



Fort Wayne/Allen County Disability Advisory Council's 2022 Annual Report



Increasingly, "person first language" is being challenged by specific groups. More and more often the term "disabled" is acceptable rather than "person with a disability" or "differently abled." As an effort to reflect changing terms, this report will use "disabled."

PURPOSE

The purpose of the Council is to assist in providing disabled people equal access to employment, services, programs, and activities throughout the City of Fort Wayne and Allen County. Some of the council's responsibilities include serving as an information resource for City and County elected officials and administrators, highlighting the needs and conditions of disabled people, identifying barriers to full community participation, and recommending corrective actions.

RESPONSIBILITIES

- Serve as an informational resource for City/County elected officials and administrators.
- Identify barriers to full community participation encountered by disabled people.
- Recommend corrective actions to address identified barriers.
- Produce an annual report.

2022 COUNCIL MEMBERS

- Chairperson: Ronald Duchovic, Professor Emeritus of Chemistry Purdue University (IPFW)
- Vice-Chairperson: Becky Weimerskirch, Retired Executive Director, Community Transportation Network
- Secretary: Rachael Miller, Special Education Teacher, FWCS
- Joni Schmalzried, Chief Program Officer, AWS Foundation (joined the Council, December 2022)
- Patti Hays, CEO, AWS Foundation
- John Guingrich, President/CEO, The League
- Tina Acosta, Director of Outreach, Turnstone
- Jeff Scherer, Communications Coordinator, Scherer Resources
- Laura Maser, Allen County ADA Coordinator

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Disability Advisory Council used the year 2022 to refocus our attention on the “advisory” character of the Council as articulated in the proclamation establishing the Council in 2017. We engaged in an extensive Strategic Planning process through which the Council’s Vision and Mission statements were restated with greater clarity and specificity:

Vision Statement

We envision an inclusive community of equity, dignity, and respect, where disability is understood as a natural part of human diversity.

Mission Statement

The Fort Wayne / Allen County Disability Advisory Council is an official voice advising both city and county governments to build a community of inclusion by advocating for people with disabilities, their families and supporting organizations, to ensure they are treated with equity, dignity, and respect. By reporting on identified problems, recommending solutions, and engaging local government, we work to remove physical and societal barriers. The Disability Advisory Council highly esteems as its core values:

- **Commitment** to the community,
- **Integrity** in its actions,
- **Wisdom and Expertise** in making thoughtful recommendations,
- **Fairness** in all its endeavors,
- **Legacy** as a reflection of enduring change,
- **Cooperation** with all members of the community, and
- **Courage** in the face of opposition.

The Strategic Planning process identified five Council objectives:

1. Enhancing communication between the FWACDAC and City and County Government
2. Improving opportunities for the employment of individuals with a disability
3. Contributing to the construction of accessible sidewalks, crosswalks, and curb cuts
4. Training government managers in inclusive behaviors
5. Sustaining effective and productive Council meetings

COUNCIL ACTIVITIES IN 2022

In January, Ron, Becky, and Rachael began the year by approaching the Allen County Commissioners and Mayor Henry of Fort Wayne to set up quarterly meetings with both governmental groups and to develop a new vision for the position of ADA Coordinator of the City of Fort Wayne.

Kate Jove-Jacobson reviewed what our progress in the strategic planning process. The Council discussed creating SMART goals and will work on these at the next meeting.

As February began, Ron wrote the following letter to Mayor Henry:

Mayor Henry,

Good morning.

I am writing to follow-up on our Feb. 15th meeting with you.

First, I want to thank you again for the opportunity to meet with you. Have you considered our proposal to meet every 90 days?

Since our meeting, I have contacted Heather Van Wagner, outlining the Disability Advisory Council's vision for the role of the City ADA Coordinator:

Thank you for your continued commitment to the Fort Wayne/Allen County Disability Advisory Council (FWACDAC). Your participation in our meetings is vital to maintain continuing and timely communication with the City of Fort Wayne.

While we fully respect that you are a city employee and that it is the city's prerogative and your initiative which define your job, we hope that we can cooperatively encourage the development of your role as the ADA coordinator for the City of Fort Wayne. We imagine the development occurring in several directions:

- The role of the FWACDAC is to “observe” and “suggest” but *not* “demand” action from either the city government or nongovernmental agencies. We imagine the Disability Advisory Council’s “advising” role as the fundamental basis that propels the FWACDAC to advocate for the adoption of “best practices” which go beyond the minimum requirements imposed on the City of Fort Wayne by the ADA Law itself.
- We propose the creation of an ADA Coordinator role that is completely independent of Risk Management for the City of Fort Wayne. The work of an ADA Coordinator to build an inclusive community in which all community members are treated with dignity, equity, and respect is a full-time responsibility.
- The ADA Coordinator should undertake the responsibility to engage proactively all the departments of city government with proposals that establish an inclusive community. Rather than being a focal point which identifies and catalogues current deficiencies, the ADA Coordinator should pursue policies which build an inclusive community that is shared by all members of that community.
- Tina has already pointed out your participation in an ADA certification program. This is, from our perspective, a very timely step. We congratulate you! We also suggest that the

ADA Coordinator possess legal training/expertise. This can be accomplished either by identifying existing legal expertise within city government and making it readily available to you or by adding an additional staff person to your team to provide this expertise.

- As a member of the FWACDAC, the ADA Coordinator will provide continuing contact with the city government throughout the year, thereby complementing the requested quarterly meetings with the mayor.
- As an initial step in working with you, I would like the Performance Goals that the FWACDAC will set for itself as part of the Strategic Planning Process to be consistent with the projects that the City of Fort Wayne is planning for the coming year. I understand that a list of the projects will be posted on the City Webpage. Can you tell me when this will occur, and will you please provide the URL of the post?

Finally, I invite you reply to this email in the spirit that there are certainly components of your position that I do not fully understand. Since I am not “inside” city government, there are many subtleties that I do not appreciate. I am hoping that this email will be the beginning of an extended discussion that produces a fruitful collaboration resulting in a more inclusive Fort Wayne community.

Sincerely,

The city/county proclamation celebrating Disabilities Awareness Month was posted on March 1. Unfortunately, there was only limited media attention surrounding it. Fort Wayne Magazine will have some articles next month and there was a brief press conference at the airport outlining their new disabilities initiative.

At the March meeting it was reported that Heather sent the training materials to the mayor when requested.

Also at our March meeting, the Strategic Planning process focused on developing goals. Goals need to be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely (SMART). How do we prioritize goals? Small group sub-committees can establish goals in different areas. Ron will send a follow-up email regarding this.

As a result of the Council’s March meeting, three (3) Strategic Priorities have been identified and sub-committee membership proposed:

1. Strong Relationships and Collaborations:

Jeff Sherer
Patti Hays
Tina Acosta

2. Disability-focused infrastructure:

Becky Weimerskirch

3. Local Government Investment:

Jeff Sherer

The sub-committees will work on developing SMART goals for each of these priorities and report back at the next meeting on 5/2/22. Kate will meet with each of the subcommittees to ensure we keep the SMART formatting.

The Disability Expo is scheduled for May 14, 2022, at the Coliseum.

In April, Mayor Henry wrote:

April 26, 2022

Dear Ron:

Please accept my sincere thanks for the important work the Fort Wayne/ Allen County Disability Advisory Council does to help our community. Fort Wayne would not be a strong community without the hard work of volunteers like those on the FWACDAC.

After considering how my administration can best assist the FWACDAC, I propose to meet with you, as Chairman of the FWACDAC, every 90 days to discuss FWACDAC recommendations and suggestions. Our meeting will take the place of Heather VanWagner's participation in FWACDAC meetings.

I believe this approach is the best way to address challenges and solutions facing disabled residents of Fort Wayne and Allen County. I look forward to meeting with you and value the contribution you provide to this City.

Sincerely,

In early May 2023, Ron Duchovic responded to Mayor Henry:

May 4, 2023

Dear Tom,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Fort Wayne/Allen County Disability Advisory Council (FWACDAC). We very much appreciate the opportunity to meet with you every 90 days throughout the year. We further recognize that your time is extremely valuable, and the commitment of this time demonstrates your significant dedication to the creation of a Fort Wayne community that is characterized by diversity, equity, and inclusion.

We ask again that this meeting include the Advisory Council's Executive Committee, Ms. Becky Weimerskirch, Ms. Rachael Miller, and me. The inclusion the Executive Committee is important for two reasons. First, the involvement of multiple Council members contributes significantly to the long-term continuity of the Council's mission. The participation of multiple members ensures that the Council's collective memory is transmitted effectively to future members of the Council. Second, the participation of multiple Council members will offer you a multifaceted view of the Council's thinking that is richer than the perspective provided by a single Council representative.

Since these meetings are intended to enhance the communication opportunities between the City's chief elected official and the FWACDAC, they do not replace the contribution of the City's ADA Coordinator to the work of the FWACDAC. Consequently, we ask that City's ADA Coordinator continue to participate in FWACDAC meetings.

The active participation of the ADA Coordinator as a member of the FWACDAC is critical the Council's effectiveness. The ADA Coordinator provides an intimate understanding of the role that municipal government plays in the establishment of a diverse, equitable, and inclusive community. This understanding clarifies goals that are attainable and identifies collaborative pathways to these goals. If there are several different ways to achieve a goal, the ADA Coordinator could provide crucial information on the choice of an optimal course of action that collaboratively involves both City government and nongovernmental resources. Further, the topics discussed at Council meetings will identify for the City ADA Coordinator critical areas of concern that can be directly affected by one or more City Departments.

Noting the importance of the ADA Coordinator and based on the Council's investigation of the role of the ADA Coordinators in other municipalities, we also ask that you invite Heather VanWagner, the City's current ADA Coordinator, to the next meeting between you and the Council's Executive Committee.

Through our strategic planning effort and the nearly 5 years of meetings and discussions, the FWACDAC has grown and developed as an organization capable of articulating a comprehensive vision of Fort Wayne's and Allen County's future: "We envision an inclusive community of equity, dignity and respect, where disability is understood as a natural part of human diversity." Further, we can now give voice to a mission that was much less clear in May 2017 when your proclamation established the FWACDAC: "The Fort Wayne/Allen County Disability Advisory Council is an official voice advising both city and county governments to build a community of inclusion by advocating for disabled people, their families and supporting organizations, to ensure

they are treated with equity, dignity, and respect. By reporting on identified problems, recommending solutions, and engaging local government, we work to remove physical and societal barriers....”

These Vision and Mission statements expand and concretize the words of your original proclamation: “The purpose of the council is to assist in providing equal access for disabled people to employment, services, programs and activities offered in the city and county.” As Commissioner Nelson Peters noted, “With the diversity that exists within today's society, it does take all of us to enhance this community's quality of life. The Fort Wayne/Allen County Disability Advisory Council will help to ensure that everyone will have a voice at the table with all of those quality-of-life discussions.” Further, you yourself emphasized, "I'm encouraged that we live in a caring and giving community which values and appreciates all residents. I'm looking forward to positive outcomes as a result of this proactive collaboration designed to have a lasting and meaningful impact in Fort Wayne and Allen County."

Just as the FWACDAC has reflectively developed a more comprehensive understanding of its role and of its responsibilities to the residents of Fort Wayne and Allen County, we also anticipate that the role of the City's ADA Coordinator and the City's own conceptualization of that role will mature and develop. We view this development process collaboratively and fully understand the advisory role of the FWACDAC. We only hope that our continuing conversations and regular meetings will contribute to "...providing equal access for disabled people..." through the dedicated initiatives of the City's ADA Coordinator.

I want to emphasize that I write to you not simply viewing the world through the proverbial rose-colored glasses of an individual who spent nearly 27 years as an academic. My professional life experiences include working for a major automobile company (Chrysler Corporation), working for two governmental agencies (NSA, contractor to NASA), and working as a postdoctoral fellow at Argonne National Laboratory. I appreciate the pragmatic realities that drive decisions. I am well aware of the limitations of power. However, like Robert Kennedy, I can say, “Some men see things as they are and ask why, I dream things that never were and ask why not.”

Thank you for your thoughtful reading. I am hopeful that you, the FWACDAC Executive Committee, and the City's ADA Coordinator will very soon engage one another respectfully and productively in the first of many productive conversations.

Sincerely,

At the Council's May meeting, the Council was informed that Heather VanWagner will no longer participate in Council meetings as Mayor Henry will be meeting with the Council's Executive Committee every 90 days. That first meeting has not yet been scheduled. The Executive Committee will meet with the County Commissioners every 6 months. That next meeting will be held on July 7th at 11:00 at Citizen's Square. Jeff requested that Laura Maser be included in that meeting. She has it on her calendar. She will also meet with the Executive Committee to get up to speed on the work of the council.

Members of the council introduced themselves to Laura.

Continuing the Council's Strategic Planning activities, Kate Love-Jacobson shared the goals developed by each of the subcommittees.

We have a booth at the Expo on May 14th 10:00-3:00 at the Coliseum. We can have a small handout ready for distribution.

On June 2, 2022, Ron Duchovic again wrote to Mayor Henry:

Dear Mayor Henry,

I am again writing to you on behalf of the Fort Wayne/Allen County Disability Advisory Council (FWACDAC). We very much appreciate the opportunity to meet with you every 90 days throughout the year. Your time is extremely valuable, and this commitment demonstrates your significant dedication to the creation of a Fort Wayne community that is characterized by diversity, equity, and inclusion.

We renew our request that this meeting include the entire Advisory Council's Executive Committee, Ms. Becky Weimerskirch, Ms. Rachael Miller, and me. The inclusion the Executive Committee is important for several compelling reasons. First, since no minutes will be kept at these meetings and memories are fallible, it will be highly beneficial to have more people present. Second, these meetings should be cordial and informational, not a contest between two individuals. Third, the involvement of multiple Council members contributes significantly to the long-term continuity of the Council's mission. The participation of multiple members ensures that the Council's collective memory is transmitted effectively to future members of the Council. Finally, the participation of multiple Council members will offer you a multifaceted view of the Council's thinking that is richer than the perspective provided by a single Council representative.

While the Executive Committee of the Disability Advisory Council continues to believe and support the participation of the City's ADA Coordinator both at the periodic meetings with you and at the monthly meetings of the entire Disability Advisory Council, it is certainly your prerogative to determine the role of the City's ADA Coordinator. It is our optimistic expectation that this role will continue to evolve and develop as the City of Fort Wayne pursues its dedication to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Thank you for your thoughtful reading. I am hopeful that you and the FWACDAC Executive Committee will very soon respectfully engage one another in the first of many productive conversations.

Sincerely,

On June 29, 2022, the Executive Committee (Ron Duchovic, Becky Weimerskirch, and Rachael Miller), met with Mayor Tom Henry.

Mayor Henry listed three priorities:

1. City employment opportunities for disabled individuals
2. Private employment opportunities for disabled individuals
3. Infrastructure: elimination of physical barriers

The mayor strongly encouraged engagement with community:

1. Podcasts
2. Other social media
3. Newspaper and TV

Mayor Henry encouraged the Council to be engaged with City departments in recommending improvements and having input on budgets.

He asked: What are other Councils (around the country) doing? He expressed a willingness to send staff to learn about other activities.

The mayor had further recommendations:

1. Work with Pete Demitsas to identify positions in the city that are more easily available for disabled people and work on improved job descriptions.
2. Focus on matching abilities with requirements of the job.
3. Shift the marketing of job openings, highlighting accessibility.
4. Shift the structure of the supports are implemented for employee and employer.
5. Identify the barriers to progress and suggest solutions.

He really wants to improve the job situation in the city and connect with employees.

How should employers be educated about the challenges?

There is a need to increase public awareness.

There is a need for more proactive and constant communication and public relations.

A question from Rachael: HOW DO WE ELIMINATE 'HANDICAPPED' FROM HIS VOCABULARY????!

Possible tools:

- Podcasts
- Social media
- More diversity on Boards of Directors

On July 7, 2022, the Executive Committee (Ron Duchovic, Becky Weimerskirch, and Rachael Miller), held its first semi-annual meeting with the Allen County Commissioners (Nelson Peters, Therese Brown, and Richard Beck). Key points in the discussion were:

The primary role of the Disability Advisory Council is to act as advisory body for the County Commissioners (as well as for the City of Fort Wayne). We discussed the developing Strategic Plan and its central focus on building an Inclusive Community characterized by Dignity, Equity, and Respect

We discussed Infrastructure – curb cuts, sidewalks; the All in Allen Plan – Accessibility and visitability and using the concept Universal design in housing

An emphasis on collaboration articulated: How can Council help commissioners?

Laura Maser, the County ADA Coordinator discussed training programs for county employees.

Commissioner Peters addressed several topics in his comments:

1. The importance of the Council to remain focused its original mandate.
2. He asked: What should county government be doing to build inclusive community?
3. He cautioned the Council not to get lost in grand goals; be specific, identifying achievable outcomes.
4. He appreciates and welcomes collaboration with Council.

Becky and Rachael echoed Commissioner Peter’s point of view, noting that the Strategic Planning process has been overwhelming. Commissioner Therese was in complete agreement.

Laura is working with HR to incorporate sensitivity training at the County level. Job recruiting has been done with agencies who work with disabled people and accommodations are made as needed.

Several key questions were discussed: Is the Council losing focus on the goal of supporting the County government because of our larger community vision? Is the Council biting off more than it can chew? What actionable dreams doe the Council have? What should things look like that aren't being done yet?

The Council must be articulate and specific in communication; deliberate and intentional; using “person first” language.

In the Council’s August meeting, the Strategic Planning process focused on the development of attainable SMART goals for the Advisory Council. Previous conversations explored a variety of topics:

1. **Employment:** Ensuring opportunities are as wide as possible for disabled people.
2. **Infrastructure:** Curb cuts and crosswalks; periodically reviewing plans of City and County Highway Departments.
3. **Visitability of homes:** Can the Council influence County and City ordinances and local builders to adopt universal design principles.
4. **Transportation:** For example, efforts by Citilink to make bus stops throughout the City more accessible.

5. **Disability training:** Making sure that the language used by City and County employees regarding disabilities is appropriate.
6. **Website development.**
7. **Celebration of successes.**
8. **ADA transition plan:** Keeping the plan current.

Two SMART Goals were formulated:

Employment Goal: Evaluate city & county hiring processes to make recommendations on removing barriers to employment by December 31, 2022. The county will be represented at the job fair, Oct. 21st at Ivy Tech north campus gymnasium 10:00-3:00: job and resource fair for disabled people.

Infrastructure Goal: Annually and upon request conduct a plan review of the implementation of sidewalks, curb cuts, and crosswalks and make recommendations.

At the September meeting, it was noted that Patti Hays's term expires in December. She is a NEIDAC appointee. NEIDAC is already working to determine a new appointee, so there should be a smooth transition.

The Council continued its Strategic Planning work, reviewing, revising, and paring down goals to ensure that our vision best fits within the advisory role of the Council. This includes fostering partnerships and influencing continued positive momentum within the community as well as representing the diverse needs of people with disabilities.

In the October meeting with Mayor Henry, the Executive Committee discussed a range of topics:

1. Potential public speaking arrangements (contact John Perlich)
2. Participation in Blogs
3. Review of social media and reconstruction of the ADA Web page (John Felts)
4. Employment opportunities; meet with City personnel director (Pete Demistas)
5. Curb cuts question; meet with Shan Gunawardena (City Public Works Director)

In the November meeting, the Council reviewed the updated draft of the strategic goals. John Guingrich moved to adopt the draft of the Council's strategic goals. Patti and Becky seconded; the Council approved. Kate will develop a document for tracking and measuring the Council's progress in meeting its goals.

Laura Maser has started mapping out a draft schedule for next year, considering the annual goals and needs of the year.

A representative from the Allen County Highway Department will be invited to attend our January meetings to discuss planning sidewalks and curb cuts for the year.

Following the October meeting between Mayor Henry and the Executive Committee, John Perlich reached out inviting members of the group to be guests on the mayor's podcast. Jeff Scherer

suggested perhaps doing this in March, Disability Awareness month. Further, he suggested that the County Commissioners should do a public service announcement with members of the Council in March.

Jeff would be willing to work with John Perlich as well. The mayor gets requests to speak at events often (Jeff pointed out that there is a place online to request him to speak) and has suggested that perhaps members of the council be speakers at relevant events where his presence is requested. Ron is going to follow up with John Perlich to express interest and to suggest coordinating with his meetings with Luke Labas.

On October 25th, a member of Great Lakes ADA did a 90-minute training presentation with approximately 50 individuals from the City of Fort Wayne and Allen County as well as members of an HR group. The interactive training permitted a great deal of engagement from the participants.

In July, Laura did an ADA training for county leadership as well.

The County will be working with CivicPro and AudioEye on upgrading and improving their ADA website, making it more accessible.

At the December meeting Joni Schmalzried, the new NEIDAC representative replacing Patti Hays, was welcomed to the Council.

In an email, John Perlich indicated that he would like to collaborate with the Council on the Mayor's podcast and would welcome the Council's participation in relevant speaking engagements with or on behalf of Mayor Henry.

Council members voiced concerns about scheduling guests to meet with the Council in an intentional and efficient manner without the process becoming too time intensive, resulting in a lengthy calendar of meetings. To avoid the use of large portions of the Council's meeting calendar, several options were suggested:

1. Communicate via group emails.
2. Having subgroups of Council members meet with various individuals and report back to the entire Council.
3. Communicating by email prior to monthly meetings to establish objectives and to maintain positive communication with Council members.

The Executive Committee will meet with Mayor Henry on January 5, 2023. A report will be made to the entire Council at January's meeting.

March is Disability Awareness Month. Jeff and Tina worked together to plan for the ADA anniversary this past July. The Council will attempt to participate in the March podcast with the mayor.

The County Highway Department (Brian Sechler) will join us at the January meeting. Ron will reach out to the city to see if Shan Gunawardena (Public Works) can also attend at that time.

The Council approved the Final Strategic Plan. The following pages were provided by Kate Love-Jacobson who has done an outstanding job guiding the Strategic Planning process over an extended period of time. Thank you, Kate!

The raw data contained in the two addenda are available on request from the Fort Wayne/Allen County Disability Advisory Council.