

Upfront

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the fine print

TO DO: The London Heritage Farm Society presents its annual **Family Farm Fair** on Sunday, Aug. 8 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the London Heritage Farm, 6511 Dyke Rd. Lots of family fun with a bouncy castle, petting zoo, pony rides, children's games and crafts, antique and collectibles fair, food concession and more. Call 604-271-5220 or visit www.londonheritagefarm.ca.

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the weather

Friday
high.....22
low.....16
Cloudy with sun

Saturday
high.....18
low.....15
Rain

Sunday
high.....18
low.....15
Cloudy with sun

on this day

August 6
1914 – World War I: Serbia declares war on Germany; Austria declares war on Russia.

quote of the week

"There was another Alice Wong helping them with fundraising — not me."
— MP Alice Wong

Blind man takes city to task on crosswalks

Human Rights action filed for failure to install audible prompts

By NELSON BENNETT
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A blind Richmond man has launched a human rights complaint against the City of Richmond for failing to live up to a promise it made to install audio prompts at crosswalks throughout the city.

But Rob Sleath will be going it alone when he appears before the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal Aug. 23 to 27, as the Richmond Committee on Disability, which has supported Sleath in the past, is not supporting his bid to force the city's hand.

"Yes, the city dragged its heels for a long time, but that's the nature of the beast," says RCD secretary Frances Clark.

"The key thing is that he decided to initiate the action at a time when the city was actually working with him. We were making good progress."

Sleath, who is one of about 550 blind or visually impaired people registered with the Canadian National Institute for the Blind in Richmond, disagrees.

He chairs the Advocates for Sight Impaired Consumers, a local group that advocates on behalf of Richmond's visually impaired. He has been lobbying the city on the issue of blind way-finding for several years now.

About five years ago, the city started installing roughly 60 special pedestrian crosswalks at high-traffic areas throughout the city. Sleath lobbied to have them all equipped with audio cues for the blind, but



Rob Sleath tries to negotiate the crosswalk at the Gilbert and Lucas roads intersection with his guide dog.

the city decided against it. "The city went ahead and installed up to 60 of them, knowing full well that they were problematic for people with vision loss," Sleath said.

But in 2007, the city's public

works and transportation approved \$150,000 in funding to retrofit the crosswalks with audio prompts, at a cost of about \$3,000 per crosswalk.

But they've yet to materialize, and Sleath said it all comes down to a disagreement on the type of sys-

tem to use. "The traffic engineering department and myself don't see eye-to-eye in terms of what technology to use," he said.

He's not sure what kind of system the city wants to install — he just knows that it does not want to install any system that uses language cues, but prefers non-verbal sounds.

"The city, for some reason, is not prepared to put in verbal messaging," Sleath said.

The advantage of a verbal cue is that it can tell pedestrians what street they are on — something sighted people simply take for granted. Sleath said the city wanted to go with an audio cue that uses a non-verbal cue, like a clicking sound.

He said he was told by city staff that the city's aversion to verbal messaging may have something to do with Richmond's proximity to an international airport.

Sleath isn't sure what that means. But if it has something to do with Richmond's linguistic diversity, he said the argument does not hold water because street names, like Granville Avenue, are pronounced the same in any language.

"I don't care what language you speak, you are still going to pronounce it 'Granville,'" Sleath said.

Because it is to be the subject of a quasi-judicial hearing, city hall spokesman Ted Townsend said the city could not comment on Sleath's complaints.

For blind people, every step off the curb is a leap of faith

Rob Sleath approaches the corner of Lucas and Gilbert Road, with the help of his guide dog, Lombardi.

He knows there is a lighted crosswalk here, but still has to flail around until he finds the button to activate the flashing amber light. Traffic rushes by.

"Here we are, standing at the corner, and nobody's stopping for us," he says. "They're waiting for the light to go on."

He hits the button and the amber lights flash on. He has no way of

knowing this, however, because he's blind. A car zips past, despite the flashing light.

"It didn't stop, did it?" he says.

In fact, he has to listen to the traffic to make sure it sounds like it has stopped before he takes a leap of faith and steps out onto Gilbert Road.

A handful of controlled intersections in the city have audio cues for the blind. A chirruping or "cukoo" sound signals blind people it is safe to cross because traffic has stopped

for a red light.

But at pedestrian crosswalks, there are no audible cues, and traffic does not have to stop for flashing amber lights, unless there is a pedestrian in the crosswalk.

A blind person has no way of knowing where these special crosswalks are to begin with, and when they do arrive there, they have to hunt for the pole and activation button.

When they push it, they have no way of knowing if the light is flash-

ing because there are no audible cues.

Sleath said audible way-finding technology can be installed at crosswalks that emit low-volume repetitive sounds so that the visually impaired can tell when they are approaching a crosswalk and locate the activation button.

It can also verbally inform them that the light is flashing, and what street they are on. Such systems are in place in the District of North Vancouver and Langley Township.



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