

# The Town of Caledon's Universal Design Policy

## ENCOURAGING DEVELOPERS TO OFFER ACCESSIBLE FEATURES IN HOMES

In 2009, the municipality of Caledon, Ontario, found itself faced with a problem that is becoming increasingly common in municipalities across Canada: its residents were growing older, but the homes that were available or being built in the town simply weren't being designed with the needs of an aging population in mind.

To help meet this challenge, the Town decided to add a policy to its Official Plan that would make universal design principles a mandatory part of any new housing development applications. The intent of the Universal Design Policy is to ensure that local developers offer more accessible living options.

### Quick Facts

- Canada's population is aging at a faster rate than ever before. Currently, one in six Canadians is over the age of 65. Within the next few decades, that proportion could double.
- According to most studies, the vast majority of Canadian seniors want to remain in their own homes and communities as they grow older. However, many existing houses weren't designed to meet the needs of seniors.
- The Town of Caledon's Adults 55+ Strategic Plan is a long-term, community-driven strategy to address the needs of residents over the age of 55. The goal of the Plan is to ensure that the town's residents have the resources, knowledge and support to age in place, regardless of their needs or abilities.
- As part of the Official Plan, all new applications to develop housing in Caledon must include a universal design option, complete with floor plans and elevations that will be displayed in the development's sales office.

Source: Statistics Canada and the Town of Caledon.

### What is Universal Design?

Universal design is a set of features, principles and strategies that can be incorporated into the design of a home, so it can be more easily adapted to keep pace with the needs of residents of all ages and abilities. Universally designed houses allow occupants to live safely, comfortably and independently in their homes as they age, without any expensive or disruptive renovations.

### Toward a Universal Plan: A Brief Timeline

"Our initiative started as part of our regular Official Plan policy review," says Marisa Williams, Senior Policy Planner for the Town's Community Services Department.

"Seniors' housing was becoming a top priority for many members of our community. The original Seniors' Advisory Committee and, particularly, the Housing Accommodation Working Group had been stressing the need for more appropriate seniors' housing."

The problem, according to Williams, wasn't a housing shortage. It was that most of Caledon's developers were building homes that didn't offer the accessibility and other features that older homebuyers wanted.

"Many of our seniors want to stay in Caledon as they downsize," she explains. "But with the high land values in Caledon, developers weren't building the kinds of homes that seniors want to live in, like bungalows and senior continuum communities."

"Our Official Plan, at that time, didn't have a clear policy to address issues like accessibility or aging in place, so Council decided to make universal design part of our core housing policy."

## Putting the Plan into Action

Under the Universal Design Policy, developers who are applying to build any new subdivisions must include at least one floor plan model that incorporates universal design features in order to receive draft plan approval from the municipality. Such universal design features can include:

- **exterior features** such as a flush threshold (no-step) main entrance and lift options in the garage, for accessible access to the dwelling;
- **main-floor living**, with a main-floor master bedroom and bathroom for people who may have trouble navigating stairs;
- **wider hallways and doors** to accommodate someone using a walker or wheelchair;
- **counters of varying heights in the kitchen**, to allow older residents to cook comfortably from a seated position;
- **toggle switches and higher plug placements** to make the lighting and ventilation systems more accessible; and
- **roughed-in areas to install a residential lift or elevator** right away or in the future.

In addition, builders must display the universal design option in their sales office, along with a list of all the universal design features that are available. This will let potential homebuyers see what options are available to them at an extra cost, while allowing sales agents to direct older buyers to the options that could be of most benefit to them.

Universal design was chosen as the foundation for Caledon's policy because of its flexibility in meeting the needs of both homeowners and developers. A house that is designed in accordance with universal design principles can adapt easily and cost-effectively to changes in the needs of homeowners as they age, without requiring them to carry out any additional upgrades or costly future renovations.

To make sure that the Policy would be well received, Town staff worked in close consultation with local builders, developers and other stakeholders. Former Mayor Marolyn Morrison invited local builders and developers to a round-table meeting to discuss how they could work together to develop more accessible homes.

In addition, the Town's Seniors' Advisory Committee (Seniors' Task Force) developed a handy checklist of "easy living features" to help both residents and developers better understand the benefits of the Policy and how universal design can support accessible living. The Town also makes a point of distributing information about the Policy at events like their annual Seniors' Day.

## Caledon's Adult 55+ Strategic Plan

Caledon's universal design policy is part of the Town's Adults 55+ Strategic Plan, which addresses the unique needs of residents aged 55 or older. Among other aspects, the Plan sets out six key goals:

- **GOAL ONE:** Ensure that sufficient human and financial resources are available to support the strategy;
- **GOAL TWO:** Ensure Caledon residents have a range of housing options that can support their needs and allow them to age in place;
- **GOAL THREE:** Ensure programs and opportunities exist for adults aged 55+ be socially integrated into the community;
- **GOAL FOUR:** Enhance new and existing programs and services for adults aged 55 and over;
- **GOAL FIVE:** Improve outreach and the sharing of information about accessibility and aging in place with members of the community and other partners; and
- **GOAL SIX:** Support additional transportation resources for seniors in the community.



Photo: No-step threshold





## Next Steps:

As part of the Town's Official Plan, Caledon's Universal Design Policy is still a work in progress.

While the original intent of the Universal Design Policy was directed at seniors, building accessible homes can have farther-reaching benefits:

- They are accessible to all persons with disabilities or mobility issues.
- They are accessible immediately, and remain so as residents age or their mobility changes. This allows residents to save on costly renovations.
- The accessibility features may add resale value.
- They allow ease of movement for all households (for example, they are easier to enter with a stroller or a handful of groceries).

"Our goal was to ensure we have a diverse range of housing options for everyone who wants to live in Caledon, regardless of their age or abilities," Williams explains. "This Policy is one of the important ways we're working to make that goal a reality."

When asked what advice she would give to other municipalities who might want to follow in Caledon's footsteps, Williams says simply: "Involve the development community, as well as your accessibility, age-friendly and seniors' advisory committees, as early in the process as possible."

"Ideally, have the mayor and other political officials and stakeholders come together to discuss housing needs with local builders and developers. Having these discussions is vital to ensuring that everyone involved is on board and ready to work together in a constructive and co-operative way to make it a success."

To find out more about Caledon's Official Plan, including the universal design housing policy, visit the Town's website at [www.caledon.ca](http://www.caledon.ca).



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