and equipment costs in the category of in kind. If it is unskilled labour, it would be at the standard rate of a maximum of \$20 per hour, but if they have in kind of skilled labour, they can use the professional classification and, of course, show proof of identification of those professionals. That's definitely an option for them.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. DiCostanzo.

MS. DICOSTANZO: I believe you answered most of the questions that I had, which was how many applications are you receiving from Halifax? We have a lot more businesses here compared to the rural area and the changes, but I was surprised when you said 17 per cent came from Halifax and 40 per cent from Cape Breton. That leads me to my other question. I was in Inverness this summer and cycling around and ran into that organization for the beach.

MS. STEGEN: Oh, yes. The Mobi-Mats.

MS. DICOSTANZO: That's right. I was so impressed at the time. I was speaking to a couple of the families. These are tourists from the United States and others coming especially because they found out about this. To me this is a huge business idea and a niche

market for Nova Scotia. Let's do this with every beach possible and bring in the reputation that Nova Scotia - has anybody come to you with that idea?

MS. STEGEN: I will speak to it briefly and then request that the question be deferred to Mr. Post because I believe there are some commitments in the strategy for 2030 that speak to a partnership with Lands and Forestry.

As it relates to that particular project, many of you would know that at Communities, Culture and Heritage, beyond the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program, there are many grants available. In the unit of sport and recreation, there is a program, the Recreation Facility Development Grant Program. That particular initiative was supported through the provincial government, through the Recreation Facility Development Grant Program. The Mobi-Mat initiative in Inverness was something we were able to support, and we're very proud of that. Definitely our regional offices are in constant conversation with municipalities about their interest to have more beaches around Nova Scotia, whether they be provincially or municipally supervised - how we can do more.

[11:00 a.m.]

In addition to the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program, through our Recreation Facility Development Grant, we can support that type of work moving forward. I would like to defer to Mr. Post at this time to speak to the work he's doing with Lands and Forestry.

MR. POST: One thing Ms. Stegen said is that 20 per cent of our population has a disability - well, actually, it's 30 per cent - the recent data that's come out from Statistics Canada. I'll circulate this for you. We are the highest in Canada. In fact, that doesn't include individuals or institutions, so probably one out of three people in Nova Scotia have one sort of disability.

When you have a disability, you don't walk or roll alone. It affects your family members and all that, and if you just include direct family members, it affects close to 600,000 Nova Scotians, so it's over half of our population.

In that sense, it's a huge business opportunity - if you restrict those people from entering your business. Then leading to accessible tourism, that's a huge opportunity that some jurisdictions are taking advantage of. In fact, they're marketing themselves. Tuscany, for example, markets themselves as the most successful place in Europe. In fact, I think we've got that opportunity to do that as well.

On the beaches - that thing that happened in Inverness, Cape Breton, was just incredible. Here's this tiny little community - a small group, a couple of individuals put this thing together, and the rest of the province is following their lead. When that happened,

I think it embarrassed HRM. They now have a beach, as well, at Chocolate Lake. It's wonderful to see that.

Lands and Forestry have made a commitment that they will have an accessible beach in each of their regions in the next two years, as well as improve the number of accessible fishing sites, which they currently have. In fact, you can go online and find an accessible fishing site and other opportunities.

The accessible term is huge, and I must compliment Lands and Forestry for their commitment. I'm not just saying that because I'm a civil servant, but of all the departments, they have done an outstanding job of leading the way, taking this opportunity and expanding, including accessible campgrounds.

MS. DICOSTANZO: Just a follow-up, for example, in Inverness, do they have hotels also working with them to make sure - for us to attract tourism, we also need B&Bs and the others to work together in order to have this as a niche market for Nova Scotia.

MR. POST: Exactly. We're working with some of the other business units in government to hopefully develop a whole accessible tourism strategy for Nova Scotia. ACOA is interested as well, because they see it as an opportunity. Yes, I think you're on the mark there, it's a tremendous opportunity for us.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Moving over now to Ms. Leblanc.

MS. LEBLANC: Can I defer to my colleague, Ms. Zann?

MR. CHAIRMAN: You certainly may - Ms. Zann.

MS. ZANN: Just on that note, I certainly hope that Lands and Forestry stops the clear-cutting so there are forests for all our tourists to look at and that the animals aren't all crowded around in our towns and cities because they don't have any habitats anymore.

That said, I did note that yes, there is a large percentage of Nova Scotians that have a disability and that we are definitely on the upper side when it comes to Canada. Along that note, I know this isn't about the business aspect particularly, but as I had mentioned earlier, I have noticed as an MLA in a rural district, in particular, some people who have money are able to get nice, fancy motorized wheelchairs - they're shiny and they've got all the gadgets and stuff. Then some people don't, and they're having trouble getting the next version up from what they have.

Are there any programs that are new that are going to help our people across the province who do want to have a better wheelchair or can get a wheelchair to be able to get to these businesses or to be able to work at all? Can you give me an update on what the stats are for that and what you're working on to try to help people actually be accessible themselves in Nova Scotia?

MR. POST: You're right on wheelchairs. This wheelchair here is \$35,000 - the cost of a small car. There is some assistance available to those who need it through the Department of Community Services that is required. A lot of people depend on NGOs like Easter Seals and others to provide that service. Anything medical, as you know, is expensive and it does restrict people. This chair is my legs.

MS. ZANN: Exactly. As I was telling you about the woman that I know well in my community who has one arm and one leg - she was in a train accident when she was a kid - she was dared to lie under a train, and she did and she got her arm and leg cut off, so she has been dealing with this for a long time.

It breaks my heart to think that we have to have a fundraiser for her to be able to get a proper wheelchair. I did help her get a wheelchair when I first got in government 10 years ago, and at the time she called me and said she had been told by somebody in Community Services when she kept calling to ask if her wheelchair was ready, and they said, why don't you get a number and stand in line? I mean - one arm and one leg. So that just infuriated me and that's when I picked up the phone and talked to the deputy minister and said, this is unacceptable, and we got her the wheelchair the next day.

That is actually one of the things I'm the most proud of, those kinds of small things that help make one person's life better. Even getting her an apartment where she could turn her wheelchair around in her bathroom, she said that was the first time ever in her whole life that she had that. That just breaks my heart because this should not be happening. We need to be able to start to help people live quality lives.

What are we doing to help them in that aspect? What are the things we are doing other than relying on the kindness of the Lions Club or these different Rotary Clubs, which is charity really. They shouldn't have to rely on charity to be able to afford a good wheelchair to get them around. Are there any other new programs that are coming up that you know of or things that we can be lobbying for to try to get government to assist people with?

MR. POST: I agree. I'm not aware of any new programs regarding that. Actually, it goes beyond wheelchairs. It's something that should be looked at.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Since you are side by side and you want back in, I won't put you to the bottom of the list - Ms. Leblanc.

MS. LEBLANC: You talked a little bit about this, but I just wanted to clarify. As we all know, there are different levels or degrees of accessibility, so we could look at a business upgrading to get a chair lift versus the much larger, expensive - putting in an elevator, for instance.

I'm wondering if you have in the program a certain level of standards - like if someone says, I want to make my business wheelchair accessible, then is it like you have

to then put in an elevator? I guess that's my first question. Do you ever ask people to reconsider their applications because their ideas are not meeting a particular standard?

MS. STEGEN: That's a great question. The current guidelines are referred to the accessibility improvements needing to meet the Building Code. That's the first thing. Then of course through the principles of universal design, we'll provide additional information on ways to even go beyond the Building Code, but at a minimum they must meet the Building Code.

There have been times where the panel, based on their expertise - and there are four members of the panel. Wayne would be one of them. The other member was the previous program officer for the Community ACCESS-Ability Program, so it creates a great link for us. Another member is a policy analyst with the Accessibility Directorate. Then the fourth member is someone who has been trained in the Rick Hansen assessor certification and is a civil engineer by trade and provides that background in the Building Code.

It may just be at the stage where they're working with Wayne through the application process before it gets to the panel where, with the concept drawings and the estimates, we will notice that the information does not meet the Building Code, and so we may need to go back with them and get further information and get the estimates to be redone. I would say a few times we have seen that, and it has been around the entrances. The measurement may be slightly off, and so just reminding them where to find the information on the Building Code. On the guidelines, we do list the different categories that they need to be looking at to ensure that their application is in compliance.

Then of course what we will do to add that layer of accountability is add to the terms and conditions in their agreement the details as to what they have agreed to do. That's where these site inspections and final reports become very important to ensure that they did meet that standard and of course to get their certification at the end from contractors and building inspectors, they would again be assessed that way also. The Building Code is current.

At this point, I would defer, if that's okay with the chairman, to Mr. Post because in the strategy for 2030, there is reference to standards being one of the commitments moving forward and new standards related to the built environment focused on universal design will then of course be something we'll be paying attention to because the guidelines would be adjusted to be supportive of those standards. I will defer at this time.

MR. POST: One of the things that we discovered by scanning the globe for what's really working is around standards. In that way, Europe and the U.S. lead the way. Ironically, the U.S. has had an Accessibility Act since the early 1990s - one of the few good things that came out of the Vietnam War. It's interesting.

We have a Building Code, which is a pretty good standard. We can do better. But a Building Code focuses primarily on the building, not the context of the building or

recreational facilities. One of the things that we will be doing is one of the priority standards that we're going to be developing is one on the built environment that goes beyond that.

It's also the reason we formed a partnership with Rick Hansen. The first time I ever met Rick was about four years ago. He came through town here, and he was developing this international standard based on the LEED environmental sustainability example where you have different levels. I loved it and got involved with him to develop that. He has developed an international standard at different levels. We're going to be taking that, refining it, and adapting it to suit Nova Scotia.

Again, that will be done through community engagement. The success of the Accessibility Act was its community engagement. The first time in the history of the province, an Act was developed directly with the community, where people with disabilities sat with the lawyers and the policy makers to actually draft an Act. We want to continue that.

Right now, they are recruiting members from the community to serve on a standards committee which will develop those standards. It will take some time because it's quite complex when you start getting into the details of it. That's one of the areas.

In the meantime, we have the Rick Hansen standard, so if you want to go beyond the Building Code, we now have a way, and you get recognized for it. In time, I would see the Rick Hansen standard as being integrated into things like TripAdvisor.

That's one of the frustrations I have. I had to go to Montreal recently. I was on the website looking for an accessible hotel room. They're all accessible. You call them up and ask them. You make a booking, and you go there. Yeah, I can get into the hotel, and I can get into the room. I just can't go to the bathroom because there's no standard.

That's where we're moving on that. In a way, I think Canada and ourselves in Nova Scotia are going to be leading the way in that. I'll stop there.

MS. LEBLANC: Based on that great answer - thank you - I'm wondering, is there any fear, or are you taking into account that over the next several years, the standards will be created and put in place and the investments that you're making now in businesses may not match up with the standards. Is there a way - for instance use the Rick Hansen model or gold star level - to implement that now so that we're not looking in 10 years at the business that has already had a big investment needs to upgrade again. Any thoughts on that?

[11:15 a.m.]

MR. POST: That's a question we get that all the time from different community groups. That's not just in a built environment, it's any standard. Standards evolve and mature over time like a good wine.

So in this case, we've got the Rick Hansen Foundation standard, which is way beyond the Building Code, and we have that now. We'll be building on that. We can't rush that because, again, it needs community engagement. It needs involvement of the business community, of the architectural community, of the recreational community. There are a lot of players at play here that need to be involved and for us to get it right.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Wilson.

MR. WILSON: This is a follow-up back a little bit to the questions from my colleague from Hammonds Plains-Lucasville in regard to stakeholder and community engagement. In his questioning, it struck me that what was interesting - I mean, one of the most powerful foundational things that we need to have in building legislation, policies, programs and all that, is the voice of the people. Again, as we spoke earlier how Claredon Robichaud was that guy on the ground that could give you that.

I did follow and I know a good history on how we got to where we are today - the challenges we had. In developing these programs and this legislation, the oxymoron - I'm not sure if that's the right word - of the whole thing is, we're developing something for people that we're having a problem getting to or them getting to us. I know that there were a lot of good things done to get access to people with disabilities and, more importantly, have them have access to us in hearing their voices, and I think we learned a lot of things.

I'd be very interested in knowing what we learned on community engagement for people with disabilities and what plans we have to improve that. Because again, when you think about it, we're wanting to hear the voices of people that are having problems having their voices heard simply because they are restricted for one reason or another. I think you guys did a great job in pulling that out, but I think we need to do a better job. I think that's for all of us as MLAs, we learn by our experiences.

Just recently, my mother went through a health issue that left her in a disabled state. You're an MLA for six years and you think you've experienced it all, but you haven't. You think you've learned how the system works, but you haven't. I've learned more from my mother's disability and what I need to do to try to promote things. So again, that experience, that connection, is so powerful. I'll stop my rant on that. I really do want to know - probably Mr. Post, I keep looking at you on that - what your thoughts are on how we could do better and what we are doing in that respect.

MR. POST: The first voice is critical to getting things right. There are many first voices out there because of the range of disabilities. I only became disabled six years ago.

It was all new for me. Here I am as a city planner, worked around the world - never really thought about accessibility. It really opened my eyes, and that's how I got so involved - I was retired at the time actually when I became disabled and I got pulled back in to lead this.

It's going to be a learning experience for all of us, including us here. I'm learning things all the time and I'm running into different barriers all the time doing things and engaging community. A little example is dealing with people who are deaf, who are blind, who have cognitive issues and all that. So this engagement of community is so central to what we're doing, keeping grassroots involved.

When we were developing this Access by Design document, we had focus group sessions. They were fully accessible with American Sign Language and different interpreters there. We also wanted to put out an online survey. It's pretty straightforward, right? You have the SurveyMonkey out there, and you do that. We put it all together, and then we ran into a barrier, and it was an institutional barrier, where an online survey was the only survey tool that was available that was accessible to the blind but we weren't allowed to use it in Nova Scotia because of a regulation that any survey that's online, the data has to be stored in Canada. SurveyMonkey, who knows where it's stored. It could be Finland, it could be Cape Breton. We don't really know.

There are these things that we keep on running into and learning about. Luckily, they gave us an exemption to that, and they let us go ahead. But it's a journey, it's not a sprint to get to where we are. I'm learning so much each day from the different disability groups, and we're just integrating it and trying to do our best.

The other important thing is it's not just about people with disabilities, to contain it - it's really to integrate into the community. That's why when we set up the Accessibility Act, one of the requirements in there now is that there has to be an accessibility advisory board, 12 members - I call them the apostles of accessibility. Half of them have to be persons with disabilities, but the other half not, and that's really important. We want the business community there because all those people are learning, and they're spreading it.

One of the critical things in my work over the years - I have always found children to be such a powerful change agent in community. One of the first things we did cost very little money, if any. I went to the library, our lovely Halifax Central Library here. It's amazing how accessible that is. That second floor where the children are is my favourite floor. I went there, and I said, do you have any books on disabilities for children? They said, come back on Monday, and I went back there, and there was a pile that high. They allowed me to take them all out to the office.

We went through them, and we decided to pilot a project we called Readability. We have children with disabilities reading about their disability. We're targeting four- to six-year-olds. They're still pliable. You can still change them. The power of that is incredible. The first session was a couple of blind people reading, using braille. They taught the kids

some braille, taught them about etiquette with service dogs and all this, and some games about being blind.

The next session was interesting. It was with the deaf, someone reading with sign language and an interpreter, and teaching the kids some sign language. The impact that had was just incredible. A few days later, I got a call from one of the teachers. She said, oh Gerry, there's a little boy, he would not sit. He stood up throughout the whole thing, the sign language. He says, little Johnny, I got a call from his mother. He didn't speak for two days. He invented his own sign language at home.

The power that has and the ripple effect that has throughout the community. It does to the parents, the grandparents, and all of that. The children are really, really important in getting this awareness, this education out there. I'll stop there.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We have about 20 minutes left, and I have five on the speaking list, so I think we'll proceed the rest of the way without a supplementary, if I may, so that we can try to get to everyone. Mr. Horne.

MR. HORNE: Thank you. It has been very exciting, and that's a good word, here, for what you're saying and what you're doing in our communities and across the province.

As a go-forward, how will you feel about this program up to 2030? Are you able to mastermind the use of all that money that will be given, \$1 million a year, or are you going to be exposed to much more because of all the different questions, like from Dartmouth North and Clare-Digby? I'm just wondering about your staff abilities and needs and requirements, the kind of programs and grants that will be given out. I guess talk about the progress of your journey. It would almost seem like a journey that you're commanding and required to follow. If you can just go down the road a little bit on what you feel is going to happen and how you can deal with it with the finances that are available at the moment.

MR. POST: Our initiative, our journey, is much more than grants. It's nice to have a grant. It's much more than that. Everybody in the community has to participate in this. The numbers speak for themselves. If you don't, you're going to be left out as a business or whatever. We're working very closely with all sectors. Municipalities, for example, will play a significant role in this. As the chairman knows, we're working with the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities. We have a working group going on. In the Act, there's a requirement that, once prescribed - and hopefully they will become prescribed in April - all municipalities are going to have to prepare an accessibility plan of what they can do to make their municipalities more accessible.

We have this working group going with the federation. We decided to pilot Wolfville, not because the chairman is there, but it just happens to be a nice community, and the university as well can play a role in all of that. We have been working with the Town of Wolfville, and again, it's all community-based. They put out a call for applications for people to serve on an accessibility committee. They were overwhelmed by the response,

which surprised them. We had town hall meetings, and the chairman was there as well, to have people engaged, to identify where the barriers are, to talk about that. The community developed an accessibility plan. It's in draft form. It's on the website for the Town of Wolfville. You can go and have a look at it. It's going to their council for approval in two weeks' time. That will hopefully become a bit of a template.

Out of that, we're also preparing a handbook for all municipalities along with a training program to make things happen. We're doing the same with the universities and the community college. There's a lot going on. Everybody has a role to play in our community. When people see it, they will act. We went out for the consultation and we met with many people. One of the top things that came out was the need for greater awareness. Once people see it, they will change.

I'll give you one little story here in Halifax with Ambassatours. They went to the Utility and Review Board for approval for expanding their fleet. None of the buses they were proposing were accessible, so there was an intervention by the community. The community met with the owner of Ambassatours. When he saw, all buses from now on in his fleet are going to be accessible, and partly because of this accessible tourism thing. When you look at who's coming off the cruise ships, it's usually elderly people, a lot of mobility challenges. He saw it, and there was no need for regulation. He's making the investment because it makes community sense, business sense. There's lots happening. As well, as I said, here is a city planner who didn't have a clue about accessibility.

We're working with Dalhousie and others to embed accessibility into curriculum. It's completely irresponsible to graduate an architect or a planner or even a web designer without knowledge of universal design, when you look at these sorts of numbers. We're working in all sectors on all aspects to make things happen. It's an enormous effort.

The beauty of Nova Scotia is that we're small. We can make things happen very quickly. Rick Hansen was here recently, and he just can't get over how fast we're moving. I think in part, it's because of our size as well as the support we have out there with these little tiny groups doing big things, like Inverness, leveraging that and setting an example to the larger organizations like HRM and the province. It's pretty exciting, and it's really a movement more than just a project. That's the way I view it, anyway.

[11:30 a.m.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Smith-McCrossin.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I just have to say how much I enjoy listening to you, Mr. Post, and sharing. It reminds me of my grandfather, so I'm just going to share. He lost his leg in one of the Springhill bumps many years ago, and he went on to work at the deaf school in Amherst. I remember as a young child being fascinated with his stump and he taught us all how to do sign language, but growing up I never looked at my grandfather as someone who was disabled. It was just what he lived with.

It became really apparent to me as he aged, and he got to a point where he was no longer able to drive, and that lack of independence took away his spirit, to be honest. It was very difficult as family to see that. It really emphasized to me the importance - if we can empower people as much as possible by removing as many barriers as possible, we have a better society.

That leads me to my question. I've been working with many people in our community who have barriers. Our regional hospital - the building is accessible, but the location is not accessible. Our province about 15 years ago made a decision to build a new hospital, but outside of the town. At the time, it was promised that there would be a sidewalk, there would be accessibility built in so that people could get there, but it never happened. Every day we have people in their motorized wheelchairs driving on the highway in very unsafe conditions because they don't have transportation. It's their only way of getting to the hospital. We also have many people in our community that don't have transportation - they can't afford it - so they walk.

I've been working with TIR, with our municipalities to say, how can we get access to our hospital? No one is taking responsibility. Everyone just passes - it's someone else's responsibility. I just find it ironic to be here at this amazing meeting this morning and hear all of the great work that you're doing, but we don't have an accessible hospital in my area. I'm looking for your advice - if you can give me any direction of how to make this happen.

MR. POST: I'm finding that, too, after being in a chair for six years at some places, and it's embarrassing, where there was no accessibility lens put on location or design. That's why we're doing the standards. That's included in the standard.

An example is Access Nova Scotia in Bayers Lake. I can't get to it this time of year. I don't have a car. I can go by transit, but there are four lanes of traffic, no sidewalk, and a barrier. It's not safe. The building itself is beautiful - it's accessible. That's why we need those standards, to make that happen, but there's no need to wait for standards to get that correct. We're working with TIR. I'm preaching - we have to make sure that when you choose a location of a facility, whether it's a hospital or a school or what have you, that it's accessible beyond the building. That doesn't just include a sidewalk to it, but also grade and all those sorts of things, because that can be difficult. That's why standards are so important.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Jessome.

MR. JESSOME: Can you chat a little bit about the expectation and impact that this initiative will have on home-based businesses and any perceived obstacles or work that's being done with the municipalities with respect to Building Codes?

MS. STEGEN: The example of the feedback that I shared from Corvid Enterprises would be an example of a home-based business. Definitely businesses in Nova Scotia are encouraged to apply to the program, and in that particular case, the owner actually had

three other people working in her home location. I guess my message today would be they are eligible and there are the five categories available, and we hope that's an important part of not just growing business in Nova Scotia, because this program is not just about consumers, but also the persons with disabilities who are the employers and employees, and contributing to that workforce. That's very important, and they're included within the guidelines.

The second part of your question was - sorry?

MR. JESSOME: I'm curious, in experiences that I have had with local businesses, there have been challenges around upgrades or changes to infrastructure on a property that has a particular type of zoning, so I'm curious what the relationship or the initiative is with municipalities and are there any challenges that are either perceived or to be addressed?

MS. STEGEN: I'll start and give context within the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program, and then I'll defer to Mr. Post for the work that he's doing with municipalities. It's a really great question because when we met with the business community and the disabled community early on in the October 2017 consultation, this was an issue that was raised by the business community - that if you're in an historic area or maybe in a downtown area, some permits may take six or eight months to get processed. I have an application in or ready to come in to CCH and what if I get into this sort of delay.

One of the things that we've tried to do - because it's a bit out of the scope of the actual grant program - is when we're either promoting the program through reachAbility or we're out promoting the program ourselves, how we have conversations with municipalities so that they're aware of the grant program and how important it is when applications are coming in and business is interested to make those changes and we have a goal to have Nova Scotia accessible by 2030, how can they be part of that solution moving forward?

So, we start the conversation, but within the context of the grant program. At this point, I would defer to Mr. Post in terms of the work that he's doing specifically with municipalities.

MR. POST: As Ms. Stegen mentioned earlier, on the Rick Hansen program for example, the second session we had we focused on municipalities, to really upgrade their skills - the building inspectors and planners and all that - because we see them as being a transfer agent to people in the community, so you're not just approving things. Let's have them be more proactive - when someone comes in with an application that they have to start suggesting improvements to accessibility that may be beyond the Building Code.

To give you an example, bathrooms are a big thing. In fact, it was during the Law Amendments Committee hearing that we had on the Act, there was a mother with a 12-year-old daughter who is severely disabled. When she's at a shopping centre and her

daughter has to go to the bathroom, she has to undress her daughter and dress her on the floor of a public bathroom - this thing about hygiene alone and the indignity of that.

With the Rick Hansen thing, there are now change tables for adults. They're just larger. You try to put on your pants when you're in a wheelchair, it's nearly impossible. We don't have many of those here. I was recently in Toronto where I experienced it. It worked for me. It's not a big expense and, in fact, Dawn will help finance that sort of thing.

It's so important to make those sorts of changes, but you don't realize it if you're an owner of a gym or whatever - that's a requirement. In fact, what opened up the markets for them - I'm looking for a gym right now and I can't find a good gym with an accessible change room because they haven't really thought about that. We have a lot of work to do on creating this awareness. As I said earlier, once the awareness is there and the support is there, things will start to happen.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We're going to try to squeeze two more Q&As in before our time is up - Ms. DiCostanzo.

MS. DICOSTANZO: Just a quick one. When I read about your course, the Universal Design Building Capacity courses - this is for people to take the course so they can become the person who comes to your business to tell you what you need to become. I compared it to Clean Nova Scotia. I used Clean Nova Scotia 10 years ago when it was new. At the time it was \$300 to bring them to the house to tell me where - because we were changing the windows, it was the right time and you got that money back.

I'm trying to see if your courses have the same incentive that businesses will call you to send these people. First you said \$1,000, and the person who is taking the course - to me, I'm seeing this as employment for young people as a job on the side that they can learn this as well or for people who have some disability who can take these courses. If you can give me a roundabout figure of how much it's going to cost that individual to take the course and how the businesses, once they call them, how much of the \$1,000 can be refunded once they do the work. Is that correct? Is it done similar to Clean Nova Scotia?

MS. STEGEN: I will defer to Mr. Post. He's more familiar with the implementation side versus our work with the Nova Scotia Community College.

MR. POST: It's very similar in that now we have a standard as well to adhere to, and the assessors that are trained can also be certified under CSA, Canadian Standards Association, so you take an exam and a test. Once you become certified under that, then you can rate it according to the Rick Hansen standard.

They basically have two standards - bronze and gold, there's no silver. If you want a gold standard, you're going to have to hire an assessor who is CSA certified. That's what we're training through this program. Then as a business, if you want to do that, Dawn's program will help fund an assessor to come in and do the assessment.

MS. DICOSTANZO: So, what percentage of that?

MS. STEGEN: Within the first category, the Built Environment, we will fund 15 per cent of the costs associated with the assessment.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We'll move to our final question from Ms. Leblanc.

MS. LEBLANC: I was just wondering, given all of this, Mr. Post, what are your views on having sign language interpreters in our House of Assembly during legislative sessions?

MR. POST: I've talked to the Speaker, the Honourable Kevin Murphy, on it and yes, I think we should. It's a short answer.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. I think it was a very interesting discussion. Before I thank you, I'll give you a couple of minutes to wrap up. Ms. Stegen.

MS. STEGEN: I'd like to thank the committee for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program. As we stated earlier, because of this program, more businesses are investing in improvements to their establishments, making them more accessible for persons with disabilities. These investments help Nova Scotia further the province's commitment to equal opportunity, improving accessibility for persons with disabilities.

I'd like to thank Wayne for his time and dedication to help administer the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program, and of course I'd like to thank Mr. Post for his tremendous leadership, and for the incredible work he and his team do at the Accessibility Directorate. In addition, I'd like to thank the individuals in the room - our province's MLAs for helping to promote the program amongst the constituents. Thank you.

We all want a province with no limitations, where Nova Scotians can work, live, and contribute to our vibrant communities. It takes business, community, and government of all levels coming together to make changes to help all Nova Scotians. I thank you for helping us work towards a province that can be enjoyed by all Nova Scotians regardless of their abilities.

If you or your constituents have any further questions about the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program, I hope you won't hesitate to reach out. Together we're making small changes that make a big difference.

[11:45 a.m.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Stegen, Mr. Matheson, and Mr. Post. Again, I thought it was a very good discussion and a very important topic for all of Nova Scotia of

the issues around us as an aging population. Every one of us is aging, and every one of us is one instant away from living with a disability.

This is very, very important work from folks in the civil service. Mr. Post, I want to thank you for your leadership on this in terms of all your advice and insights into the development of the Act and your ongoing work. We're very fortunate that you have come out of retirement to offer your services to Nova Scotians. Thank you very much.

We'll take a two-minute break to allow our guests to step away from the table, and then we'll deal with our committee business.

[11:46 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[11:49 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: I would like to call the meeting back to order.

Folks, we have a couple of housekeeping items just to clean up following our last meeting. The first, with the proroguing of the House, the procedures of the committee are prorogued as well, so we just need to confirm the times that we will be meeting.

Mr. Wilson, would you like to make a motion?

MR. WILSON: I would assume this is in regard to the committee business with the meeting during the House session.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Correct.

MR. WILSON: I would like to make a motion that the Community Services committee not meet during the House sessions, and the July and August summer months, as usual, for the duration of the committee mandate.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Any discussion? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

The second item is the 2008 Annual Report of the Standing Committee on Community Services. Again, that was work by the previous committee before prorogation. We agreed that we would accept that report, but folks didn't have that in front of them, or it hadn't been circulated before we considered it.

That has now been circulated, and I would ask for a motion to accept that report and allow the chairman to sign on behalf of the committee and table that at the Legislature. Mr. Jessome.

MR. JESSOME: So moved.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Any discussion? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

The next meeting date is to be determined, depending on when the House concludes. I think we had potentially May 7th or June 4th probably as the likely dates of the next meeting. Following the closure of the House, we'll be advising committee members on that date.

Seeing nothing else, I now adjourn this meeting.

[The committee adjourned at 11:52 a.m.]