

# Just how tough it is to get around this city in a wheelchair?

CITY COUNCILLOR SPENDS A DAY DISCOVERING, FIRST HAND HOW WE RATE FOR USERS



Herald photo by David Fuller

Councillor Bridget Mearns talks with Chris Schamber as they ride electric wheelchairs along the path in front of the entrance to the Galt Museum Thursday morning.

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Lethbridge has come a long way in advancing its convenience for those living in the city with mobility challenges.

But there is still work to be done.

Councillor Bridget Mearns found out first hand on Thursday as she toured around in a motorized wheelchair with Chris Schamber, a barrier free designer who has often lobbied to city council about accessibility issues.

City council was challenged by the Canadian Paraplegic Association during its Aug. 20 meeting to spend a full day in a wheelchair and learn what it is like travelling around Lethbridge.

"In order for our city to be inclusive it has to be accessible," Mearns said during a stop at the Galt Museum.

"These are little things that you don't notice. Chris has been an amazing guide in pointing all these things out to me. Some of them are glaringly obvious like curb cuts that don't match up to the crosswalk."

Mearns encountered her first problem early on in the day when she left her northside home to catch the bus.

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# WHEELCHAIR

There was a light post in the middle of a sidewalk on St. Edwards Blvd. near Stafford Drive, forcing her to choose between a narrow passage on one side and the street on the other.

She also found it tricky getting on the bus — not because of Lethbridge Transit, whose buses are wheelchair accessible, but because Mearns wasn't used to the detailed motorized controls yet.

She took the bus to MLA Greg Weadick's office for a morning meeting, then met Schamber at City Hall.

They went by Park Place mall, Galt Gardens and up to the Galt Museum to view various examples of accessibility.

"There is a significant difference between a good sidewalk and a bad sidewalk," Mearns said. "Little things have big impacts."

"The city is getting better with their accessibility," Schamber added. "For the most part it's getting pretty good."

Schamber said the biggest problem he runs into, besides inconsistent sidewalks, is the placement of open door buttons.

He says various buildings can be difficult to enter as some

buttons are set too high off the ground.

"With my limited movements as a quadriplegic, reaching over to hit some of those buttons is hard," Schamber said.

"There's just little things that able-bodied people don't think of."

Mearns went back to City Hall for a meeting in the afternoon, where she also was going to visit her office upstairs and council chambers to gauge the access to her seat.

She then planned to take the sidewalk up Stafford Drive all the way home.

"Just riding my bike I know there's some really tricky spots," Mearns said. "But I'm going to do the full journey."

Her next step will be to look into the potential of creating a standardized design for such features as curb cuts and the height of pedestrian crossing buttons.

"You see really good examples of where they've done a good job," Mearns said. "And then the older examples where it just wasn't a consideration."

"Aldermen are in charge of our community, so who better to take out on a tour?" Schamber said.

"I'm trying to make a better community for the future for everybody."

# MONEY'S TIGHT

"All of these things are frankly beyond our control, but they affect Alberta and they affect our bottom line," said Horner.

The government won't incur any long-term debt as the shortfall will be covered by the \$6.3-billion Sustainability Fund.

Horner reported that overall revenue decreased by \$400 million in the first three months of the fiscal year because of lower oil and bitumen royalties. Expenses increased by \$5 million due to disaster funding.

He noted oil has recently fluctuated between about US\$109 and US\$77 a barrel and currently sits at about US\$95.

Horner said the government is taking action to ensure it meets Redford's promise of balancing the budget by 2014.

He said government departments have been directed to spend less than their budgets and find other efficiencies to save at least \$500 million in total.

Ministers have been asked to review their capital budgets to see where money can be saved.

"We will be reviewing every government program and service to ensure every single penny goes towards delivering programs and services that produce demonstrated results," said Horner.





Herald photo by Ian Martens

## A COMPLICATED DEVICE

Mayor Rajko Dodic looks at the display of a motorized wheelchair before heading out on a tour of the downtown during the Tuesday noon hour with Chris Schamber. Members of city council were recently challenged by the Canadian Paraplegic Association to spend the day in a wheelchair to better understand some of the issues of accessibility around the city.



# HOT-BUTTON ISSUE

16.09.2004

PEDESTRIAN BUTTONS INSTALLED AT DIFFERENT HEIGHTS JUST ONE THE OBSTACLES STILL FACING WHEELCHAIR USERS IN THE CITY, SUGGESTS CITY COUNCIL PRESENTATION

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**C**ity residents who use a wheelchair face obstacles at almost every corner. Chris Schamber, of Quad Design and Barrier Free Consulting, outlined the problem areas in a presentation before city council, Monday.

They include sidewalks with uneven control joints, pedestrian buttons that are installed at different heights and out of easy reach, parking spaces that are too small for lift-equipped vehicles and buildings without family washrooms.

"Pedestrian buttons are one of the main issues that I have," Schamber said. "Some of the facilities are very important for people to get in and out. The more independence

people have the better quality of life they have where they can have their own self-esteem to get in and out."

The city has invested in making travel easier for people who use wheelchairs, including adding curb cuts for street crossings.

"Every year they're getting better and better," he said. "I'm happy with some of the changes they're making. I just wanted to create more awareness for them to maybe, when they're doing things, to make it correct. There are some times where some construction crews do it differently than others. If they're going to spend the money do it right the first time."

For example, pedestrian buttons along Mayor Magrath Drive aren't equally accessible and that situation could have been prevented if a consistent design was applied.

Schamber has devised solutions to the

problems. They include paved pathways, making sidewalks without the lipped control joints and with wheelchair-friendly slope and specially designed parking stalls that would provide access whether in a parking lot or on the street. Signs could also be used to indicate the width of a parking stall in winter time when the lines are obscured.

"I'm just very thankful to be able to give a presentation to create awareness for other people to be able to enjoy a better quality of life in the future," he said.

Accessibility standards weren't the same as they are now when some city sidewalks were poured. As standards have changed over time, the city does some retrofitting work and works with the development community and city staff to ensure new areas of the city are more accessible, Garth Sherwin, city manager, said.