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# Measuring Up the North

The BC Paraplegic Association's vision is a World Without Barriers. "Measuring Up the North" is working hard to make that dream come true in northern British Columbia.

In Prince George, BC a conference was presented by "Measuring Up the North" of which the BC Paraplegic Association is a founding member with the North Central Municipal Association (NCMA). The conference explored the opportunities for BC's northern communities to make themselves inclusive, safer and healthier places for all their citizens, with particular attention paid to the needs of a rapidly aging population and those with physical disabilities, whether long term or short term. Studies show that the aging population wants to stay in their own homes for as long as possible, and from a social and economic perspective, communities and governments should support that desire in every way they can. It is very expensive to provide institutional care and communities are better served by the participation in everyday life of a healthy, active and happy older population.

Melanie Crombie of the BC Paraplegic Association, engaged and inspired the over 135 delegates representing several professional disciplines and communities, opened day two of the conference with her story of "The Dream," which began in 1957. She described how a group of people with spinal cord injuries dreamed of helping others and of building a more accessible community - a world without barriers. The first thing they accomplished was to convince government to change the driving regulations so a person could drive a car using hand controls. They



Zero-step homes don't need to be one-story.

kept the dream alive and eventually the BC Paraplegic Association gave Sam Sullivan (a former mayor of Vancouver) his first job to travel BC and convince mayors to form advisory committees on accessibility. Many years later, Sam and leaders in the community started the "measuring up" movement; people like Mike Harcourt (former BC Premier), Claude Richmond, the former minister of Employment and Income Assistance for the Province of BC, who funded the project, and Legacies 2010, who then developed the Measuring Up tool all got involved. You can find

the "Measuring Up" tool at the 2010 Legacies Now Society website at [2010legaciesnow.com](http://2010legaciesnow.com).

In 2006, Claude Richmond presented "Measuring Up" to members of the Union of BC Municipalities where two members caught the dream: Murray Krause, councillor in Prince George and Mary Sjostrom, now mayor of Quesnel. Mary, Murray and Maxine Koppe, executive director of the North Central Municipal Association (NCMA) then visited Pat Harris, of the BC Paraplegic Association in Prince George with the idea of joining forces. Pat and Melanie Crombie were delighted with the prospect of partnering with NCMA to further BCPA's dream of accessibility and inclusion in the north. With NCMA, they set out to search for the perfect person to spearhead the Measuring Up the North (MUTN) project. Laurie Ringaert, a Canadian accessibility consultant now living in North Carolina was asked to suggest potential candidates. Laurie did; she took the job herself calling it her "dream" job and she has taken the Measuring Up the North project further than many dreamed it would go.

The initial goal was to have six communities be part of the MUTN project, but 38 communities caught the "dream" and are working hard to make their communities ones without barriers. Many of them were at the conference networking, learning and sharing, building momentum and support.

Results of day one of the conference reflected the research and aspirations of the project: there is a business case for universal design that includes accessibility; accessibility is essential to daily functions of the disabled and aging population and their quality

of life; the Canada Building Code needs to be changed to ensure these practical concepts will be included in all buildings: public and private buildings and homes.

In fact, visitable homes are seen as a key element of accessible communities. Imagine leaving the hospital wheelchair bound to go home and when you get there you cannot get to the front door because of steps, and

when you are manhandled up the steps, you cannot get through the front door because it is too narrow. After being manhandled again to get inside, when you need to use the wash-room, you cannot get through that door on your own and need help moving from the wheelchair to the toilet. Imagine your frustration and the embarrassment, the guilt and concern because your caregivers are having

to struggle so hard to help you. This is the "get in and pee" challenge faced by all disabled persons, whether by disease, injury or age.

It does not have to be that way. Eleanor Smith from Concrete Change and the originator of the idea of visitability made a great business case for building new homes with visitability criteria as part of the base foundation for design and construction. Her three basic criteria of visitability are:

- one zero-step entrance somewhere on the house;
- 32-inch wide doors on the main floor;
- one main floor bathroom with manoeuvring room.

She said that, where possible, all new houses should be built so that anyone can access the main floor. One never knows when they may become disabled themselves. Inviting a relative or friend with a disability over to visit means that they need to be able to get into the house and have access to a bathroom. Besides, imagine how useful that zero step entry can be to a mom struggling with a baby carriage, or bringing in groceries, or when you move - wouldn't it be nice not to have those steps and a door wide enough for that brand new sofa?



This visitable home in Winnipeg belongs to Moira Jones.



Zero-step homes just make life easier.

Eleanor not only makes the case from the useability angle, but she outlined the extra costs to build this way. Wait for it: \$2 for the bigger doors and ranging from just over \$100 to \$550 US, assuming at least a half bath is already planned for the main floor. Plus Eleanor demonstrated that homes built this way look every bit as good as those with steps and narrower doors, showing pictures of homes from Bolingbrook, Illinois where the mayor and council legislated visitability criteria for all new home construction.

Eleanor contends that building homes in this manner is also a selling point for the construction companies. They have the oppor-

tunity to make a name for themselves as smart builders using statements like “a zero-step entrance for your convenience” as routinely as “granite counter tops.” As well, these builders have the option to sell upgrades like bathroom hardware such as a roll-in shower,

side-opening ovens, a main floor bedroom, lower counters, and electrical outlets and switches placed at convenient heights. In Prince George, one builder, Winton Global Homes, has developed a unique way to “hang” a floor so that current building code requirements can be satisfied while still creating the opportunity for zero-step entrances and at only about \$100 more in cost than the traditional method of setting a floor.

Eleanor also detailed the cost of not building in this manner:

- expensive renovations;
- substandard living conditions which result in negative health affects;
- falls (can be life threatening);

- isolation which has negative health implications;
- caretaker health issues and stress; and
- institutionalization (an expensive and often avoidable option with potential negative health affects at a heavy cost to the taxpayer).

Eleanor is a practical and visionary advocate for including visitability criteria into new home building citing the fiscal wisdom/tax implications, sustainability aspects and public health concerns as well as the opportunities for those involved in home construction – the builders, planners and elected officials. The benefits to the community are enormous. This dream is still catching: recently new Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards were published: LEED-ND (Neighbourhood Development) and LEED for Homes.

It never fails to surprise me how we continue to do things the way we have always done just because we have always done them that way. And how at times a simple idea can seem so innovative – and make an enormous difference. Visitable homes seems pretty simple to me; build it right in the first place and open the door to better lives for all. ☐