

Blind victory: Richmond man wins fight for more accessible sidewalks

BY LAURA BAZIUK, THE PROVINCE AUGUST 25, 2010



Visually impaired Rob Sleath pushes the button of an audio message crosswalk on Blundell Road in Richmond on Aug. 23. He has dropped a Human Rights complaint after the City of Richmond promised to put new technology to help the blind cross the street.

Photograph by: Les Baszo, PNG

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," Sleath, 55, told *The Province*. "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 intersections along No. 3 Road 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."

Said city spokesperson Cynthia Lockrey: "We're very pleased with the agreement. It's the opportunity for the City of Richmond to become a leader in accessibility for residents."

Most crosswalks already have devices that 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 Burnaby, Vancouver 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 Kamloops, Penticton and Saskatoon already provide street names at their crosswalks, but the verbal messages sound off at the same time as the walk signals. 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* 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.

"[Richmond staff have] come up with the answer here, and 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.

Victory not Sleath's first

Improvements to crosswalks is only one of Rob Sleath's landmark achievements for the blind and visually-impaired community.

The 55-year-old Richmond resident lobbied TransLink for the system that announces bus stops out loud, for signs that reserve seats for the disabled and for special tiles at SkyTrain stations to warn

visually-impaired people they are near the platform's edge, after more than 20 visually-impaired transit users fell onto the tracks.

With ASIC, he has pushed entertainment companies to add descriptive narration to movies so blind people can enjoy a good film.

He's the B.C./Yukon regional chair for the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, and founder of ASIC, Advocates for Sight Impaired Consumers and ComPACT, the Committee to Promote Accessible Conventional Transit.

Sleath has been a "leader in his field as an advocate," said Jane Dyson, executive director of the B.C. Coalition of People with Disabilities. He has worked with the group on guide-dog legislation and transit issues, she said.

"I'm a firm believer that it's not my blindness that's the root of my disability," Sleath said. "It's the environment around me.

"That's really what I'm working toward: changing the environment, because you minimize the disability as a result."

— *with a file from Postmedia News*

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