

**Needs Assessment: Fernie**

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### **Introduction to the Problem**

The City of Fernie located in British Columbia, Canada is home to approximately five thousand individuals (Government of Canada, 2019). Its mountainous terrain and rural environment provides residents and tourists with a breathtaking view of the Rocky Mountains. Founded in 1898, Fernie's historic community has established itself as an ideal destination for outdoor recreation and peaceful tranquility. Fernie locals remain accepting of diversity and welcome the possibility for change within their city, as evident through displayed support of LGBTQ+ initiatives and interview reports of lived experience by residents.

Though locals accept diversity and convey a spirit of inclusion, the location does not create that atmosphere due to an aging and inaccessible infrastructure for persons with physical disabilities. The buildings, which date back to Fernie's founding, present a particular obstacle in the establishment of an inclusive and accessible environment for individuals with physical, cognitive, and/or age-associated disabilities. For example, one evident trend is the exodus of individuals with physical disabilities due to aging. According to the 2016 Canadian Census, 68% of the population is between the ages of 15 and 64 years. Only 13% of residents are aged 65 and older (Government of Canada, 2019). The town naturally caters to the working-class with the greatest amount of residents working in the mining industry and an extremely small percentage of the population consisting of persons who are retired (Government of Canada, 2019).

About 6.2 million individuals living in Canada have at least one disability that affects their capacity to participate in purposeful activities in their day-to-day lives (Doyle, 2021). There is a need for producing a more accessible and inclusive environment for the residents of Fernie as well as for those that come for travel. These changes will enhance the mental well-being and

overall quality of life due increased participation in purposeful endeavors (Salvatori et al., 2003). By addressing the barriers and challenges within this community, the city of Fernie and its residents can be a catalyst for change while providing equitable opportunities for all that partake in their meaningful traditions.

The lack of adherence to provincial legislation pertaining to accessibility for those living with disabilities continues to serve as a significant barrier due to the absence of appropriate funding sources. The Accessible Canada Act (ACA) has set forth federal jurisdiction stating the removal of barriers to be completed before or by the year of 2040 (Pon, 2020). However, limited action has been taken to explicitly address the systematic barriers that hinder occupational participation for individuals with disabilities (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC], 2021). Specifically, the Accessible British Columbia Act, otherwise known as Bill 6, lacks compliance policies to be followed by public businesses and corporations (CBC, 2021). Therefore, it may only undermine the true principle which established such a proposal in the first place.

The Canadian Adaptive Network (CAN) was developed in response to the detected need to put legislative principles into action. Formed in 2017 as a means to establish awareness within the province and beyond in order to effect change, the mission of the network is to, “Build a collaborative network for the coordination of services, creation of effective communication, reinforcement of existing organizations, and provision of a gateway for information regarding best practices, standards for adaptive design, and flexible and diverse programs and facilities aimed at achieving readily recognizable and measurable change” (Ashley et al., 2019). CAN currently recognizes the need to increase awareness and create a strong voice for the population of persons with disabilities in order to effect the change that the public policies call for.

In order to understand the need for reform in Fernie and open the opportunity for that representative voice to be heard, it was necessary to understand local citizens' perspectives on accessibility and inclusivity. Advocates of individuals with disabilities as well as residents living with impairments in mobility or innate deficits were identified as primary proprietors. Researchers sought to understand and understand how one's physical and/or cognitive limitations could impact their experience in the city of Fernie and if there were any specific modifications that could be made to improve the accessibility movement. Through this needs assessment, citizens can demand the urgency to develop their community into becoming a more inclusive society where one's disability does not determine their level of participation in purposeful life pursuits.

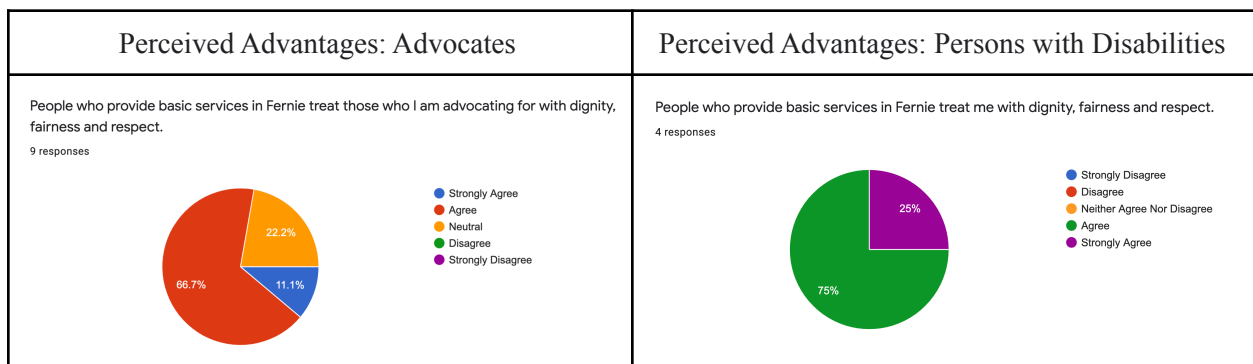
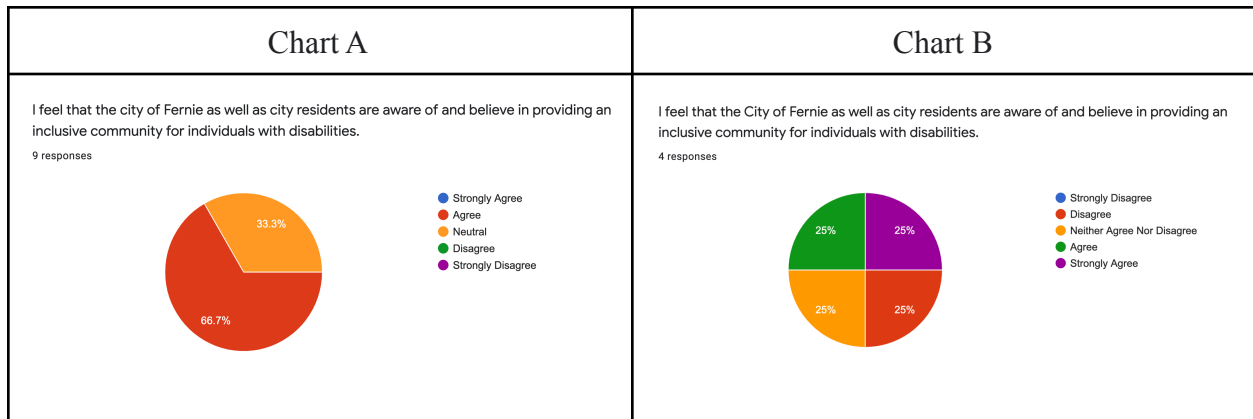
### **Community Needs Assessment Summary**

The needs assessment was conducted to gather information on citizens with disabilities and advocates within the area to identify problem areas within the community regarding accessibility and inclusivity. Participants included individuals with disabilities, advocates and those who hold leadership positions within the community. Participants were obtained through the group's community partner, Stella Swanson, the board director in Fernie and a member of the Canadian Adaptive Network (CAN). Data was collected via interviews over Zoom or the phone, and was recorded in a standardized google form. Two sets of interview questionnaires were developed: one for advocates and one for persons with disabilities. Overall, interviews were conducted with thirteen participants in total, nine who identified as advocates and four who identified as persons with disabilities. The google forms were emailed to individuals who weren't able to conduct live interviews. One participant responded independent of an interview session. After completing the interviews and logging responses, graphs were generated and themes were

analyzed from the participants' interviews. Themes were categorized by advantages, barriers, interactions and specific modifications.

### *Theme 1: Advantages*

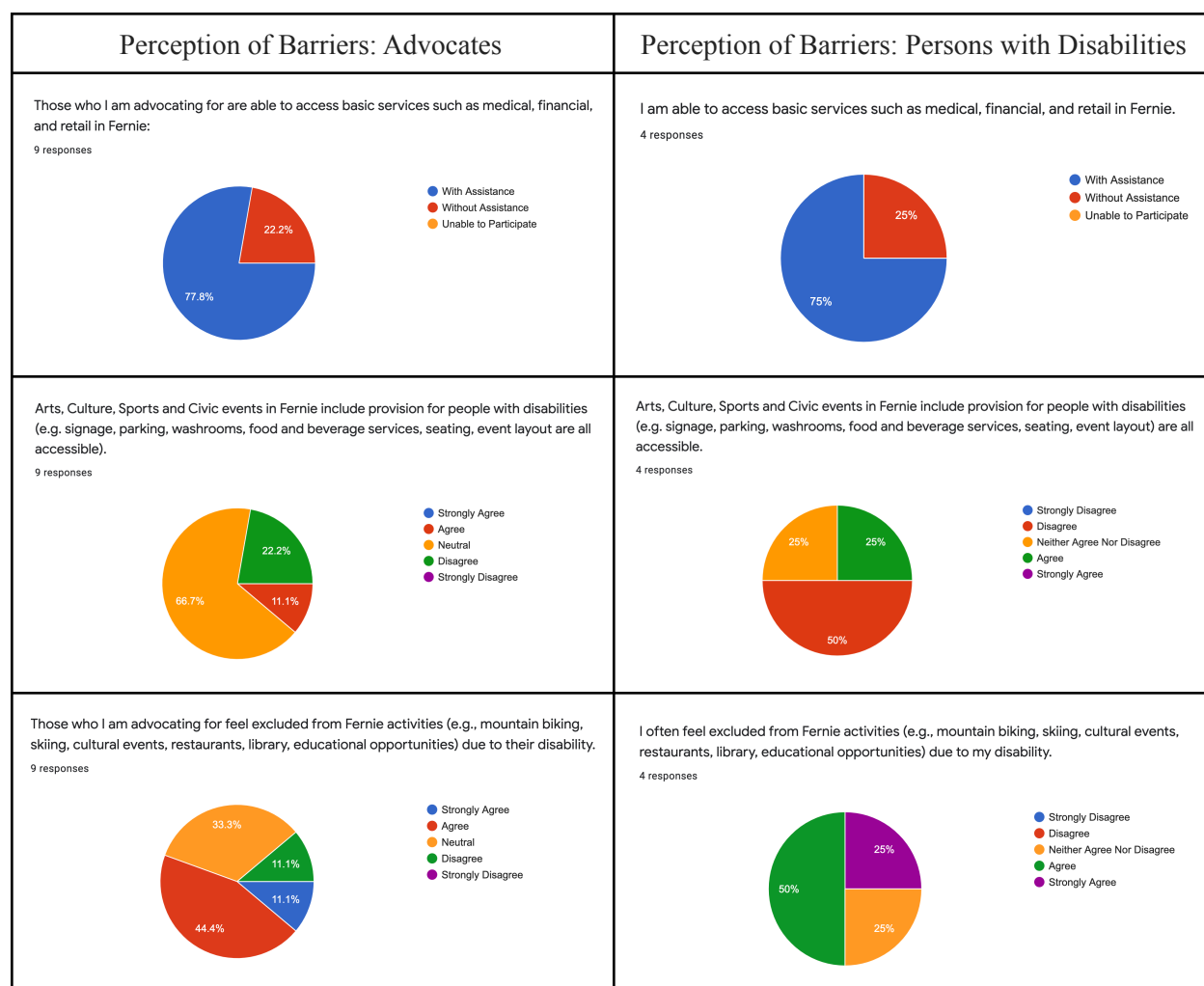
The majority of interviewees expressed that residents of Fernie are accepting of others. The community is generally perceived as open minded and supportive. Another expressed advantage is that Fernie is a small community with reported convenience due to close proximity of buildings. The majority of interactions in Fernie are positive: 75% of persons with disabilities are in strong agreement that their interactions with others are positive, the remaining 25% are in agreement. While 66.6% of advocates feel residents are aware of and believe in providing an inclusive community for individuals with disabilities (chart A), only 50% of persons with disabilities responded with “agree” or “strongly agree” to the question (chart B).



## Theme 2: Barriers

Themes in barriers common among interviewees related to town infrastructure. There was a general consensus that the buildings' historic nature impact facility in access when entering as well as when navigating within them. Another common theme that presented itself was the impact of limited accessibility on inclusivity within the community. Sidewalks, roads, parking, and the design of planned events that are held within the community are not consistently accessible. Confounding factors include terrain, maintenance of sidewalks and roads, upkeep from the weather during the winter months, absence of clearly visible ramps for public buildings, and lack of advanced planning for the attendance of persons with disability at public events. Overall awareness of physical barriers and implementation of planning to facilitate immediate ease of participation for persons with disability in the community are lacking according to interviewees.

Perception of Barriers: Advocates	Perception of Barriers: Persons with Disabilities
<p>Those who I am advocating for can easily access public buildings within the city of Fernie (e.g., ramps, elevators). 9 responses</p> <p>Legend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strongly Agree</li> <li>Agree</li> <li>Neutral</li> <li>Disagree</li> <li>Strongly Disagree</li> </ul>	<p>I can easily access public buildings within the city of Fernie (e.g., ramps, elevators). 4 responses</p> <p>Legend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strongly Disagree</li> <li>Disagree</li> <li>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</li> <li>Agree</li> <li>Strongly Agree</li> </ul>
<p>Those who I am advocating for are able to participate in most Arts, Culture, Sports and Civic events in Fernie: 9 responses</p> <p>Legend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With Assistance</li> <li>Without Assistance</li> <li>Unable to Participate</li> </ul>	<p>I am able to participate in most Arts, Culture, Sports and Civic events in Fernie. 4 responses</p> <p>Legend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With Assistance</li> <li>Without Assistance</li> <li>Unable to Participate</li> </ul>



### Theme 3: Interactions

Education and advocacy for universal design is a generally perceived step in the right direction according to interviewees. A common theme which surfaced is the need for targeted education within the community to serve as a catalyst for change. Broadening opportunities for employment and increasing opportunities for social engagement with the CAN and persons with disabilities will increase awareness of accessibility needs and existing barriers in Fernie. Some specific solutions interviewees reported included education within local schools related to disabilities, local events to promote CAN initiatives and spread awareness, and continued partnerships with local businesses to promote better accessibility options.

#### *Theme 4: Specific Modifications*

Bathrooms, housing and transportation were identified by participants to also be areas that were not accessible to those with mobility impairments. Many talked about the use of grants to complete modifications that would make areas of Fernie more accessible. Overall, one hundred percent of the interview participants agreed that Fernie would benefit from a more accessible and inclusive city. Through the use of the synthesis of this information, a more narrow focus can assist in working towards that goal.

#### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations to this study include the location of the city of Fernie, which is British Columbia, Canada. The location of Fernie made it slightly more difficult to get in contact with our interviewees as well as our advocate mentor, mainly because there is a two hour time difference between the East Coast and British Columbia. It was not possible to visit the city in order to see some of these accessibility problems first hand and responses from the interviewees were necessary to understand their experiences. Another limitation was the time constraints of the project. Although themes were established, interviewing more individuals would have strengthened those common concerns.

#### **Conclusion & Summary of Community Needs**

Fernie's small and close-knit community offers many benefits for those with a disability in the community. Residents are generally open-minded and willing to help each other which made the experience for those who have a disability in the community easier. As a person with a disability, living in and visiting Fernie presents challenges. Main Street, one of the highlights of Fernie, is simply not accessible. Stairs leading to the shops make it impossible for a person in a wheelchair to enter independently. Handicapped parking is scarce and not well marked. Even if



appropriate ramps were installed, the historic nature of the buildings make them difficult to navigate in a wheelchair.

In addition to physical barriers, feelings of isolation and being excluded from activities is a concern among Fernie residents. The culture in Fernie places an emphasis on outdoor activities that are largely inaccessible to those with disabilities. Although adaptive skiing and mountain biking have been introduced, there are gaps in these services due to lack of transportation. Gravel hiking trails, lack of benches and few accessible pathways make navigating Fernie very difficult for a person with any sort of impairment. The City Hall building is inaccessible, which means a person with a disability is unable to attend meetings to voice their concerns related to accessibility.

A barrier identified in the community accessibility assessment performed by CAN was the cost of making necessary changes to business' infrastructure to increase accessibility. Although business owners may be willing to make these imperative changes, Fernie needs support in the form of funding in order to move forward with necessary renovations to become more accessible. Additionally, the need to network with persons with disabilities in Fernie in order to determine where preliminary changes need to be made so that funds can be utilized in the most beneficial manner is crucial. By talking to members of the community and identifying potential funding sources, these barriers can be addressed.

### **Recommendations & Next Steps**

Three main themes guide recommendations for CAN's agenda: networking, presence, and advocacy/promotion. Suggestions for next steps are outlined as follows:

#### *Networking*

It is suggested that CAN establish and continue contact with the LGBTQ+ community which has experienced success in receiving local support through active promotion. Making connections with organizations outside of Fernie, such as in the city of Cranbrook, BC and with the Kootenay Adaptive Services team may open up avenues and provide direction on how to implement effective strategies for accessibility and inclusion.

Re-establishment of monthly focus groups open to the general public will aid in developing relationships required to strengthen CAN's ties and spread awareness among the people of Fernie. Incorporating online attendance through Zoom will increase accessibility to meetings for persons who cannot attend in-person due to physical limitations. Networking out into the province with existing organizations may also help. One resource, provided by "Canadian Assistive Technology" includes a listing of resources by province of organizations that advocate for various populations of persons with disabilities, complete with contact information (Canadian Assistive Technologies, 2021).

### *Presence*

Create a stronger social media presence in order to spread awareness to a wider audience, inclusive of the younger population present in Fernie. Expand social media from the present website, Twitter and FaceBook pages to instagram and TikTok. Connect with a local high school or other education graphic arts departments to create material. Establish weekly posts on these forums related to themes. For example, Monday posts may be coined "Mobility Mondays," and focus on educating subscribers about legislative mandates, the findings of CAN's accessibility assessment, or highlight business owner's initiatives. Another example is highlighting community members living with or advocating for persons with disabilities in "Fernie Fridays." These posts can introduce the community member with a picture and written description of who

they are, what accessibility and inclusivity means to them, and how they participate in or envision making Fernie a community that welcomes all people. Increasing awareness in this way may increase the pressure for changes to be made.

### *Advocacy/Promotion*

A recommendation is to use data collected from this needs assessment to report public perceptions of accessibility at Town meetings or organized community events and select representative persons with disabilities to speak publicly of their experiences in order to bring more awareness to the public. Expanding the current needs assessment by formulating an accessibility and inclusivity poll for the entire Fernie community. Emphasizing the marketable impact increased accessibility will have on the tourism industry can support businesses and others to “buy in.”

Educating business owners and town council on national and provincial accessibility acts, referencing non-compliance to the act in current infrastructures and how it impacts persons with disabilities will effectively communicate the need and consequences of the lack of accessibility. Town Hall’s inaccessibility was most prolifically mentioned within conducted interviews. Request that all town meetings be held in an accessible location until renovations are made. Ensure that members of CAN as well as persons with disabilities are in regular attendance at meetings. Hold rallies outside of town hall to spread awareness along with a petition for renovations to town hall.

Begin the process of grant research in order to obtain funds for the town hall renovation. Funding is one of the largest barriers preventing change. Possible avenues for grant access include The Enabling Accessibility Fund (EAF) or GrantWatch. Propose that representatives of CAN sit on town planning committees for local events in order to have a broader representation

of individuals with disabilities and their advocates. Advocate for CAN by holding fundraisers and propagating CAN's mission through signs posted in local shops and having an informational table at town events. Plan to hold a week of events for National AccessAbility Week, 2022 (Canada, 2021). Events for the week could include a movie night, 5K run/walk event, or festival. Seeking community partners in advance will drive success of the event.

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