



The Corporation of the  
City of Sault Ste. Marie  
**COUNCIL REPORT**

August 11, 2025

TO: Mayor Matthew Shoemaker and Members of City Council  
AUTHOR: Virginia McLeod, Manager of Recreation and Culture  
Diane Morell, Accessibility Coordinator  
DEPARTMENT: Community Development and Enterprise Services  
RE: Sensory Playground

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**Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to address a Council resolution regarding a Sensory Playground.

**Background**

*At the August 12, 2024, Council meeting, Council passed the following resolution:*

*Whereas in July 2016 the City of Sault Ste. Marie opened its first sensory playground in Bellevue Park in the east end of the community; and*

*Whereas since its opening, the sensory playground has been heavily used and thoroughly enjoyed by children and families; and*

*Whereas a sensory playground provides enhanced accessible play options and eliminates barriers to play, and provides sensory stimulation along with the promotion of family bonding; and*

*Whereas the City of Sault Ste. Marie should aim to provide equitable access to amenities and services in different parts of the community, especially as they relate to families and children; and*

*Whereas as a community, with the establishment of the new splash pad in the west end there has been a revitalization of Manzo Park; and*

*Whereas many communities of Sault Ste. Marie's size have more than one sensory playground;*

*Now Therefore Be It Resolved that City staff be requested to explore options for the establishment of a sensory playground at Manzo Park or at any other City park in the west end of Sault Ste. Marie, and report back to City Council*

## **Analysis**

Inclusive playgrounds play a crucial role in communities; they are not just for play as they foster learning, growth, and socialization for children of all abilities, creating an environment that is safe, engaging, and beneficial for all.

Over the past several months, City staff have conducted a series of public consultation sessions to gather feedback from various stakeholders.

The Accessibility Coordinator and the Accessibility Advisory Committee hosted a public consultation open house on October 30, 2024. The Parks component focused on obtaining feedback on an inclusive sensory playground.

On February 10, 2025, staff visited H. M. Robbins Public School to facilitate feedback sessions with the students. Four classes participated in the sessions, ranging from a grade 2/3 split to grade 6/7. Students were provided an overview of the project and asked to put stickers on their favourite type of equipment. Students then drew pictures of the equipment and features they would like to see in a park.

The Accessibility Coordinator has conducted targeted consultation on the usability of accessible playground equipment in Sault Ste. Marie with the following user groups:

- Young adults with disabilities;
- Parents of children with disabilities;
- Care Coordinator with Ontario Health at Home who provides support for families that have children with disabilities;
- Thrive Child Development Centre staff;
- St. Mary's College – Special Education team and students; and
- Accessibility Advisory Committee for the City of Sault Ste. Marie

On May 5, 2025, stakeholders were invited to attend a consultation session to obtain further feedback. The session provided valuable information as the discussion focused on challenges users currently encounter, and feedback on types of playground components that would benefit children with a range of abilities.

Further, the Accessibility Coordinator has been tracking recurring requests from the public. A list of types of equipment and features is outlined below:

- Equipment with specialty seating for children to allow them to stay in their mobility devices while using playground equipment;
- Features to allow adults to carry young children with a disability onto the equipment i.e., carry a child up stairs to use the slide together;
- Features that allow children with physical disabilities to experience movement in a different way i.e., rocking vs. gliding;

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- If ramping is provided on a playground, it should lead to a meaningful play experience;
- Achieve inclusivity by means of accessible paths of travel through areas that may not be accessible for children with physical disabilities; however, these children can still watch and be involved in play with their friends and siblings; and
- Adult change tables and ceiling track lifts in washrooms/change areas near public play spaces.

Council has endorsed the need for a sensory playground at Manzo Park, and in consultation with families, equipment needs to support all children with various disabilities.

Staff are recommending the playground at Manzo Park be developed using the '7 Principles of Inclusive Playground Design' a guiding set of principles developed by PlayCore in partnership with leading play researchers. The seven principles were created to help structure a standardized approach to building more truly inclusive play opportunities and include:

1. Be Fair: The play Environment promotes equitable use as it is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities. It encourages multigenerational play by supporting the active participation of individuals with diverse abilities, needs and interests.
2. Be Included: The play environment offers flexibility in use and accommodates everyone's right to play by being more usable, by more people, to the greatest extent.
3. Be Smart: The design is simple and intuitive, making it easy to understand, allowing individuals to be successful and gain confidence through play.
4. Be Independent: The design communicates perceptive information and allows individuals to effectively explore, interact and participate in sensory-rich play as independently as possible.
5. Be Safe: The play environment is tolerant of error by meeting current safety standards, considering unintentional actions, and promoting emotional security for personal growth and development.
6. Be Active: The play environment can be used efficiently, supporting diverse opportunities for children to engage in sustained, healthy physical activity with an emphasis on social participation and cooperation.
7. Be Comfortable: Appropriate size and space is provided for approach and use so that the play environment is comfortable for individuals with diverse sensory needs, body size, posture, mobility, environment sensitivity, and motor control.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> PLAYCORE/Utah State University (2025), *7 Principles of Inclusive Playground Design*, Retrieved (February, 2, 2025) from <https://www.playcore.com/programs/me2>

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A truly inclusive play experience addresses the developmental needs of the whole child by providing opportunities for physical, sensory, cognitive, communicative, and social/emotional development.

Manzo Park has become a destination for families. The splash pad, outdoor pool, and courts provide families with a variety of play experiences. The site has parking, which would be expanded to accommodate accessible parking spaces, paved pathways, and washrooms. These features make it an ideal location for an inclusive playground for all abilities, allowing more children with diverse abilities to participate in active play opportunities.

### **Financial Implications**

Staff were successful in securing a grant through the Enabling Accessibility Fund Small Projects in the amount of \$125,000. Additional funds are required to complete this project, and a capital request will be brought forward for consideration during the 2026 budget deliberations.

### **Strategic Plan / Policy Impact / Climate Impact**

This item supports the Corporate Strategic Plans Focus Area:

- Quality of Life: Maintain an affordable community with exceptional four-season recreational opportunities and invest in recreational infrastructure.
- Infrastructure: Ensure community parks, green spaces and recreational needs are met.
- Service Delivery: Remove physical and digital barriers to enhance accessibility.

This project also aligns with the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005* ("AODA") and the City's Accessibility Policy respecting the four core principles of: Dignity, Independence, Integration, Equality of Opportunity

The redevelopment of Manzo Park playground would utilize a recycled rubber surface which supports climate action by reducing the need for new raw materials and using resources more sustainably. This project aligns with the City's sustainability goals and supports both environmental and community benefits.

### **Recommendation**

It is therefore recommended that Council take the following action:

Resolved that the report of the Manager of Recreation and Culture and the Accessibility Coordinator dated August 11, 2025, concerning the Sensory Playground be received as information.

Respectfully submitted,

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