

Herald – 06-07-09

Simple changes can reduce disability's impact

*Railway stations are a real challenge for the vision-impaired, but they needn't be, writes **Greg Piper**.*

I participated recently in an exercise in Morisset in which politicians and professionals experienced the challenges faced by people with disabilities. I was blindfolded and faced the world with my new disability, albeit with considerable support from James Bennett, of Blackalls Park, and his guide dog, Putu. James has been totally blind for five years and is active in advocating for better understanding and improved facilities for those with disabilities.

James helped me through my initial sense of vertigo and gave me practical tips on basic situations such as traversing a footpath, locating doors, ordering a meal at a cafe, and using public toilets. None of the tasks were easy, but with help I managed. The experience was brief, but I gained a better understanding of challenges faced by people with disabilities.

James told me of the difficulties he experiences as a blind person reliant on public transport. He described the process of climbing stairs, counting paces, turning, counting again, turning again and climbing more stairs, all of which is just part of the routine he follows to catch a train at his local station, Fassifern. James has had to learn these routines for each station he uses and he advises that he is unable to use other stations because there is too little support for blind people and no consistency.

I was so impressed by Mr Bennett's positive outlook and his advocacy that I looked into his requests for improved and consistent guidance through railway stations and found that suitable methods exist and have been employed in a number of countries. Even India has moved to implement a broadscale and consistent system of tactile paths—something that RailCorp has not yet done in New South Wales.

The greatest opportunity to help the blind and visually impaired is by combining tactile paths with handrails containing Braille or tactile messages. The surface of the path would indicate the route, while information on the handrail would indicate the station name and platform number.

These tactile paths would then lead to information boards with messages in Braille or tactile letters. Major stations could even have interactive audio systems providing more comprehensive information. These things can be implemented in a systematic and standardised way that would help in unfamiliar surroundings. Tactile paths can lead people around obstacles and they can identify intersections and stairways.

I have raised these suggestions with the Minister for Transport and recently mentioned them in Parliament. I acknowledge that it will take some time and resources to develop such systems and to stage their implementation, but I do not think there would be many more worthy projects to address social justice, access and equity.

Greg Piper is the state member for Lake Macquarie and Mayor.