

Get help for home mobility

BY VINCE HANCOCK
Special to the Record-Eagle

Structural and financial challenges can block the paths of those who use wheelchairs or have special requirements of their homes.

While contractors can solve many problems, full-scale renovation can result in overwhelming costs. Often, the struggle lies in identifying one's immediate needs, especially following a sudden change in mobility due to an accident or illness.

In the past, solutions had to be cobbled together from a variety of sources, but lately, several new avenues for home accessibility have opened for those in northern Michigan.

If you're planning to update an existing home, be prepared for possibly great expense. According to Benzie County Building Inspector, Charlie Sessoms, a bathroom renovation can generate the most costs, especially in older homes.

"When you start tearing it apart, you might find out that stuff's half-rotten, and that's the time to replace fixtures," he said.

Accessible toilets can also drive up the total price. Various permits alone can total between \$300-500 for bathroom remodeling, in order to cover electrical, plumbing, and building work. Other major work requires building permits, too, which are issued by county governments to ensure that structures meet federal, state and local codes.

To keep actual construction costs down, Sessoms suggests planning ahead to get a better deal.

"I would talk to a contractor in the mid-summer in order to make plans for winter work," he said. "Although construction is seasonal, many contractors are looking for inside work."

Careful plan design can ensure a home that meets needs as abilities change. For new additions or construction, a plan review with the building inspector is conducted before permits are issued. Here, most outstanding issues or problems are solved, but future requirements should be considered. New construction should provide for easy entrance and exit, wide hallways and door frames.

A good starting point when considering changes to the home is the Northern Michigan Alliance for Independent Living (922-0903). The non-profit organization offers advice on equipment that may assist with a variety of needs, as well as referrals to other agencies, resources and contractors. It also advocates for long-term accessibility in both private and public buildings.

Traverse City resident Skip Brown has called for greater accessibility in new buildings. Six years ago he founded Freedom Builders of America in order to meet the local needs of the poor, a volunteer organization that accomplishes about 90 projects per year, including exterior ramps and interior

changes.

"If you're building a new home from the start, three-foot doorways instead of little two-foot doorways would be good forethought," he said. "Yet those things aren't happening very often. We're still at times building homes and saving four dollars per door because it's narrower and we don't have a need for a wheelchair now."

Brown suggested that new construction should consider traffic patterns inside the house along with future needs.

Beyond the immediate needs of the residents, such planning could also make life easier for Brown, who organizes volunteer plumbers, electricians and furnace repairmen to renovate or, in some cases, almost overhaul traditional modular and trailer homes. One project included wide, short-rise steps for those using walkers. Wheelchair ramps can be removed and reinstalled if homes are sold or residents move.

He expressed enthusiasm about the work, and described Freedom Builders as a ministry which seeks to build relationships as well as ramps and accessible stairways.

"Through housing repair or modification, We're here to remind people that they're important, that they have value and that they're not forgotten," he said.

Simple jobs, such as lowering cabinets or installing handrails and grab-bars may provide tangible benefits. If family or church members

Design

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installing one bathroom vanity in a matching finish and style to create a lower island or work station in the kitchen. Standard bathroom cabinets are generally lower than kitchen cabinets.

Peterson likes to see raised dishwashers, side-by-side refrigerators, counter-height ovens and single-lever faucets to make it easier for everyone from a wheelchair user to a mother balancing a grocery bag and a toddler on her hip.

In the bedroom suite, Davenport disguised the institutional look of Hughes' hospital-style bed by pairing it with a standard twin bed and covering them with a floor-length bedspread, to make it look like a standard king-size bed.

A huge white-tiled master bathroom with roll-in shower, a tub with jets and special-access sinks is the only space that might give away the occupant's disability.

But while it might be difficult to disguise adapted bathroom furnishings, there are ways to make the space

attractive. As more people live into old age, more companies are manufacturing products such as lever door handles, more accessible tubs and sinks, and attractive grab bars, all of which used to be custom-made.

Some adaptations can be expensive (an elevator, for example, can cost \$15,000 to \$20,000), accessible design sometimes can save money. When designing a home for a wheelchair user, it might make sense — and reduce cost — to eliminate some interior doors. Also, expensive molding can be dispensed with because dings and dents are inevitable during wheelchair passage. Eliminating bottom cabinets to allow leg space for the wheelchair user also might save money.

Peterson used the principles of universal design when she and her architect-husband designed their new home in Brookfield.

"If we want to stay in our homes (as we age), why don't we make them homes (we) can stay in?" Peterson said.

Accessibility begins at the front door — new homes easily can be built with at least one entrance level with the ground, critical for the disabled but also helpful to

active parents wrestling with a stroller.

One of the biggest no-nos, designers say, is the hulking wooden ramp out front that might as well scream "a disabled person lives here." For almost the same price, homeowners can add a gradual sloping sidewalk surrounded by plantings and leading to a front door at ground level.

Bolingbrook, Ill., passed a law in 2003 requiring any new home in the city to have ground-level access. A year later, 3,000 homes have been built with flat entrances, and there have been no reports of problems with moisture at the entries — one worry in a snowy climate.

For people with disabilities and limited incomes, the U.S. Veteran's Administration and the state government offer some modest grants to help make homes accessible.

But more than money, designing for accessibility requires careful planning.

"The inspiration comes from things that do cost a lot, but there are ways that don't cost a lot of money," Peterson said. "My rule for the work I do is: If it doesn't look good, don't do it."

can't help, seniors may have another option in United Way's new "Tuesday Toolman" program. It's strictly available strictly to seniors over 60 who are enrolled with the Area Agency on Aging. While the program is very new and has extremely limited funding, United Way's Susan McQuaid said that senior volunteers accomplish small jobs using their own tools.

Working with Freedom Builders and a set of plans that meet current codes, they help to build wheelchair ramps. Those that don't meet the criteria can obtain, at least, those blueprints.

Beyond United way's program, the Area Agency on Aging offers an array of programs to meet the health care needs of its senior clients, who are referred there by a doctor. Deputy

Director Dr. Bob Schlueter says that victims of accident or injury should be sure to consult hospital staff.

"They shouldn't leave a hospital without talking with a discharge planner," he said. "They should be well-informed up front before they step out of that hospital."

Vincent Hancock is a local freelance writer.

Consolidating clutter: Reorganize, resell

BY JANET LIVELY
Special to the Record-Eagle

Remember in elementary school when the teacher came around with a big garbage can and ordered you to sort and toss squirreled away items from your desk until there was only neatly stacked essentials?

Too bad no one forces us to do that as adults. Clearing the clutter is so satisfying when it's done, but it can be so hard to get started.

Luckily, there are many places in the area that will painlessly unburden you of __ and maybe even pay you for __ items that you no longer need. And for those possessions that you can't part with, there is a wide range of products on the market to help you get organized.

"Home storage systems are huge, huge sellers, especially right now," said Julie Jacobs, manager of hardware, tools and home organization at Lowe's in Traverse City. "From December until June, it's monstrous."

Popular items at Lowe's include Tuff Duty garage and workshop organizers from Coleman that come in mix-and-match sections, ranging in price from \$58 to \$144, Jacobs said. Shoppers are also snapping up high-end systems from ClosetMaid featuring hardwood-laminate shelves and drawers that are simple to install but look like built-in cabinets, she added. Unit prices range from \$39 to \$122.

For a garage in crisis, De Weese Hardware in Traverse City sells heavy-duty hooks for hanging everything from bikes to sledge hammers. The hooks, which come in packs of 10

and sell for about \$16, are always popular because people "like to get things off their garage floor," said Rob De Weese.

The store also sells the heavy-duty SuperRack storage unit that can be assembled — no bolts required — as shelving or a workbench. The price for 2,500 pounds of storage: \$68.

But to be a true clutter-buster, you must be careful not to "organize" unwanted items only because you feel guilty about throwing them away and think you might someday have a garage sale. One option may be a re-seller like The Drop Spot in Traverse City, an eBay-certified service that opened in November. For a commission of about 35 percent, the e-savvy staff at The Drop Spot will photograph, describe, categorize, auction off, ship and pay you for just about anything worth more than \$30.

Of course, anybody can sell on eBay themselves. But proprietor Mark Bowie says his clients get better prices — such as the guy who sold a 10-year-old bike frame for \$325 — due to his staff's research and presentation.



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"You drop it off, you walk out and three weeks later you get a check," Bowie said.

Model trains, used auto parts and power tools draw lots of bidders, he said, although almost everything sells easily except for clothing. No problem there, however, because there is a long list of consignment shops in the area that will gladly resell your nicer garments.

At Top Drawer Resale Clothier in Traverse City, owner Sharon Carmean sells clothes brought in by more than 1,300 consignors. She inspects their items, sets a price and splits the sale 50-50. And if the clothes or jewelry don't sell, she'll donate them to charity.

"Some people make hundreds and hundreds of dollars," Carmean said. "It's a nice alternative rather than all the work of having a garage sale."

Most consignment shops have some restrictions, however. Top Drawer only

accepts spring and summer clothes this time of year and limits consignors to only 10 items per day. Carmean doesn't require consignors to make appointments, although some shops do.

One of Traverse City's newest consignment shops, Re°clec°tia, doesn't take clothing at all but sells things you'd keep in the garage, such as snow blowers, scooters, tools and kayaks, along with furniture and home décor items. Owners Janet and Ron Ramoie say their consignment customers avoid the time and trouble of selling things on their own.

"There are no people calling or coming to the house," said Janet Ramoie, who will make arrangements to haul large items to her store.

But if you want to get rid of a variety of things quickly and unequivocally, consider giving them to charity. One of many organizations is the new Goodwill store on South



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Get rid of hazardous materials

Even if some of your clutter is just plain junk, it might not belong in the garbage.

Hazardous materials, ranging from expired medicines to florescent light bulbs, need special handling to protect the environment.

Grand Traverse County will collect household hazardous waste three times in 2005: On April 30, July 30 and Sept. 24.

Call 941-5555 to make an appointment to dispose of your items and check the county Web site at www.grandtraverse.org (click departments, then resource recovery) for more information on the materials accepted. The county collects used batteries and cell phones all year, along with paper, plastic, glass and metal containers.

Information about collection sites is on the Web site, which also lists area businesses that accept used motor oil and other items. The county has not set a date for its next collection of used computers and other electronic equipment. A special collection in October brought in 55,000 pounds of used electronics.

Airport Road in Traverse City. When you drive up to the side door, someone will help you unload and give you a receipt to use at tax time.

Goodwill won't take your old televisions, computers, or a few other items due to environmental concerns, said Ruth Blick, their director of retail and marketing.

She said there's really just one main rule: "Give to a

charity what you would give to a friend. If it's broken or has pieces missing, we can't fix it."

Otherwise, Goodwill will take about anything you can fit in your car. The agency needs more donations, Blick said, because sales at the new store have been "very, very good."

Janet Lively is a local freelance writer.

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