Council Direction: N/A

Information:
Like all City operations, the City of Hamilton museums are actively complying with the regulations of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), and in particular the Customer Service standard which came into effect January 1, 2010.

A number of the City-owned museum buildings are not fully physically accessible to persons with disabilities. Most of the museum buildings have some level of heritage designation (including National Historic Site status), and therefore the need to protect the heritage fabric complicates any project to modify the buildings to increase accessibility.

In order to provide access for those who cannot physically tour the museums, staff developed virtual museum tours which are available through the web.

The Civic Museums Virtual Tour Project

The virtual tours allow the visitor to take a web-based, self-guided, room-by-room walking tour of the entire museum. The visitor can navigate by using a floor map or by following links connecting the rooms. Additional depth is added to the tour through ‘hotspots.’ Clicking on a ‘hotspot’ on the screen reveals close-up photographs and additional text and audio recordings, providing more information on key museum artifacts.
The virtual tours are accessible to users with a wide range of disabilities. Users with vision disabilities can enlarge the text or change the contrast used on the controls. The tours include embedded audio for all rooms, hotspots and navigation links. The audio can be played through a text reader if the user prefers. The tours are also completely accessible through keyboard only control. This meets or exceeds the requirements for WC3 2.0, level A accessibility, the basis of the AODA standards for website design. The virtual tours will operate on both Macintosh and Windows platforms.

Other highlights included:

- Every room in each of the seven museums has been captured in a 360 degree panoramic photograph which can be zoomed and panned. This replicates the physical experience of visiting a museum site as closely as possible;
- Audio accompanies all panoramas, hotspots and navigation controls, deepening the experience and allowing users with vision disabilities to use the tours. Narration provided by city museum staff and Councillors McHattie, Pearson and Ferguson;
- Text accompanies all panoramas and hotspots thus allowing users with hearing disabilities to use the tours;
- Accessibility features (such as support for text readers, keyboard only navigation and alt text tags) allow all users, including the blind, to use the tours;
- The tours will be accessible both through on-site kiosks and over the internet and will serve as an additional means of access to the museum sites for everybody. This will allow the museums to potentially reach new audiences;
- The tours can be accessed through any computer with appropriate web connectivity and so can be used at sites such as libraries or local schools; and,
- The tours will be available 24 hours a day 365 days a year.

Costs and Sources of Funding for Virtual Tour Development

An RFP was issued in October of 2010 and closed on November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2010. Synthescape Art Imaging was awarded the contract to implement the virtual tours. Synthescape has a long history of high quality image capture, 360 degree image stitching and virtual tour development with the Virtual Museum of Canada, the National Gallery of Canada, the Detroit institute of Arts and the Courtauld Gallery in the U.K. While Synthescape was responsible for implementation, most of the design work was completed by City staff. This includes the overall look, feel and navigational methodology used in the tours.

The total purchase price of the virtual tour project was $90,475 (including webhosting and maintenance). Other research and development costs brought the total project to $171,914.00. To offset project costs, staff obtained a $42,000 Museums and
Technology Grant, from the Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Culture for Ontario and a $55,800.00 Museums Assistance Program grant from the Department of Canadian Heritage. The City’s contribution to the project was $76,114.00 (funded from the Collections/Preservation project in the Culture capital budget) or approximately 44% of total project costs.

In addition, the Culture Division has received a further $50,000 Museum and Technology grant to partially fund the development of three virtual tours focused on Hamilton sites and events integral to the War of 1812. These include the Battle of Stoney Creek, The Hamilton and Scourge and the Burlington Heights encampment. These tours are in the very early stages of development and will be launched in 2012.

The tours can be accessed from the museums page on the City of Hamilton website: http://www.hamilton.ca/CultureandRecreation/Arts_Culture_And_Museums/HamiltonCivicMuseums.