

‘Rhoda Report’ looks at accessibility issues in Bancroft

By Jim Eadie

The old expression ‘walk a mile in my shoes’ applies only if you can walk. Local 22-year-old woman Rhoda Dickinson was able to walk up until she was 9 years old, and has depended on a wheelchair for mobility for the past 13 years. Dickinson suffers from an extremely rare condition called Fucosidosis, which causes progressive bone and muscle deterioration, loss of speech, and very early arthritis. Originally, not expected to survive past the age of 12, she is still thriving, even if her body has trouble keeping keep up with her enthusiasm.

Even though she can no longer speak, a ‘thumbs up’ from her is good, but a ‘thumbs down’, and look out!

One of the special places she loves to spend time is the Lifehouse, located in Bridge St. next to the York River. Getting there is a problem-plagued, and even dangerous journey in a wheelchair, and Dickinson and her friend Robbyn Hatton decided to do something to bring awareness to the plight of disabled or older citizens:

‘The Rhoda Report’.

Perry Kelly, public works manager for the Town of Bancroft very generously and graciously agreed to take a tour of some of the towns streets and sidewalks for a ‘Rhoda Report’ on Sept. 30.

With Kelly pushing the wheelchair, the tour started on the west side of the intersection of Station St. and Hastings St. where the first problem was found. The ‘light change’ buttons are not located where someone in a wheelchair can reach them, are blocked by recycling and garbage containers or snow in the winter. In some cases the walk signal then does not cycle up, and the wheelchair bound traveler is left sitting.

Then came the steeply sloped sidewalk going north past Vance’s Motors. The sidewalk has so much slope it takes considerable strength to push a wheelchair straight, as it wants to swing left directly into oncoming traffic due to the forces of physics and nature. Kelly discovered that first hand, struggling to keep the wheelchair on the sidewalk.

‘I am surprised,’ he said. ‘I never would have thought about that before.’

Hatton noted that the slope also causes a lot of trouble for older people, people with hip problems, or when icy in the wintertime.

Good marks were given for the patching heaves and cracks in the sidewalk.

‘They are a trip hazard,’ noted Kelly.

Hatton added that a wheelchair can become stuck, and in addition the ‘thump’ caused to the wheelchair is very hard on Dickinson’s back. She is glad they were fixed.

Then came the intersection with Bridge Street. Again ‘light change’ buttons not reachable, and the painted crosswalk ends at a high curb with no slope.

Hatton demonstrated how the person pushing a wheelchair must push the rider along the curb in a traffic lane in order to get to one of the buttons. The number of impatient drivers under these circumstances surprises Dickinson and Hatton.

At the Lifehouse, there is a high curb to the street, making access to crossing Bridge St. to use the boardwalk difficult.

‘You know, the curbs can be fixed by our own staff,’ said Kelly. ‘We can look at getting the slope cut down on those curbs.’

After the one-hour tour, Kelly thanked Dickinson and Hatton for arranging this opportunity. He noted that often some of the things that can make a big improvement are simple. "I have learned a lot," he said. "We often take a lot of things for granted."

"I feel that he (Kelly) heard what Rhoda had to say," Hatton later said. "She would like me to help her do another tour in the winter time."

Dickinson would also love to conduct voluntary "Rhoda Report Cards" for local businesses and public buildings that might be interested, in the future.

"There are lot's of problems there," said Hatton. "Simple things like just a doorstep will really help someone in a wheelchair."

Emma Dickinson, Rhoda's mother also spoke of her frustration with helping Rhoda in, out and around buildings. "She doesn't want to just go window shopping. I have also seen people on scooters trying to get off their scooters or reaching with their canes to press "light change" buttons. These improvements would help a lot of people.

