

# ***Accessibility and Inclusivity***

**Host:** Simon Andrew, Assistant to the City Manager

**Panel Guests:**

- Jeffery Ford, community activist
- Tim Hennes, Senior Building Inspector
- Mike Hoenig, Program Coordinator for the University of Iowa Center for Disabilities and Development
- Alissa Voss, The Arc of Southeast Iowa

**Simon:** Hello, and thanks for tuning in to Iowa City Matters, a podcast designed to provide listeners with info about the civic and community topics that impact you. I'm Simon Andrew, Assistant to the City Manager for the City of Iowa City.

To begin our podcast, we are going to travel back in time to Washington D.C. on July 26th, 1990.

**President George H.W. Bush:** "Three weeks ago we celebrated our nation's Independence Day. Today we're here to rejoice in and celebrate another "independence day," one that is long overdue. With today's signing of the landmark Americans for Disabilities Act, every man, woman, and child with a disability can now pass through once-closed doors into a bright new era of equality, independence, and freedom. As I look around at all these joyous faces, I remember clearly how many years of dedicated commitment have gone into making this historic new civil rights act a reality. It's been the work of a true coalition, a strong and inspiring coalition of people who have shared both a dream and a passionate determination to make that dream come true. It's been a coalition in the finest spirit -- a joining of Democrats and Republicans, of the legislative and the executive branches, of Federal and State agencies, of public officials and private citizens, of people with disabilities and without. This historic act is the world's first comprehensive declaration of equality for people with disabilities -- the first."

**Simon:** What you just heard was a speech given by President George H. W. Bush on the White House lawn nearly thirty years ago. Today's podcast topic is accessibility and inclusivity, and we are releasing it on the 29th anniversary of the American with Disabilities Act being signed into law.

During today's episode on accessibility and inclusivity, part of what we will discuss will pertain to this landmark legislation that prohibits discrimination based on disability. As part of my duties for the City, I act as the ADA coordinator to ensure that public spaces and city programs can be enjoyed by everyone in our community.

Let's begin by introducing you to our guests who will be joining the conversation.

First up is Jeffery Ford. He is a longtime volunteer in the community, specifically in areas of housing, environmental, and civil rights causes. Jeffery, how long have you lived or worked in the community?

**Jeffery:** We've lived in the area since 2006 now.

**Simon:** thank you for joining us. Tim Hennis is a senior building inspector for the City. His department is responsible for enforcement of all codes and ordinances regulating the protection of the public health, safety, and general welfare as it relates to built environments and structures. Tim how long have you worked for the City?

**Tim:** I've worked for the City for 24 years now.

**Simon:** Okay, very good. Mike Hoenig serves as a program coordinator for Iowa's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, Center for Disabilities and Development, at the University of Iowa. He is also cohost of "Hello, It's Us," a public access television program that highlights a variety of disability issues through the lens of inclusion. Mike, how long have you been a part of the Iowa City community?

**Mike:** Well, I've worked here just over 25 years and I did grad school here for about a year so I guess that makes 26 and a half.

**Simon:** Very good, thanks for joining us Mike. Rounding out our group of guests is Alissa Voss. Alissa has held a variety of roles at the Arc of Southeast Iowa since she first started working there in 2007. She currently serves the Human Resources Director at the Center, which provides information, services, and advocate for individuals with developmental disabilities. Alissa, what's your history with the Iowa City community?

**Alissa:** I have been in and around Iowa City for the past 12 years.

**Simon:** Thank you very much for joining us today. So we're gonna dive right into our topics here. Jeffrey, Mike, and Alissa, I want to start the episode by having each of you share your personal stories and talk about how you became advocates for accessibility. Alissa, let's begin with you please.

**Alissa:** I came from a very small town in Northeast Iowa. When I was just 21 months old I was running around and happened actually trip on a shoe and my neck flew back and hyper-extended and pinched my spinal cord which had left me paralyzed from the neck down. Throughout my years I was able to do lots the therapy and everything and and gained a lot of mobility back and now have an electric wheelchair. Being a small town, I kind of had to pave the way I guess you could say. Because I was pretty much the only one like that was going through the school system that had a wheelchair and just kind of had to start off with you know simple things too, like with making sure there was ramps or doors were wide enough. And just really seeing my parents having to help advocate for me along the way as well. It's really kind of helped me see how it's done and made me want to help navigate for others as well.

**Simon:** Absolutely, well we certainly appreciate your work in the community. You're a great advocate and thank you for sharing your story. Mike, let's turn to you next. How did you get involved in advocating for accessibility and inclusion?

**Mike:** Well, I've been blind since birth and I was thinking about this question and I think the first time that I really remember doing this was doing some self-advocacy. I was in high school and I did a work-study program and they told me I was going to get paid and I didn't so I remember going to the personnel director and talking about that. And then obviously in college having to advocate for access in terms of getting tests taken in a separate location or getting books ordered. And then actually dealing with Social Security after I did get a job and they decided that they wanted to bill me for lots of months of Medicare coverage, which I didn't need and which I had told them. As my Social Security Disability ran out they continued to send me checks and bill me for Medicare so I had to do a lot of advocacy in that area before I even knew what the term meant. When I really got introduced to formal advocacy was when I went to work for the

Illinois-Iowa Center for Independent Living in the Quad Cities, which is where I actually still live. We had offices in Davenport and Rock Island and there were all kinds of opportunities to get involved in transportation and the education system, personal assistant services both in Iowa and Illinois. I think the first real success that a group of us had when I was there was, shortly after the ADA was passed and getting the Illinois side of the Quad Cities to actually provide a real paratransit service. They were they were

going to try to provide paratransit with cabs and we organized a large group that basically invaded all of their board meetings. And we knew we were having some success when we overheard the director say well it's rainy day maybe nobody will show up. None of them will show up but we did and so you know I think after that I really I got the bug and we were very much a cross-disability group advocating at the local and state and even national levels. And so I've been very fortunate working at the University to have some opportunities to continue to either conduct advocacy or to support it and grow it in our state.

**Simon:** Thank you very much, Mike. We really appreciate all of your advocacy in the community. I've had the pleasure to be on your show "Hello, It's Us" a couple of times and it's a really important venue with which we can make sure that the public is engaged in all of these issues.

**Mike:** Well thank you.

**Simon:** Jeffrey, let's turn to you. Could you share a little bit of your story with us.

**Jeffery:** My story is a little bit different than Michael's and Alissa's in that I came to my disability later in life. I thought I understood what disability was about when I was a young man. My father had severe polio, I have an uncle who lived in a wheelchair, I was a pastor and thought I was advocating for my disadvantaged portions of my community. And then in 2013, I experienced septic shock and really felt like I only had the flu and a couple weeks later woke up without fingers or really functioning feet anymore. So I ended up with double amputations and significant finger loss. I think my advocacy for issues around the ADA began in earnest after my first ride out into the community with my wheelchair which resulted in

landing on my knees and injuring myself pretty severely. And it was all over crack in the sidewalk. It's humbling to think now that I thought I knew what all these issues were about and then to learn and I think that's a big part of what I see is my advocacy now is helping people become aware and I find that that helps immensely. Of course, there are stubborn situations where you have to really fight but generally we we live in a wonderful community and it's it's very nice to be able to just bring things to people's attention and have them respond so well.

**Simon:** Absolutely and hopefully this podcast can be a piece of that of communicating educating and engaging with the community. Some of you have life experience prior to the ADA, while for others it's always been there. I'm wondering how your individual experiences influenced your stance on the role, success, and challenges of this law.

**Mike:** Well, it's a really interesting question. I still remember when the ADA was passed I was working for the Center for Independent Living and we had quite the celebration. I remember our program director coming in on the Monday morning after it was passed and saying, 'we passed it!' lo I guess I would say that I've observed a lot of differences and in terms of my role, I think just working for the center at the time we were all active. You know, if there was a parade or something we would we would carry signs that said Americans with Disabilities Act. I was involved a little bit when in reviewing some of the regulations following passage of the law, primarily as a private citizens making some comments about concerns and so forth. And I would say that the ADA has made lots of changes over the years, so the tangible ones that obviously are out there are things like curb cuts. You know it started out as back in the day the old TDD relay or people that were deaf could use a telecommunications device which eventually became known as a TTY. Call into a relay service and then the relay service would make the call to a hearing person for them and then they would go back and forth. The person who was deaf would type what they wanted to say and then the operator would verbalize that and then type back to the individual whatever was said by the person on the other end. So I remember you know seeing that and saying that this is a real opener for people who are deaf or hard of hearing so and as technology has advanced. We've seen things now like the FM loops and other types of equipment that have been placed in many college campus classrooms. Certainly here at Iowa I know Hancher has done that. So you know, it's really been exciting to see that type of technology you know. Obviously

we're seeing an increase in curb cuts and accessible entrances, though we still battle to keep improving that in terms of blindness and low vision. Lots more accessibility whether it's elevators, menus in Braille. Just yesterday I was going to an appointment at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics and I was really pleased to find some really nice signage by the door and so I won't have to hunt around anymore for that now that I know where that is. I think it has really promoted a lot of discussion. I think just as an example at Iowa there's a very active group of students with disabilities. It started out as the Hawkeye accessibility Ambassador Program where we partnered with facilities management and asked students to go in and educate designers, architects, and so forth there were either remodeling, renovating, or building new construction. That has ended up evolving to more of a student advocacy and maybe even activism group, which is great. And we're pleased that the students have taken the leadership on that now. We sort of got it started and don't think that kind of thing would have happened pre ADA because the discussion is just out there. Probably it may be a bit more of a subtle, you know something that you don't see every day, is just the overall public awareness. And how frequently because people know the kind of work I do, I have friends who maybe don't experience a disability or don't acknowledge it that may be having more difficulty walking or just really into civil rights will call me and say man this happened. Isn't this a violation of the ADA? So, you know, I do think we're making progress. I do think we have a long way to go and I do get concerned at times that we definitely do not want to regress from where we are. And so I think the upcoming ADA celebration, that I believe we're going to talk a little bit about later, is one of many many opportunities people have to kind of get recharged. And make sure that our generation that's coming up now understands that things have not always been accessible. And that it's on all of us to keep working to ensure that the ADA stays and is complied with."

**Simon:** Thank you very much, Mike. Alyssa, I'm gonna turn to you now. You talked about the difference between a small town, maybe that has fewer resources, as compared to a city the size of Iowa City.

**Alissa:** Yes, definitely could tell a difference once I, you know, moved away from my hometown into bigger areas. And then coming here at Iowa City settling here. Yes, I've definitely been able to enjoy I feel like more just with the basics like the curb cuts and electric doors and things. Of course there's always going to be places that need to have more accessibility, in

particular like bathroom areas and things like that. Just having enough space but definitely we have a great community here and where I feel like you can really get your voice listened to as well. And getting ideas out there and what needs to be improved upon. We've just come a long ways from where if we started back in 1990.

**Simon:** Thank you. Absolutely, we definitely have a community that defines accessibility and inclusivity to be one of our core values. So we definitely have a supportive community but as you noted we have a ton of work to do yet. So maybe you can speak to that a little bit Jeffrey and what your experience has been. You mentioned that your perspective has changed some over time.

**Jeffery:** I think I would want to begin by saying how much I've appreciated living in Iowa City. I moved to the area in 2006 but did not move into the city itself until 2015. In that interim period between when I first lost my legs and hands, I was searching for a home. I was living in different communities in temporary apartments. I was not able to go back to my original home so I've become aware of the impact of just simple laws as to whether a home is built with some nod towards a ADA compliance. And I think that's an area where we can do more as a community. We have a sort of a visiting code, if you will, where you can get in the door and to the bathroom. It leaves some homeowners with quite a few renovations to do if they are gonna move beyond that, but I also I can't help but point out the differences between what Iowa City's doing and what some of the other communities are doing in the area. We have new buildings going up in other communities that don't provide elevators to featured venues. We have a new venue going up in a nearby community where technically they're in compliance with the ADA, but it's an inconvenient compliance. I was asked to look at a project and sort of give my stamp of approval, and I left the meeting eventually because it was clear that they'd already decided what they were gonna do. They built the building and then tagged on the ADA, whereas I built my home from the scratch with the ADA in mind. So simple, so clean. Most people don't even realize the things that I've put in it. So it's not that we're making a home ugly or a public space different, quote-unquote, but we're making it usable for all. And Iowa City has, I think, done a great job of that. My knowledge of the law and of what we're doing locally has increased as I've interacted with you, Simon, and you've done a great job of responding to concerns I've had as I've negotiated accessible spaces in the wintertime. When probably for lack of knowledge the person

contracted to push the snow pushes it to the end of the street. And of course that's where the accessible space is but we've learned a lot in the last few years and I appreciate what you've done for that in terms of getting those spaces cleaned up. I think we're at a good place to advance some of the needs of the spirit of the ADA. By that I mean we do have an older community and we do have lots of buildings that are grandfathered into the ADA. I think some of those could do a much better job of responding to the needs in terms of doorways entry ways, bathrooms. Maybe not just when there's significant remodeling but perhaps when there's a change in ownership I have to commend the owners of Bricks, for instance. It's a lovely space, easy to get into, it's not too crowded, the bathrooms are very accessible. I have a local store I go to, where the door doesn't work, the aisles are crowded, the ramp is insufficient. It's an older building but, you know, I'm not so sure that we can't do more there at this point in time.

**Simon:** Well, thank you, Jeffrey. And that segues into my next question well as I turn to Tim. Jeffery, you talked about the difference between what's technically required by the ADA and what's a best practice and what's more inclusive moving forward. There's a difference between public and private in terms of these regulations. I'll talk about the public side of things in a moment, but Tim I'll ask you to talk about the oversight and the construction of private buildings in your role in that process.

**Tim:** In the Building Inspection Services division of the City our responsibility is to review plans for new and remodeled buildings to assure that they meet all the building code requirements but a part of that is also the requirements for accessibility and we do treat it as a priority. And I'm glad to hear some of these comments going around today. We don't get that kind of feedback on accessibility because it's as Jeff mentioned it's sometimes an afterthought. And then oh we've got to fit this into the building. When I first got into the construction code enforcement it was all about safety getting out of the building, getting out of the building. And then you go to a similar site, and it like wait a minute there's accessibility to get into the building. So that's an important detail that we need to look at and that was an eye-opener for me. And the division always advocates for this. One of the tough issues that we have is new construction is usually designed by a licensed professional that they take accessibility into consideration when designing. The tougher challenge for us, and I think it says Jeff just mentioned this, is existing buildings and when you're doing an existing building you run into different provisions of the code where if it's

technically and feasible to do something, you may not need to do it or you do a percentage of the cost to do it. And then you start going down a checklist of what those are: get into the place, get a restroom that's accessible within the place. So you start that checklist and if it's on a remodel or a changeable occupancy a lot of times, it's based on the value of construction. 20% of the cost shall go to providing accessible features. And you go down that pecking list: accessible route, restroom, and there's a few more. But a lot of times there is not a large change of value to the remodel if I change from one occupancy to a different occupancy. You're not doing much work, that may not even require permit other than a change of occupancy permit. And I think that's hard for people to understand but when they do make a revision or a remodel in the building, whatever work they do we apply the code and unfortunately, it is a minimum standard that we apply in a lot of times. What they're willing to pay for.

**Simon:** And generally for businesses you know the picture that we try to make is that it's good for business as well you know it's being inclusive of people with all different levels of mobility. Or whether they're even pushing a stroller or we talk about cyclists a lot with curb ramps. There are a lot of ways in which improvements, especially to commercial buildings, are good for the business themselves too and as was mentioned here earlier maybe aren't as expensive as they may have assumed going into it. The housing market is a little bit different. Jeffrey talked about that a little bit and I know that we've had this discussion before with our visitability requirements, and maybe those could go farther. We do go farther than other cities in the state but maybe there could be some provisions added there. I know we've talked about the cost, Tim, the relative cost before and if I recall correctly the difference in cost for the construction is often times not significant.

**Tim:** That's true and just give a little history on that is in the early 2000s is when we adopted the 200 International Residential Code. And and I think it was adopted in 2002 or 2003 by the time we went through the education and everything to get everybody up in speed with it. But we adopted a visitability usability requirements for single-family dwellings and that was in collaboration with members from the Home Builders. And we set the standards high and then through that negotiation we had to water it down a little bit, but we wanted a zero-step entry, we wanted wide doors in the house. And through that negotiation in order to get something on the books, to kind of a foot in the door, we had to back down to where it was designed so that you could put a zero-step entry into it you had to. Show on

your plans how you can do a ramp from the garage to your house without losing the required parking space, you had to frame your doors wider. You didn't necessarily have to put a wider door in there but if you were to go to remodel it would be less invasive to the remodel to just have to take the door out and remove a couple of studs, so to speak, and put a wider door in or have a wider opening. So less invasive construction in that way

**Simon:** Maybe Jeffrey, you could speak a little bit to the importance of having those features and maybe that they're constructed like that and not necessarily that make it easier to retrofit.

**Jeffery:** I think I'd like to provide a little bit of background in two areas on that because I think it's been a part of my own education. When I moved to the Iowa City area I bought a home in the country. It ended up, because it was built in the side of a hill, being three stories. It was all glass. It was a lovely Bill Nowysz design built in the early 80s, late 70s. So prior to the ADA, prior to any kind of thinking about this really, you know, in a large sense. It has circular stairwells. It had narrow stairwells. It had a master bathroom but it was quite tight to turn into it. But I didn't pay any attention to any of those things at the time. You know, I was able and moving and enjoying all the glass and the view. And at the same time I have worked with housing now for issues for many many many years through Habitat for Humanity, through the Housing Fellowship, through the local Shelter House. And I have been involved with designing buildings as an effort to try to make them somewhat accessible based on the knowledge I had of my father and my uncle. That's a different reality when you suddenly get sick and cannot even move back into your own home. And so you begin to look around and you say what can I do as an interim. Perhaps you can find an apartment that has wide doors. Yes, that's nice. Zero-entry, that's nice. And perhaps the bathroom is larger but there's probably not going to be bars in the bathroom so you have to add those. The shower or bathtub is certainly going to have a threshold on it in almost all new construction and those can be awkward if you're in a wheelchair. Lighting can be better or worse depending on how you are able to see. Eventually Lynette and I decided that we would try to find a home. We looked on the market for quite some time and just could not find anything that was not gonna require quite a bit of adaptation. And I get that, I mean we've got a couple hundred years of housing in town. We've only built a small portion really since the 1990s when you look at that. Eventually we decided to build from scratch. We looked at a home that was built for visibility but by the time we made the

adjustments to it we could almost build the same house from scratch and it was a brand-new home. We did so and as I mentioned earlier we were able to incorporate what really are minor changes to the home that make it not only visitable but liveable for myself and for guests. Zero-step entries, wider doors, pocket doors, cabinets that are set back underneath the countertops, a no-threshold shower, a bench in the shower. And I think anyone would come to my home and say this is lovely. There's no negative feedback that I get on the visibility of it, which sometimes you get that reaction when you're out in the community and people say oh I I would do that to my home but I don't want to do that yet. I don't want it to look like that. Well you can make it very accessible and very attractive at the same time. What I would say in conclusion is that organizations like the Housing Fellowship are building units that have accessibility in mind. We have some units in the low income area that are being specifically targeted for that. Of course, individuals with the money to build rather expensive home, myself included, are able to do that. My concern is for that middle-income person who suddenly has these, or lifetime, problems and they're looking for a stand-alone home or a condo and whether they can find those readily on the market. I think it would be nice if we could do more. I appreciate how far we've come. You can go to a lot of communities and not have that frame built out in a way that you can easily replace that door, so I commend the City of Iowa City and hold it up as a model to other communities and also challenge us to think about doing a little bit more.

**Mike:** You know I don't know if anyone will have the institutional memory of this but I'm gonna ask. I seem to remember when when the visitability stuff was happening in Iowa City there was at least one architect that was out front really advocating for this and kind of getting ahead of the market even. I remember getting contacted at CDD by this gentleman and does anyone remember anything about that? I just remember being impressed that here was somebody that was taking this on that was not being necessarily even told to do so but saw this as a market and I thought wow this is this is great.

**Tim:** I was involved with that but I do not remember the specific architect. I do remember we did have a home builder at the time that we recruited and brought in. What sold him on it was he had a father that it was going through some of this. And it's not all about full accessibility or not, it may be a temporary disability. And he experienced that and that's what really

helped bring him on board with it and advocate to others. But it takes life events like that in order to see the light, you know, on some of these things.

**Jeffery:** I think I would want to build on that is we're all moving towards a decline in our ability if we're alive. And hopefully we're alive and aging and as we move in that decline a lot of people want to stay in their home. I can't imagine that if we sat down and thought about that as we build our homes and as we buy our homes we as consumers wouldn't put more pressure on that market. But often what we're most concerned about at the time is what our immediate needs are. And this takes a long perspective and I would just encourage people as consumers to start demanding it and that will help put the pressure on the contractors and eventually on the City policies to have more availability.

**Tim:** I agree one-hundred percent with that and I think with baby boomers aging, I think we're starting to get and builders are starting to get that demand put on more to build with this in mind. And I know the Home Builders Association some of their builders go through this certification, and they don't remember the actual title of it, but it's about aging in place and building for that population. I do think that it is a grassroots effort that is starting to we see some traction.

**Simon:** So much like commercial buildings maybe some of these features in homes can be good for business as well. I'm gonna shift over to the public side of things here. We've had a few projects in the City recently that I'd like to highlight that integrate accessibility and inclusivity. I'll introduce each project and I'd like to hear your feedback on your experiences with those projects, and that can be prior to the project being completed or during construction. That's always one of our biggest challenges in accessibility and in the public sphere is that even when we're making improvements, that eventually will aid in accessibility, in the meantime it often can present challenges to the public. So the first one I wanted to talk about was Washington Street. It was completed in 2017. It included a water main replacement and resurfacing the road but the sidewalks were also addressed. An important goal of the project was to ensure that things like benches and sidewalk cafes were installed to have the straightest accessible route possible. Mike, I know that you are on Washington Street a lot. We've walked on that street together a few times, so could you recall

some of those changes and how that impacted you and maybe some best practices during the construction process as well.

**Mike:** Probably the best practice that I noticed the most in terms of the sidewalk cafes is that there was a period of time, and this may have even predated the 2017 project, that I would run into people. Because, you know, in terms of access they would not have any sort of barrier anything like that. And so using my cane, you know, people were fair game and many times people don't know quite what to say and letting me know. I think, you know, that that has been addressed. It's interesting this you that you should mention Washington Street in general because I experienced something today that could have been a real challenge. This is totally off the cuff so if we decide to edit that's perfectly fine. But I was coming east on Washington on the south side and there was a lovely sidewalk sale going on. There were two people at least, it sounded like a younger woman and she was pretty timid, 'sir-sir.' And finally, I don't know if it was a supervisor or whatever, that came up, 'sir there's a sidewalk sale going on here let me take you around it.' And it was really great and it may have just been because that person was tuned in but it also may have resulted from an awareness of that because of the work on Washington Street that could be an accessibility issue. Another thing that I would say that's not a part necessarily of the 2017 project, or at least I don't think it was, was the installation of audible traffic signals. And we're continuing to kind of refine that. But Simon and then the engineers Scott and Jason that were involved with it and I actually spent some time hanging out on the corners of the intersections. And that is really a best practice. It's not, you know, in a lot of cities. It's really, really helpful because the intersection of Washington and Clinton is where I'm speaking and sometimes there are buses turning. Sometimes there's absolutely no traffic and so just the forward-thinking nature of having those installed. And I believe there may be another one down at Burlington and Clinton, but the first one that I encountered was at Clinton in Washington. And so the high traffic area is real important. So I don't think I completely answered your specific question but hope that this will be of some help.

**Simon:** Absolutely. No, I think that you did answer it and that's where I was going next, was to thank you for helping us with those audible signals and in programming them. We have a few installed in the community but we're still working our way through learning how to program them best, to make them most usable for the public. We are, as we install new traffic signals,

making sure that they all have the hardware in there even if we don't have the audible signal program just yet, but we'll be able to make sure that they all have those audible signals. I think that you've mentioned before Mike that in communities if they're not consistent, I think you had an experience when you were traveling once where a given intersection didn't have one when you were expecting it to, and that caused you some issues. Could you talk about that a little bit?

**Mike:** Well it was in Auckland, New Zealand interestingly enough and it was my first experience with them, with audible traffic signals, I heard about them but you know they were primarily in the United States at that time in larger cities. And so I was walking down the street and there there was one, and I can't remember if it said walk or if it was a different type of sound for when it was time to cross, whatever it was it was very evident. And then I went to the next intersection and there was another one so I crossed it. And I went to the next intersection and I didn't hear it and I thought that the traffic you know, basically I was taught to cross streets based on traffic patterns, when you cross when the parallel traffic is is moving. And I thought it was it was okay to cross but I didn't hear the light, it's talking or audibleizing in anyway, and finally a lady who rolled her window down and said it's okay to cross this one doesn't have one. So she obviously had figured out what the problem was and helped me, but that was that was my first experience of that. And that's why I've had some hesitancy to advocate for those unless the community is committed to installing them at all major intersections, because you can wait for one and if it's not there you can stand there and wait for two or three changes from red to green and back again before you figure out oh this this intersection must not have the accessible signals.

**Simon:** Well we really appreciate you helping us work through that, as we learn how to best program those and install those in the community. Another project that is going on right now is the pedestrian mall project, should wrap up this fall. One of the major factors in deciding to move forward with that project was accessibility, again we had sporadic sidewalk cafes that made the accessible route and not as straight as it should be. But, more to the point, there were lots of loose bricks and uneven surfaces lots of steps that made it difficult for many residents to safely access the ped mall. So maybe, Alyssa, you could talk a little bit

about, if not the ped mall project, but just the importance of making sure that we have those accessible routes maintained in our community.

**Alyssa:** For me personally, for my wheelchair, I guess I I didn't really have too many problems of getting around. But I've seen it with you know, with individuals clients that I have or had as well, like they really can't have a whole lot of you know motion and stuff and I mean they're in wheelchair. And they have to have smooth surface and so they don't always have somebody there with them to help reposition them or help them. It is important to have all the smoothness and be able to have where you can actually get in and maneuver around the different areas, and doorways, and interests, and all those as well.

**Simon:** Well we definitely appreciate the public's patience with these improvements, you know long term they will be more accessible. But in the meantime it does cause problems, Mike talked a little bit about the the barriers on the sidewalk cafes or sidewalk sales, may be encroaching into the accessible route on the sidewalk. You know we have the same thing with construction fencing or vehicles and so it's a it's a constant battle to make sure that we're keeping accessible routes open. Jeffrey, if you wanted to weigh in a little bit, of on public infrastructure sidewalks curb ramps anything like that?

**Jeffery:** I have found you in particular, Simon, very responsive to my request to fix a curb. I think you've been very thoughtful about the way that Washington Street and the pedestrian mall come together. I've deliberately not entered into those areas during construction and one of my friends who owns a store downtown has been a little frustrated with me for not being there for eight months now. But, that aside when I have brought something to your attention you've responded to that quickly. And I think again back to the issue of cultural education, we as a community, have great policies. We as a community have well-meaning people, sometimes culturally we have certain practices that just make it more difficult for those of us who have some kind of disability. I grew up doing this, I never thought about pulling my car across the sidewalk if I was going to unload it quickly. Or, I never thought about leaving it hanging across the end of my private driveway onto the sidewalk too much. I you know people and get around, well it sometimes they can, sometimes it you can't, sometimes it makes all the difference when

someone tipping over. And I think culturally it would help a lot in our community if we could simply stop and think about whether our car is going to block a walkway, whether our delivery truck is going to block handicapped parking spot because the semi is pulled through four spaces and halfway into a handicapped space. And those are cultural things that I think we can all help one another if we just raise our awareness level. I've appreciated what I would call the continuity of the ped mall and the Washington Street projects, you've referred to those as straightening out walkways and smoothing out services. I find inconsistency the most difficult thing. Whether that's an uneven sidewalk with my prosthetics I'm essentially walking on teeter totters and if my toe lands on a surface that's higher than my heel then I hyper extend my knee. If my heel lands on a surface that's higher than my toe then I slouch forward in a way that sometimes causes me to fall. So, those are much appreciated. I think we obviously have some work as Mike mentioned, how do we deal with sidewalk sales? We all like them. How do we deal with art installations? How do we respond to those? And think again the cultural awareness will help us a lot.

**Mike:** Yeah I was impressed by how that business handled that this morning. I mean, they even, the first woman that was a little wasn't quite sure what to do, I mean there was an awareness. Whereas maybe you know, not so many years ago you would be left to I, you know I have hit clothes racks with my cane and or clothing. Or say, and I'm sure there were people you know standing around there. So I you know, I do think that the cultural awareness is is improving

**Simon:** Very good. Thank you. Mike you just had our Parks and Rec director, Julie Seidel Johnson, on your show *Hello It's Us*. Can you talk a little bit about your conversation with her about accessibility at parks and playgrounds?

**Mike:** The first thing that I was amazed about was, that there are 50 facilities under the jurisdiction of the Parks and Rec Department here in town. I'd, you know, I did not know that many in part and I'm sure various sizes and of course there's the big Recreation Center downtown. I guess, from a global perspective, I was really impressed by the kinds of things that are happening just in terms of accessible paths accessible playground equipment and and those are just a couple of examples of

types of accessibility. We've talked about you know trails and just making things easier for people to negotiate. What I was especially appreciative of was Julie's and the park board, and and whomever is responsible recognizing that this benefits more than just individuals with disabilities. It benefits people using strollers, it benefits people who may be older. As you acknowledge before Jeffrey, that were you know, and as any community seems like these days an aging community and people that have difficulty walking, maneuvering that the accessibility features that are being installed are beneficial to to all. Julie pointed out that they have been able to track that. There are more and more people using the facilities because of accessibility improvements, so that's been really exciting. The other thing that really impressed me was that there is an action plan, a strategic action plan, so over the course and correct me if I'm wrong Sam, and I wanted to say it's maybe like a 10-year plan but there's going to be a systematic review of each of those 50 facilities. And there will be accessibility improvements made as needed and that's really a commitment, so I think just the the overall commitment, and the recognition of the benefit of these improvements to so many people, or the the significant takeaways is that that I came away from that program with.

**Simon:** Thank you very much, Mike. Yeah, Julie and her staff the all of the parks and recreation department are very committed to make sure that their programs and facilities are inclusive and accessible and they've made huge strides in recent years. So we really appreciate you.

**Mike:** One thing I wanted, and that just I remembered, was they're creating some events that are beneficial to people who we would people might say on the autism spectrum or sometimes people may say experience neuro diversity. So creating some opportunities, some safe spaces, for people who you know typically when you think of a park or a recreation center and you think of a lot of noise and lights and a lot of stimulation. And for some some folks that is that is not a healthy environment, and so there is a conscious effort underway to host those kinds of events of the people that may not deal well with the highest stimulation will also have an opportunity to enjoy the facilities here in Iowa City. So that that's another really exciting development.

**Simon:** Yeah, when she came to us with the ideas, for I know that they're including one of those quiet areas in the Willow Creek park playground installation. We were really impressed that they came to us with those ideas, certainly without any without any prodding from administration or the community. That I think, that it we have a lot of staff that are becoming advocates themselves. So yeah, that's very good it's not just the physical infrastructure that's evolving we have programming. Whether it's in parks and rec library, or other departments that are also becoming more accessible more inclusive, and this is largely under the direction of the City Council strategic plan. For instance, the library offers special access programs for individuals with autism. We have quiet times in the libraries, therapy animals are allowed some dedicated time in the library, just for community members that don't feel comfortable being here when the library's busier and noisier. We also have a division within the Recreation Department that serves special populations and underserved populations. Mike mentioned this, they have programs also directed specifically toward persons on the autism spectrum or with other disabilities, so maybe anybody could jump in here. When the city is approaching a new program, or activity, or maybe retooling one that we already have in place, what sorts of things should organizations keep in mind to ensure that they're being inclusive? And what's the best place to start how do you go about that?

**Jeffery:** I would suggest that the most important place is to start at the very beginning, with the individuals from your community who have experience and just get their feedback. We've got lots of people in the community who spend a lot of time volunteering that are easily accessible. I would also suggest that we keep in mind as a community that there are many, many different ways that disabilities are experienced. And it's not simply about ramps, it's not simply about visibility, it's not simply about whether one can hear, it's often, especially for children, there are issues around excessive stimulation. And we can we can go a long ways if we just take the time to listen to the people who are experiencing those problems.

**Mike:** Yeah, I'm not sure if the city has a task force or a, an advisory committee on disability. I really like your idea Jeffrey, a lot, I'm just trying to figure out how to operationalize it because there's no way you can get everybody. So, well you know, maybe a some kind of combination of people with disabilities and even agency reps. You get somebody like, Alyssa, you get two for the price of one there if she experiences a disability

but she also works for the arc. And I'm sure you encounter lots of disabilities in your world every day, that you don't you know you don't necessarily experience that disability, but you have a heightened awareness because you're you're at the arc so.

**Jeffery:** One of the things that I would point out to listeners, is that you can go to the city website and you can check certain interest areas or areas of concern. And that by doing that you can get regular email or notification of issues that are coming up in the community, and then as individuals or as organizations you can keep track of projects that are coming along and be there at the beginning and have input. And I really appreciate that, it can be a little overwhelming at times if you're like me and you tend to check a lot of those boxes, but it's it's it's a great thing to have the kind of transparency we have in this community. And I I think that's the part that's incumbent upon us as individuals who have input to make to get out there and advocate and make it.

**Simon:** Thank you for that Jeffrey, and if any of our listeners are interested in subscribing for these automatic email updates, please go to ic gov dot org slash subscribe.

**Mike:** Sticking with sidewalks and curb ramps, a little bit the city doesn't gain too many popularity points when enforcing our sidewalk ordinance during the winter. You know, we had a very, very difficult winter this past year and certainly ice and snow blocking sidewalks or curb ramps was very problematic throughout the community. Tim, this isn't in your purview in neighborhood and development services, but it is within your department. Coworkers of yours in the inspection department enforce these issues. Can you tell us about some of the statistics that we saw during this past winter?

**Tim:** Yeah, even though it's not under my responsibility anymore it used to be, and it is it's quite an issue. And last year we had 1200 snow complaints and of that 1200 complaints several were on the same property. And we also ordered 420 snow removals from property, so we go out and inspect for after a snow ceases inch or more we'll go out and inspect put a tag on the door give them 24 hours go out, 24 hours later, and if it's not done we'll put a work order out. So of those 1200,420 times we had to send out a work order. And of the 420 there were several properties that were repeat customers. Quite a few. It's very challenging especially in a college town.

We have a lot of folks that are gone for a month at a time maybe in December in January, and that's no excuse. The sidewalk still needs to be cleared and so it's really incumbent on us. It's the city to make sure that we're getting out and enforcing that ordinance. We had a more proactive enforcement this year, but it was a much harsher winter as well so it was definitely a challenge.

**Jeffery:** Simon, if I could just speak to that for a bit, I think again as a city it's important for us to have those policies in place. And I fully support them as a community, it's culturally incumbent upon us to think about our neighbors. And I think we have the kind of values as Midwesterners and as Iowans, that if we took a moment and thought about the impact we would respond as best we could in many cases, perhaps better. In my own neighborhood, frequently the problem is with one particular home and it's simply that the individuals that live there have never dealt with a home before. They just aren't aware. When I bring things to their attention they respond, well they're very polite, but they have come from a culture where they lived in an apartment building. They just didn't think about these kinds of issues related to home ownership, on the other hand we do need strong enforcement. Even the best of us get lazy sometimes and I think it's incumbent upon us to not back off from that as a community. We need to support the staff in that, we need to support the city council members in that. It makes a big difference to a wheelchair user to someone in a walker. I have neighbors who are in their late 70s who walk every day year round and they will frequently be the ones out shoveling out the curb ramps so that they can continue their walk and so that I can. And maybe it's not our piece of property, but maybe we have the time or the wherewithal to add an extra hand.

**Simon:** Absolutely. Well said, thank you very much. We are releasing this podcast in advance of our 29th ADA celebration which will be held on Saturday July 27th, from 10:00 a.m. to noon on the pedestrian mall. Alyssa and Mike I had the pleasure of serving on the Planning Committee with you. Alyssa can you please talk about the theme of this year's event?

**Alyssa:** Sure, so our theme for the event is disability is diversity basically each individual is unique. And so we're recognizing and celebrating our individual differences.

**Simon:** Very good, and as we've noted earlier in this podcast that improvements made may be in the name of the Americans with Disabilities Act, really serve the entire public and that we are diverse in many ways. Whether it's race and ethnicity, or age, or mobility level, so it's really important that we frame this as it should be as a as a civil rights issue. Mike, what sort of programming could we expect at the event and how has that have gone in past years?

**Mike:** Well, thanks for asking Simon. We're really excited, we have a bit of a different flavour this year I would say. We are going to have a proclamation from the city of Iowa City I know, and I believe Keith Ruff who is our illustrious chair, is working on something from the county as well. So we're going to have some presenters. There are going to be several students. We really feel that we need to hear the voices of young people with disabilities and so those folks are going to be, I think we'll have at least two or three students from the student disability advocacy organization here on campus. And then also we're going to have a student from the UI Reach program, which is a non-academic two-year certificate program for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities at the University of Iowa. And so Reach has been active in the past and having a presence but I believe this will be the first time we've had a student from there speak. So, we're really excited about that. We have two awards, the Bill Regan vitality award. Bill Regan was a longtime advocate and was director of the ARC here in southeast Iowa. And then also the Cherry Cunningham award. Cherry, was a again, a long-time advocate and very active with the ADA celebration planning. We also hope to have a speaker who is a community advocate who does not identify as a person with a disability and it's interesting, because when she emailed me to say y'all do this but I'm gonna leave most of my time for people with disabilities, I said well going back to what you said Alyssa, our disabilities diversity theme is all about everyone belonging. And so somebody that's a non-disabled person who really gets it very much belongs and in our movement in our advocacy. So hopefully she will make some remarks and then we will also have exhibits from different agencies and advocacy groups for you to visit. And we hope to have some entertainment. We've been in discussions with the combined efforts either a choir or theatre group, and then we've also talked with Infinity Dance and I think if the weather is good one or both of those groups will be there so we have a varied program and I think it's gonna keep us busy. Those are some of the major highlights. Alyssa or Simon you know you're both active so I've probably missed some things along the way.

**Simon:** I think you covered it but I'm glad you had mentioned the Bill Regan award because I believe it was last year that Alyssa was the recipients.

**Mike:** That's right.

**Allysa:** I was.

**Simon:** It's a great event. We really like to recognize the people doing all of this great work in our community so we encourage everybody to come out on Saturday the 27th, at 10:00 a.m. on the ped mall. It's great to have such passionate people at the table for this discussion. I'd like to finish by having each of you describe a proud accomplishment or moment you've experienced while working as an advocate or in your personal experience. Tim can we start with you?

**Tim:** Sure, I don't want to limit it to a moment but I think I'm gonna build on what Jeff had mentioned earlier in the conversation, and it's what I find most gratifying is helping people become aware when you're explaining why a code provision is the way it is, and then it's like you can see the light on the other end of the phone come on. Well that isn't so bad, that's easy to do, in my position I get the opportunity to get it several of those throughout a year do.

**Simon:** Very good. Thank you, Jeffrey.

**Jeffery:** I think the most rewarding things that I've been involved with have been those individuals who might become aware of who are recently had a significant change in their ability, and have been able to sit down with them and talk them through the notion that you can do this. And it's a great community to live in, and here are some of the resources you have, here are some of the things to be aware, of that you can do this. And it's nice to live in a city where you can say don't hesitate to call. You know, call Simon. Call the various people at the Park District, call people at the library, they will help.

**Simon:** Absolutely, thank you. Mike let's turn to you.

**Mike:** I would say when the 20th anniversary of the ADA was approaching, there was a move to really get communities around the state to do a celebration. In the Quad Cities there was a celebration that was going on over at the Independent Living Center in Rock Island, which was great and they still do that they do it every year. But, being turf as we sometimes get in the Quad Cities, we wanted to have something in Iowa and so we started talking about doing something in conjunction with our local minor league baseball team. And we stole the idea from Cedar Rapids because they've done that very successfully for a long time and so we did not have an agency to back us. And I got in touch with some friends of mine who were connected with a group called the challenger baseball league, which it involves people with disabilities as well as a sled hockey which is an adapted form of hockey. They're both inclusive so people with and without disabilities, they're involved and I really had to sell them on this. They're like, you know, we've you have full plates why do we need to do one more thing, we've already got Special Olympics having a night at the ballpark. And I said this is different, this is all disabilities and so finally they got on board and we went to the team PR person and she got involved. And it turned out we had speakers, we had a demonstration of the sports that I just mentioned, all the athletes with disabilities who chose to be involved with it and signed up got their names called and they went out on the field. We sang take me out to the ball game at the seventh-inning stretch, and I'm a huge baseball fan so I was just really moved by that. And when we got done we said, we're just a bunch of people, you know we were there were like 8 or 10 of us that were on this ad-hoc steering committee. We did not have agency backing, we didn't have money, some of us chose to you know to donate. But we got the ball team to donate some tickets and some space and we had an inclusive cheerleading troupe. And it was just really exciting, and I felt like you know there were many many hands on deck that made it happen and it proved to me that if you have an idea, and you surround yourself with people that are committed, you know the sky's the limit. So now we have to think about number 30, which will be coming up a year from now.

**Simon:** Absolutely, we'll have to do something special for it. Thanks for that Mike, I hadn't heard that story yet. Now Allysa, do you want to wrap us up?

**Allysa:** Yeah, I want to say this probably one particular moment or anything, but just kind of throughout my life like my own personal experiences being able to you know give in the first automatic doors into

our school system, or to get the first elevator ever in there too as well as you know being able to work with clients and families and in this area. And I've gone to client's homes before in their building, you know, a house from ground up for an accessible house so I would go and kind of offer my feedback and talk to the contractors to just kind of come up with simple ideas that can help make things a little bit easier as well. Kind of a collective thing throughout my experiences I guess.

**Simon:** Very good, thank you very much and thank you all for the work you do in the community and thank you each for being here and sharing your stories of knowledge thank

**All the guests:** Thank you, thank you.

**Simon:** Along with our guests, we'd like to thank the Iowa City Public Library, where we record this series. I can't think of a more fitting place to host this educational program. If you enjoyed this podcast, why not listen to more? You can check out past episodes or subscribe to make sure you don't miss future podcasts. Find Iowa City Matters on iTunes, SoundCloud, or on our website, at [icgov.org/iowaCityMatters](http://icgov.org/iowaCityMatters). We appreciate your support for this program, and hope you'll continue to listen, learn, and engage. Thanks, Iowa City.