

Richmond, B.C., to experiment with high-tech crosswalks for the blind

BY LAURA BAZIUK, VANCOUVER PROVINCE AUGUST 24, 2010

VANCOUVER — A blind Richmond man's fight for more accessible crosswalks has resulted in the city testing new features at intersections.

Rob Sleath was about to proceed this week with a human-rights complaint against the city for not making crosswalks as accessible as possible for visually impaired people.

"We want access to the public information that's available to all sighted pedestrians," said Sleath, 55. "In other words, you can look up on the street corner and get the name of the intersection. People who are blind or visually impaired don't have that option."

Sleath, who lost his sight 18 years ago because of diabetes, dropped the complaint after officials agreed to a pilot project that will test some new crosswalk features, which he suggested.

Five Richmond intersections will be equipped with tactile and verbal message systems that, with the push of a button, will tell people either the name of the street they're on or the name of the street they're about to cross. There will also be a volume control and a raised arrow that vibrates to tell those hard of hearing which direction to walk.

"I applaud them for this," Sleath said. "I think that's fabulous."

City spokeswoman Cynthia Lockrey said that Richmond officials are "very pleased" with the pilot project.

"It's the opportunity for the City of Richmond to become a leader in accessibility for residents," she said.

Most crosswalks already make bird sounds to tell the visually impaired when the walk signal is on. A cuckoo sound is for north-south streets, while a chirp-chirp sound is for east-west streets.

Like Vancouver and the nearby suburbs of Burnaby and Surrey, Richmond's pilot crosswalks will also have acoustic locator tones. These devices emit a small sound to help blind people locate the button that activates the crossing signal.

Cities such as Saskatoon, Kamloops, B.C., and Penticton, B.C., already provide street names at their crosswalks, but the verbal messages sound at the same time as the walk signal. Sleath said this gives blind pedestrians little time to re-orient themselves if they're facing the wrong way.

If the \$42,000 pilot project gets the green light, Richmond officials plan to retrofit other crosswalks with the technology, Lockrey said.

And the city, home to about 600 people with some form of vision loss, will become the first city in Canada to provide street names prior to the walk signal.

"What we're trying to do is make the environment more accessible to people who are blind and visually impaired, but at the same time, consider the needs of society around these devices," Sleath said.

"We're pretty excited about it."

The five crosswalks will be tested Sept. 17 and Nov. 30. Pedestrians will have a chance to provide the city with feedback at that time, Lockrey said,

© Copyright (c) The Province