

2022 Annual Report of the Sharon Commission on Disabilities

Commissioners: Paul Remy (Chairperson), Susan Friedman (Vice-Chairperson), Geila Aronson (Treasurer), James Newton (Secretary), Susan Myerson, Lois Diamond, and Todd Arnold

The Sharon Commission on Disabilities had 9 Zoom meetings and another productive year despite the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. On March 26, One Book, One Town and the Commission on Disabilities hosted a Zoom presentation with author Robert Dugoni who wrote *The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell*. The book is about Sam Hill, a fictional character, who had ocular albinism—red pupils. Because of Sam's condition, most of his classmates tormented him. His mom constantly told Sam that he was no different from other students and strongly advocated for him to receive a quality education. Sam also established lifelong friendships with Ernie, the only black student, and later with Mickie. *The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell* and Robert Dugoni's presentation were excellent. Chairperson Paul Remy, who has Cerebral Palsy, told the author that he related to his book.
2. On April 10, The Sharon Public Library and the Commission co-sponsored an autobiographical play by David Harrell. David is an award-winning actor who was born without his right hand. His play is called *Navigating a Two-Handed World...Single-Handedly*.

David always wanted to be an actor after playing Captain Hook in a high school play, Peter Pan. As an actor, he learned how to adapt in many ways, such as changing his voice while playing numerous characters. The hilarious and colorful characters he plays tell a humorous story about his life with only one hand. His Zoom performance, which is appropriate for ages 12-100, was well-attended and enjoyable.
3. An Eagle Scout candidate contacted the Commission stating that he was making an accessible path for fishing and skating at the pond near the dog park. Commission members invited the Scout to its March meeting and suggested he should construct a ramp for wheelchair and scooter users. He liked the idea and was given contact information for the Massachusetts Office on Disability so he could get specifications to build an ADA-compliant ramp. After several weeks of not hearing from the Eagle Scout candidate, Paul Remy emailed him asking how he was doing. He did not respond.
4. Commission members were concerned that the Sharon Housing Authority (SHA) was not making reasonable accommodations under the ADA for some residents with disabilities. The Commission would have liked to work with the SHA to possibly increase its accessibility, but the Executive Director could not attend a Committee meeting. However, Susan Saunders, Chairperson of the SHA Board, attended the April Commission meeting. She informed members that the Authority is meeting residents' needs. For example, two residents needed roll-in showers. SHA installed them because they were reasonable accommodations so that the two residents with disabilities can take showers easier. In addition, SHA received funding from Town Meeting to install automatic door openers in handicapped apartments.

The SHA Executive Director quit in November due to health reasons. The Commission invited Susan Saunders to its November meeting so members could express their concerns and give

recommendations when the Authority's Board is interviewing candidates. Commission members would like to establish a good relationship with the new Executive Director. Members believe that there are inaccessibility issues. For example, one of the Authority's policies prohibits residents from parking on crosswalks and the emergency road near their apartments. This is making it difficult for residents with mobility impairments to transport groceries into their homes. The Commission understands the policy is for safety reasons. However, members want the opportunity to speak with the next Executive Director to determine if the policy could be modified to allow residents to briefly park near their apartments for grocery deliveries.

5. The Commission has been advocating replacing the brick crosswalks in Post Office Square for years. When Brick crosswalks get old and damaged, they become hazardous to wheelchair/scooter users and individuals with walking impairments as well as to women walking in high heels. The Town of Sharon received a \$329,551 grant from MassDOT for replacing all 14 crosswalks. They were replaced in the summer of 2022. Commission members are very satisfied with the new cement crosswalks, which are safer for people with disabilities and easier to maintain than brick.

Town Engineer Peter O'Cain informed the Commission that he sent a Community Project request to Congressman Jake Auchincloss to replace the brick sidewalks. The request was rejected. Select Board member Hannah Switekowski, the liaison to the Commission, informed Commission members that the Community Project funding needed to be used to help solve the town's water contamination. Only one Community Project grant can be awarded, she said, to communities. The Town of Sharon is looking into other funding sources for the brick sidewalk replacement project.

6. A customer of Crescent Ridge informed the Commission that the business had inaccessibility and sensitivity issues. In July, several Commission members and Select Board member Hannah Switekowski met with Crescent Ridge's owner. We had a friendly and productive meeting. The business already had one or two accessible picnic table(s) and an ADA-compliant ramp for entering the building.

Commission members and Select Board member Switekowski learned that Crescent Ridge was in the process of increasing its accessibility, such as adding additional handicapped signage and repainting the handicapped symbols on the handicapped parking spaces. Chairperson Paul Remy asked if the business is considering installing a lower servicing window for wheelchair and scooter users. Due to the expense, Crescent Ridge is planning to install a lower window in the future.

On YouTube, Paul found a short sensitivity training video for employees and sent it to the owner. He found it helpful.

7. In October, several Commission members toured the new high school and were very impressed with its accessibility and inclusion features. The four classrooms, for example, where some students with special needs go are not segregated in one area, but instead, are located throughout the school. This fosters inclusion with students without disabilities to learn, study, and work on school projects.

The 750-seat auditorium is completely accessible. Students in wheelchairs can easily go on stage, making it possible for them to perform in musicals and plays. Town officials with and without disabilities have this easy access at Town Meetings. Assistive Listening Systems are installed in

various locations (such as in the auditorium, classrooms, and gymnasium, to help individuals with hearing impairments. Signage that incorporates braille helps those with vision loss to navigate throughout the school. And the school's furniture, colors, and textures are having a calming effect on those students who suffer from anxiety.

The two-story school has two elevators with rescue assistance areas. In case of a fire, elevator recusers can enter these protective areas for up to two hours while waiting for rescue workers to arrive. And the fully ADA-compliant accessible High School will also serve as an emergency shelter.

8. In May, the Commission awarded a Sharon High senior with special needs, the \$1,000 Leslie Kriger Memorial Scholarship. She used the scholarship to help finance her college education.
9. Commission members continue writing articles about disability issues for *The View*, the Sharon Adult Center's newsletter. Many senior citizens who read *The View* have minor or severe disabilities due to advanced age.
10. Ruth Beckerman and Asma Abdullah resigned from the Commission.
11. The Commission is doing well financially:

Handicapped parking ticket fund:	\$ 15,898.17
Donations:	\$ 1,327.97
General fund	\$ 500.00

As of December 31, 2022, the Commission has \$17,726.14. Funds are being used to purchase equipment and services for increasing accessibility and inclusion for people of all ages with disabilities, in the Town of Sharon.