

City of Barrie platform wheelchair swing proposal

Across Ontario, public parks are updating their structures to include accessible features so children of all abilities are able to enjoy playing outdoors within their community. One item that is lacking in many of these updates is platform wheelchair swings.

The City of Barrie does not currently have a platform wheelchair swing in any of its public parks. It is something that is a necessity for children who are in wheelchairs, like our son Finnley.

When Finnley was younger, one of his favorite activities, and one that was safe given his low tone and lack of mobility, was the baby swing. He would squeal with delight to feel the wind in his hair as he swung. He would giggle watching the other kids running around enjoying the park just like him.

Finnley is now four years old and has outgrown the size capacity of a baby swing. Finnley is in a wheelchair and will never be able to use a standard "big kid" swing. We understand there are the five-point harness swings available at some parks now, but at four years old, it is already becoming a challenge to lift Finn up and down. A few years from now it will be next to impossible for us, and parents like us, to lift their children, no longer toddler sized, out of wheelchairs and up in to a five-point harness swing.

A platform wheelchair swing would solve this problem and would be beneficial for all families with a child in a wheelchair. Being able to participate in the community the same way any other child would is a simple concept; one for which a family who has a child with disabilities strives. It is the concept of inclusion.

We first emailed our ward councillor back in November 2020 in regards to the swing with hopes and dreams that this could one day become a reality. In December 2020 Jennine and John Ditz reached out to us. The Ditzs run a local charity called I Have Resolved - you can find them at www.ihaveresolve.com as well as on Facebook at I Have Resole. Their purpose is inclusion within communities. They coordinated a fundraiser wherein a group of 32 minor hockey players based out of Halton Hills held an 18 hour gaming event to raise money to put towards helping a child with inclusion needs. We were delighted to learn they had selected Finnley for this honour and asked where he needed assistance with inclusion in our community. Our first, and obvious thought of course, was for the fundraiser to help the City of Barrie purchase a platform wheelchair swing. Not only would Finnley love it, so would any child who is wheelchair bound and wants to enjoy swinging on a swing set once again. This would bring inclusion within our community for so many children.

A platform wheelchair swing will also be an important opportunity for all families to teach their children about acceptance of those who are different. They will see that children with disabilities like to play at the park and swing on swings just like them, they just might do so differently. This will be a great starting point, an early conversation on inclusion, an education that will start at the park but continue to grow as they accept their peers with different needs in their classroom and beyond.

There are many options within the City of Barrie for where the platform swing could go. In conversations thus far suggestions have been Ferndale Community Park and Sunnidale Park. Some things to take in to consideration when making this location choice are; Is there a parking lot with handicapped parking available, is the park surface accessible for wheelchairs, is the park surface woodchip, stone or rubber tarmac (some park surfaces are difficult for wheels to get across), and finally what other accessible

features are already there allowing someone in a wheelchair to fully enjoy their entire park experience. Ideally, the park selected should be a well-known and well-loved park that many families enjoy using so families with children in wheelchairs can go and feel a sense of community rather than alone and isolated, as is often the case. A busy park would also offer word of mouth meaning those who would want to use the new structure at the park would be aware it was there for use.

Other municipalities across Ontario have already taken this step in meeting inclusion and accessibility needs with platform wheelchair swings; Hamilton, Peterborough, Milton, and even Simcoe County's very own, Midland. If Midland has a platform wheelchair swing then surely, with a population much larger than Midland's, the City of Barrie should have one as well.

As the City of Barrie moves forward with inclusion and accessibility needs, a platform wheelchair swing is the right move to support those with disabilities in our growing community. Every child deserves to enjoy playing at the park.

Thank you very much for your time.

Lorrie, Marc and Finnley Rimmer.