A Question of Equity: Accessibility Across Raleigh

From Minimum ADA Compliance to a Future-Ready, Universally Designed City

Dear Mayor and Members of the Raleigh City Council,

Raleigh is discussing and investing in transformative projects that will shape our city for decades. Today we are hearing about an approximately $90 million pedestrian connection between downtown and Dorothea Dix Park. I support investments that make Raleigh more connected, walkable, and attractive. But that investment raises an equally important question of equity:

If Raleigh can envision a $90 million walkway, what is our vision for addressing the approximately $411 million in accessibility improvements identified as necessary to bring the city's infrastructure toward current ADA standards and improve safety and access for everyone?

This should not be framed as one project competing against another. It is about whether the same ambition we bring to destination projects is also being brought to the everyday infrastructure that determines whether residents with disabilities, seniors, families, transit riders, and visitors can move safely and independently throughout Raleigh.

ADA compliance is the baseline. Raleigh should be thinking beyond minimum compliance and toward Universal Design: infrastructure intentionally designed from the beginning to serve the widest possible range of people. That means continuous accessible sidewalks, safe crossings, curb ramps, accessible pedestrian signals, tactile and visual information, accessible transit connections, effective wayfinding, and digital tools that allow people to navigate the city independently.

Funding opportunities do exist through federal transportation, transit, pedestrian-safety, accessibility, multimodal, planning, and infrastructure programs, as well as North Carolina and regional transportation funding. These resources will not eliminate Raleigh's local responsibility, and no single grant will address a $411 million need. But they can help Raleigh leverage local dollars, accelerate priority projects, and create a long-term pipeline of accessibility improvements.

The larger question for Council is therefore not simply, "Where will we find $411 million?" It is: "What is Raleigh's long-term plan to close this accessibility gap, how much outside funding are we pursuing, and how will Universal Design be incorporated into every major investment going forward?"

Accessibility is not a special-interest improvement. It is public safety infrastructure. It supports independence, aging in place, access to employment and healthcare, transit use, tourism, and economic participation. Improvements made for people with disabilities frequently make the city safer and easier to navigate for everyone.

I encourage Council to establish a long-range Universal Design and accessibility investment strategy, prioritize the most dangerous and consequential barriers, aggressively pursue outside funding, incorporate accessibility into projects while they are being designed rather than retrofitting them later, and publicly measure progress toward reducing the $411 million accessibility need.

Raleigh has an opportunity to become known not simply as a city that meets ADA requirements, but as a city that looks beyond them. If we are willing to think boldly about a signature connection to Dix

Park, we should be equally willing to think boldly about creating a city where everyone can safely reach that walkway—and everything else Raleigh has to offer.

That is the equity question I believe deserves to be part of this conversation.

Accessibility Is Also an Economic Development Strategy

Universal Design should not be viewed only as an expense. It can also strengthen Raleigh's competitiveness for tourism, meetings, conventions, sporting events, and repeat visitation by people with disabilities, older adults, their families, companions, caregivers, and professional organizations.

The 2024 Open Doors Organization study, conducted with The Harris Poll, found that 25.6 million U.S. travelers with disabilities made 76.9 million trips over a two-year period and spent nearly $50 billion of their own money on travel. That equals roughly three trips per traveler over the study period and an average of about $650 in traveler spending per trip when the national totals are divided. Open Doors also reports that 93% of respondents ate out during trips, and 20 million adults with disabilities stayed in a hotel or motel during the two-year period.

Those national figures should not be treated as guaranteed Raleigh revenue, but they demonstrate the size of a market Raleigh can compete to attract. Even capturing a very small additional share of disability travel would direct spending toward Raleigh hotels, restaurants, transportation providers, attractions, retailers, and entertainment venues.

The convention market makes the opportunity even clearer. Greater Raleigh Convention and Visitors Bureau reports that 278 definite bookings in its latest sales reporting generated more than 101,000 room nights and an estimated $90 million in direct economic impact. Raleigh already understands that conventions and meetings produce measurable returns.

Disability organizations also bring substantial gatherings. The American Council of the Blind reported 676 in-person attendees at its 2025 Dallas convention, with the Blinded Veterans Association adding more than 160 attendees. Events of this kind can produce hotel nights, restaurant spending, local transportation use, tourism spending, meeting-space activity, and visits by family members and companions.

That creates a larger economic-development question for Raleigh: What if the city deliberately positioned itself as one of America's most accessible convention and visitor destinations? A reputation for exceptional pedestrian accessibility, transit access, APS, tactile and digital wayfinding, accessible hotels and venues, and universally designed public spaces could become part of Raleigh's competitive identity.

The return on accessibility is therefore broader than compliance. The return can include greater independence for residents, fewer barriers to employment and daily life, safer infrastructure, stronger tourism, additional convention business, hotel room nights, restaurant and retail spending, and a national reputation for inclusion.

The approximately $411 million accessibility need should certainly be understood as a major obligation. But it should also be evaluated as a long-term investment in infrastructure that serves Raleigh residents every day while helping the city compete for a multibillion-dollar national travel and convention market.

Economic Perspective for Council

- 25.6 million travelers with disabilities made 76.9 million trips in the 2024 Open Doors study's two-year lookback period.
- Those travelers spent nearly $50 billion of their own money on travel during that two-year period.
- 93% of surveyed travelers with disabilities ate out at least once during their trips.
- 20 million adults with disabilities stayed in hotels or motels during the two-year period.
- Raleigh/Wake County's broader convention business already demonstrates the local return: 278 definite bookings generated more than 101,000 room nights and an estimated $90 million in direct economic impact.
- National disability conventions can bring hundreds of in-person participants plus exhibitors, organizational partners, family members, companions, and other visitors.

National Blindness Conventions: A Market Raleigh Could Compete For

Two of the nation's leading blindness organizations demonstrate the convention opportunity particularly well:

- National Federation of the Blind (NFB): The NFB describes its National Convention as the largest gathering of blind people in the world. Recent attendance has remained remarkably strong: 2,590 people registered in person in Orlando in 2024, with another 655 virtual registrants. More than 2,400 people attended in person in New Orleans in 2025, and more than 2,400 again attended the 2026 Austin convention. Convention-planning information describes the event as typically drawing approximately 2,500 to 3,500 attendees.
- American Council of the Blind (ACB): ACB's hybrid national conference and convention typically draws roughly 1,100 to 1,200 total registrants in recent years, with approximately 450 to 675 attending in person. In 2024 Jacksonville had about 1,180 registrants, including roughly 660 in person. In 2025 Dallas recorded 1,217 total registrants, including 676 onsite and 541 virtual participants. The Blinded Veterans Association, which shared convention space, added more than 160 attendees.

Together, these organizations illustrate the scale of just one segment of disability convention tourism. A city capable of attracting an NFB-sized gathering could welcome roughly 2,500 or more convention participants before counting exhibitors, organizational staff, family members, companions, guide-dog support needs, and other associated visitors. An ACB gathering can bring hundreds more in-person visitors while also creating national exposure through its hybrid audience.

For Raleigh, this matters because these are multi-day conventions—not simply one-day meetings. Visitors need hotel rooms, restaurants, local transportation, meeting and exhibit space, shopping, entertainment, tours, and accessible connections between each of those destinations. The economic benefit therefore extends well beyond convention-center rental.

A serious Universal Design strategy could allow Raleigh to market accessibility itself as a competitive advantage when bidding for organizations such as NFB, ACB, veterans' disability organizations, adaptive-sports events, senior organizations, and other disability-focused conferences. Raleigh would not be investing only to meet a requirement; it would be building infrastructure that can help attract visitors and recurring convention business.

Important data note: Public summaries of the 2024 Open Doors research are inconsistent about whether the nearly $50 billion figure is annual or covers two years. The underlying Open Doors study presentation states that 25.6 million travelers made 76.9 million trips and spent nearly $50 billion in

the past two years. This document uses that more conservative two-year interpretation rather than overstating the potential market.

Sources: Open Doors Organization 2024 Market Study and study presentation; Greater Raleigh Convention and Visitors Bureau annual sales report; American Council of the Blind 2024 and 2025 Conference and Convention Wrap-Ups; National Federation of the Blind 2024 convention reporting; 2025 and 2026 NFB convention attendance reporting; Cvent NFB convention case study.

Sincerely,
Mark S. Teague
Executive Director
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