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Learn, improve and advocate — help expand accessibility in outdoor recreation

Nate Kelly Special to the Daily News

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Key Points

Outdoor accessibility faces challenges regarding distance, affordability and fundamental barriers for people with disabilities.

Organizations can improve outdoor accessibility by learning from one another, improving existing spaces, and advocating for continued improvements.

Funding opportunities like the Municipal ADA Improvement Grant Program can help municipalities evaluate and plan for accessibility improvements.

As summer approaches, more people are heading outdoors for sunshine, nature and fresh air. It's a great time of year, provided you can access the great outdoors in the first place.

“Accessibility” means different things to different people. For some, it's about distance — living too far from beaches or forest trails. For others, it's about affordability, including entry fees, program costs or equipment needs.

But for a large segment of our population, the challenges are more fundamental and harder to overcome. People with disabilities face obstacles to access that aren't within their control — barriers that can only be removed through action by public agencies, private landowners or community consensus.

Disabilities can create a wide range of access issues related to mobility limitations, sensory sensitivities, neurodivergence and visual or hearing impairments, to name a few. Outdoor spaces in Massachusetts, meanwhile, are managed by a patchwork

of entities, from town conservation commissions and state parks to private land trusts and organizations like Mass Audubon or The Nature Conservancy. Their resources and capacity to implement accessibility solutions vary widely, and while most are subject to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), compliance often only meets the legal minimum.

While the ADA provides the civil rights foundation for accessibility, with Title II covering state and local government responsibilities, these protections don't always ensure outdoor spaces are designed for a wide range of user needs. To effectively embrace an approach that improves accessibility for all, organizations and agencies responsible for outdoor recreation spaces can start by focusing on three important areas.

The first step is to *learn*, in many cases from each other. Insights gained through evaluation and shared resources are then used to *improve* accessibility to our outdoor spaces. The final step for organizations and agencies in charge of outdoor recreation is to *advocate* so these improvements continue.

The good news is that much of this work is underway with shared learning accelerating progress. For example, Mass Audubon's [All Persons Trails Guidebook](#) offers practical guidance on inclusive design, maintenance and partnerships. The organization has developed and installed accessible trails across many of its sanctuaries, typically ranging from a half to three-quarters of a mile in length with wide, stable surfaces like crushed gravel, pavement or boardwalk. Some trails include features such as frequent seating, audio tour stops and wildlife viewing areas. Some locations also incorporate braille, tactile signage and post-and-rope navigation systems to support visitors with vision impairments.

These efforts demonstrate what's possible when accessibility is carefully considered and designed with people's limitations in mind. Along similar lines, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation offers its [Universal Access Program](#), outlining both physical adaptations and inclusive programming.

Nationally, the [National Recreation and Park Association](#) provides proven strategies for improving access to both facilities and services. These resources don't just offer templates, they create opportunities for collaboration and shared learning across communities.

Of course, learning isn't enough; action must follow. That begins with a thorough evaluation of existing conditions. Municipalities in Massachusetts can tap into the [Municipal ADA Improvement Grant Program](#), administered by the Massachusetts Office on Disability, to fund self-evaluation and transition plans. These plans identify barriers to access across buildings, programs and services, and outline steps toward compliance. These plans serve as roadmaps for transforming public spaces into truly inclusive environments, unlocking future funding for design and construction.

Finally, we need to advocate consistently, and as part of a concerted effort. Towns that submit open space and recreation plans to the state are encouraged, but not required, to include self-evaluation and transition plans. Local planners can push to make this standard practice and secure funding to develop it. At the community level, accessibility upgrades often require public support, especially when funding depends on voter approval. Outreach, education and visibility are essential. Residents, elected town officials and nonprofits all have a role to play in ensuring accessibility improvements are prioritized and supported.

The benefits of time spent outdoors — physical, emotional and social — are well documented. During the pandemic, public parks and open spaces enjoyed a renaissance of interest, allowing people to connect with nature, family and community. These benefits should not be a privilege for some. They should be a basic right for all.

Accessible outdoor spaces aren't just about ramps, signage or surface materials. They're about inclusion, equal opportunity and shared experience. Accessibility is the law. But it's also the right thing to do — and it's the responsibility of people without disabilities to ensure these changes occur.

Let's learn from each other, improve what we have and advocate for what's next for the benefit of all.

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