

On the right track

The Tillamook Coast makes progress toward access for all

By Chelsea Yarnell

For the TODAY

In 1913, Oregon Governor Oswald West successfully encouraged the passage of a bill that declared the entire Oregon Coast shoreline a public highway. This designation would be the gateway to the Oregon Beach Bill that, in 1967, established public ownership of Oregon beaches and therefore access to all. The public preservation of Oregon beaches is how we continue to enjoy the sand and salty air.

But accessibility to “all” is sometimes met with barriers. Barriers that Tillamook Coast Visitors Association, or TCVA, is working to mitigate.



Ms. Wheelchair Oregon, Hannah Rarick, took a David's Chair out for a spin on the beach at Happy Camp in Netarts • Photo courtesy Tillamook Coast Visitors Association

“If the beach is open to everybody, everybody means everybody,” said Dan Haag, the association’s director of trails and outdoor recreation.

Last November, the association hosted Ashley Schahfer of Empowering Access for an in-person accessibility education and training event. Schahfer, an avid outdoor enthusiast, also has 21 years of lived experience in a wheelchair. With Empowering Access, she has provided accessibility consultations to cities, agencies and outdoor programs throughout Oregon. The training event was the culmination of a \$20,000 project funded by a grant from Travel Oregon. It covered best practices, etiquette and general guidance for disability inclusion and accessibility work in the outdoor recreation industry.

“Make accessibility part of every plan and every design you’re looking at,” Schahfer told the audience. “Just because I’m in a wheelchair doesn’t mean I don’t want to do all the same things everyone does.”

In June, Schahfer spent time with staff from TCVA and Tillamook County Parks Department conducting an accessibility survey of the Kilchis River, Trask River and Barview Jetty county parks. She evaluated each recreation site’s accessibility with notes on trail and campsite grades, picnic table heights and terrain.

The findings were compiled into a comprehensive report that was presented to Tillamook County Commissioners.

“Ashley’s work on our behalf has been invaluable as we try to prioritize projects that will improve outdoor accessibility in the county,” Haag said, adding that there is work ahead, but “places like Tillamook County are taking steps to change.”

A key takeaway from the training was the necessity to provide current information about the accessibility of visitor locations. That includes trail information, dock locations and availability of accessible lodging options.

“Information is so important to those with a disability,” Schahfer said. “We don’t need miles of paved trails. We just want the information so we can make the decisions for ourselves.”

TCVA received a second grant of \$65,000 from Travel Oregon to work with Wheel the World: an online booking site and visitor guide for travelers with disabilities.

“With this grant, we’re focusing on the information side of accessibility,” Haag said. “Information is key.”

A crew from Wheel the World will evaluate information from 30 Tillamook County sites, including a mix of restaurants, lodging and attractions. Staff will record stats such as bed heights, stair/step-free access areas, floor surfaces, turning space in bathrooms and more. This information will then be added to Wheel the World’s booking platform.

The Tillamook Estuaries Partnership has also partnered with TCVA to assist in providing information about accessibility at recreation locations, particularly waterways.

“We believe having our outdoor places accessible is how you build stewardship,” Deputy Director Claudine Rehn said. “Our outdoor spaces have natural barriers, but if we provide people with information, they then can make their own decisions. The most important thing is letting those with lived experience lead and be involved.”

Rehn said that future reprints of the partnership’s popular water trail maps will look to supply additional information about accessibility.

TCVA is also actively disseminating information about beach wheelchairs and David’s Chairs, electric, all-terrain chairs, at various locations on the Tillamook Coast.

“The David’s Chairs have been really cool,” Haag said. “They go over the soft sand and give the person using it a sense of independence.”

Beach wheelchairs are available in Manzanita, Rockaway Beach, Pacific City, Nehalem Bay State Park, Cape Lookout State Park and Barview Jetty County Campground. David’s Chairs are available in Manzanita, Netarts and Pacific City.

There is no fee for use, but reservations are strongly suggested. For a full list of beach wheelchair and David’s Chair locations, as well as reservation information, go to tillamookcoast.com/mobility.