



Access CITY

Project Update
December 2024



Welcome to Access-City!

Access-City is a study being conducted by the **Planning for Equity, Accessibility, and Community Health (PEACH) Research Unit** from Dalhousie University School of Planning with help from **reachAbility** and **Independent Living Nova Scotia (ILNS)**. The goal of this study is to test a new way of designing accessible spaces using a **digital 3D model**. Design standards are often written in wordy and complicated language, which makes it difficult for design professionals like architects and engineers to understand how to include accessible design in their work. We want to create a ‘digital twin’ model of a super-accessible version of Halifax called “Access-City” that includes feedback from experts with lived experience of disability to help designers be more creative in the way that they design accessible spaces.

We will be regularly publishing these updates as we reach milestones during the project. In this issue, we talk about a series of focus groups that we held and include some interesting findings that will make a difference in the 3D model we are developing.

Focus Group Sessions

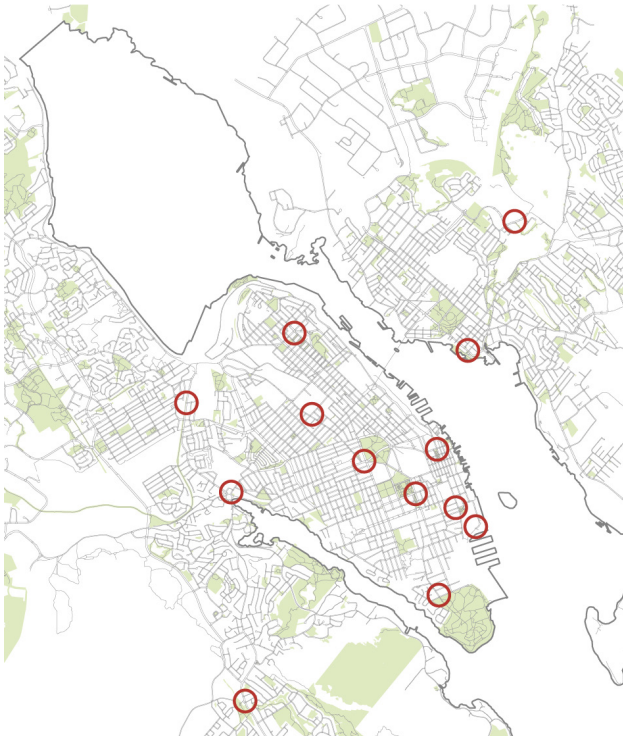
What is a ‘Digital Twin’?

A ‘digital twin’ is a 3D model created on a computer that recreates existing places in a digital space. Some digital twins show entire cities so that city planners can see how buildings might look next to other buildings before they are built. For this project, we are making digital twins of parts of Halifax that need to be more accessible.

On August 14th, 15th, and September 4th, 2024, we conducted several focus group sessions with our community partners reachAbility and ILNS. These sessions were designed to gather feedback from persons with lived disability experience to learn about which places in Halifax should be more accessible.



A group of participants in a board room at the ILNS office engaged in a focus group session.

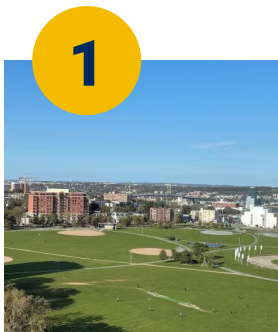


A map of central Halifax showing locations of sites discussed by participants at the focus groups.

We listed 12 different parts of Halifax and asked participants to select their **top 5** they would like to be more accessible. Participants were also asked to comment on what barriers they experience, and to offer any other sites that we did not mention they felt should be included.

We were thrilled to receive such helpful and important insights into the challenges and priorities of people with lived disability experience in Halifax. The following is a brief overview of that feedback, and the key findings we came away with.

Top 5 Problem Spots



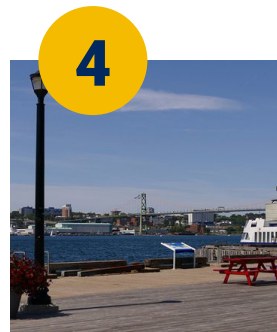
1
Halifax Commons and area (Willow Tree intersection)



2
Halifax Public Gardens area (South Park St. and Spring Garden)



3
Halifax Seaport, near Pier 21



4
Alderney Ferry Terminal & Portland St.



5
Halifax Forum and area (Windsor St. and Almon St.)



In addition to these, many participants noted that **Bayers Lake Business Park** was also in need of accessibility improvements.

From all of the discussions we had, we identified 3 major themes related to accessibility barriers in Halifax: **Safety**, **Navigation**, and **Inclusion**.

Safety

Safety was overwhelmingly the number one issue raised across every single focus group. Comments such as “it’s so scary”, “it’s terrifying”, “am I going to die?”, and “I feared for my life” were made at least once per session – and were often accompanied by personal stories of injuries and near-death experiences (including falls and being struck by vehicles.)

- Poorly maintained sidewalks
- Poorly designed curb cuts
- Lack of audio signals at crosswalks
- Lack of tactile indicators for visually impaired and blind people
- Lack of lights at crosswalk to signal pedestrian crossing
- Lack of alternative pathways for pedestrians when sidewalks are closed due to construction

Navigation

Navigation barriers very clearly cause huge frustration, and make movement throughout certain areas of Halifax difficult if not impossible for the focus group participants. These barriers were often directly related to their safety concerns.



A sidewalk closure due to construction without an alternative path poses a major barrier.

- Transit system is unreliable, and the buses are too few and too inaccessible
- Automatic doors not present or not functioning properly
- Roads/sidewalks not cleared nearly quickly enough after storms (hurricanes, winter storms, etc.), which makes navigation difficult for pedestrians, and nearly impossible for wheelchair users
- Poorly maintained sidewalks
- Lack of alternative pathways when sidewalks closed due to construction
- Doors too heavy or difficult to open
- Button for intersection crosswalks too high up, and are unusable for people with dexterity and mobility disabilities

Inclusion

Physical barriers quite literally exclude people with disabilities from participating in society and public life. Several people shared personal stories about being unable to go to certain areas or attend certain events because the pathways were too dangerous – “It’s not worth the risk.” Several participants also noted impatient and cruel attitudes from the general public.

- Lack of accessible entrances
- No ramps
- Unsafe pathways
- Lack of reliable transit
- Hostile social attitudes

Next Steps

Our next step is to create 3D digital twin models of the top priority areas in Halifax identified by the participants. These models will include accessible design elements that address the barriers that we talked about in the focus groups. Once these models are complete, we will hold another round of focus groups (in about one year's time) to present the completed models to make sure that we got it right.

Thank You!

A HUGE thank you to all of the **focus group participants!** The success of this project depends on your participation, and we are so grateful that you took the time to speak with us. We also want to thank **Chelsea Coffin** from reachAbility and **Kaitlyn Phillips** from ILNS for doing such a good job of organizing and facilitating these focus groups.

If you'd like to learn more about this project, please send us an email at **peach@dal.ca**, or you can ask someone at reachAbility or ILNS to get in touch with us.