

DATE OF MEETING 2023-NOV-08

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SUBJECT HEARING ASSISTIVE DEVICE OPTIONS FOR INSTALLATION AT CITY FACILITIES

OVERVIEW

Purpose of Report

To provide the Advisory Committee on Accessibility and Inclusiveness (ACAI) options for different technology solutions to assist hearing impaired individuals at City facilities.

Recommendation

That the Advisory Committee on Accessibility and Inclusiveness recommend that Council approve the implementation of the following pilot project subject to funding:

- Installation of a hearing loop at the front counter at two City facilities, and an adaptive soundfield system in the SARC Boardroom; and,
- Direct Staff to return to a Finance and Audit Committee Meeting to determine funding options for the pilot project.

BACKGROUND

At its meeting on 2023-JUN-07, the ACAI discussed and identified the need for and the benefits of installing hearing assistive technology at City facilities in order to assist individuals with hearing impairments. The motion to bring forward the recommendation to Council was carried unanimously.

At a subsequent Regular Meeting of Council on 2023-JUN-19, the following motion was passed:

“That Council direct Staff to prepare a report on the feasibility of audio enhancement and closed captioning options to assist hearing impaired individuals at City facilities.”

This recommendation also aligns with Integrated Action Plan C4.3.3:

“To explore and implement existing and emerging technologies to improve access to City services online, via phone, and in person for citizens with audio-visual accessibility needs”.

DISCUSSION

In response to Council's direction, a staff sub-committee was established which includes representatives from several departments including Parks, Recreation and Culture, IT, Finance, Development Services and Legislative Services. The sub-committee researched, reviewed and

discussed the various available technologies, their suitability to addressing hearing impaired individuals' needs and the associated costs.

To research hearing assistive device options, staff reached out and connected with several other municipalities in British Columbia, as well as Vancouver Island University, to learn about the assistive listening services deployed at their facilities. The various technologies provide hearing assistance at customer service counters, Council chambers, classrooms, and multi-person meeting spaces.

Staff also connected with experts in this field of assistive hearing technology to learn more about the various types of options, and the benefits and disadvantages of each one. The costs associated with each option was also researched.

Attachment A provides an outline of the different types of assistive hearing systems and solutions, the uses for each, benefits, disadvantages, as well as identifies different municipalities already using each form of technology.

SUMMARY

Assistive listening devices have been widely deployed by the City's peers and partners. Hearing loops appear to be the most common system type as the technology is mature, uncomplicated to deploy and cost effective.

Although there are existing challenges with utilizing Wi-Fi streaming and mobile applications, it is expected that each iteration of the technology will improve the effectiveness of the streaming and speech-to-text offerings.

Peers and partners relayed many stories of gratitude and appreciation from hearing impaired patrons. Vancouver Island University in particular, shared that the more systems they install, the more people with hearing challenges can be engaged and participating. The system helps everyone to hear and focus better and which in turn increases overall participation and involvement fostering an environment of inclusivity.

OPTIONS

1. That the Advisory Committee on Accessibility and Inclusiveness recommend that Council approve the implementation of the following pilot project subject to funding:
 - Installation of a hearing loop at the front counter at two City facilities, and an adaptive soundfield system in the SARC Boardroom; and,
 - Direct Staff to return to a Finance and Audit Committee Meeting to determine funding options for the pilot project.
 - The advantages of this option include:
 - i. Low cost and minimal staff training
 - ii. Ability for staff to collect feedback from patrons and meeting attendees on the effectiveness of the assistive listening services
 - iii. The information collected during the pilot program can be used to develop a multi-year project budget to expand assistive listening systems in other City facilities

- iv. Does not preclude staff from exploring other low-cost options such as speech to text services at City facilities.
 - The disadvantages of this option include:
 - i. Limited to two technologies and feedback/results will be dependent on the locations chosen.
 - Financial Implications:
 - i. A budget allocation of \$10,000 will be required to proceed with the pilot project.
2. That the Advisory Committee on Accessibility and Inclusiveness recommend that Council approve the implementation of the following pilot project subject to funding:
- That Staff install a hearing loop at the front counter at two City facilities. And,
 - Direct Staff to return to a Finance and Audit Committee Meeting to determine funding options for the pilot project.
 - The advantages of this option include:
 - i. Low cost and minimal staff training
 - ii. Ability for staff to collect feedback from patrons on the effectiveness of the assistive listening services
 - iii. The information collected during the pilot program can be used to develop a multi-year project budget to expand assistive listening systems in other City facilities
 - iv. Does not preclude staff from exploring low to no cost options such as speech to text application deployments at facilities.
 - The disadvantages of this option include:
 - i. Limited to one technology and implemented at a front counter or 1-to-1 interactions and not available for one-to-many (ex. Council or committee meetings) interactions.
 - ii. Does not include an option to pilot a one-to-many solution such as adaptive soundfield in City meeting spaces.
 - Financial Implications:
 - i. A budget allocation of \$5,000 will be required to proceed with the pilot project.
3. That the Advisory Committee on Accessibility and Inclusiveness provide alternate direction.

SUMMARY POINTS

- Council directed staff to prepare a report on the feasibility of audio enhancement and closed captioning options to assist hearing impaired individuals at City facilities
- Research found several different technology solutions for hearing assistive devices exist, many of which are already in use by other BC municipalities.
- Implementing a pilot project for assistive hearing devices at City facilities is a positive step toward reducing barriers and increasing access for all in alignment with the Integrated Action Plan C4.3.3

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment A: Assistive Hearing Technologies

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