

“Wider” and “Flatter” Doesn’t Always Equal ADA Compliance

Providing access for visitors with disabilities at outdoor recreation sites requires careful planning and attention to detail. Many well intentioned park operators and municipal staff assume that if a route is “wider” or if the ground appears “flat enough” that they have met their ADA obligations for accessible routes. The reality is that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires accessible routes to comply with the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design (the ADA Standards) available at www.ada.gov.

The ability to access all aspects of outdoor recreation sites hinges on the presence of accessible routes. To assess if there are challenges for people with mobility disabilities that could reduce access to desired facilities or activities, imagine a visitor traveling through a site. Begin where visitors



No accessible route is provided to access this boardwalk.

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arrive, usually in a parking area. Make sure that an accessible route is provided from parking to the various elements of the recreation site. If you have recreational boating facilities or fishing piers/platforms, or elements such as gazebos or pavilions, they must be located on an accessible route per the ADA Standards. Even though the ADA Standards do not directly address access to some areas common to recreation sites, such as trails, picnic and camping facilities, viewing areas, and beach access routes, state and local government entities still have obligations to ensure access for visitors with disabilities to these features. To meet these obligations under the ADA, state and local governments may choose to apply the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) Outdoor

Developed Areas Standards for outdoor recreation accessible routes (www.access-board.gov) when constructing or altering trails, picnic and camping facilities, viewing areas, and beach access routes.

Some of the accessible route features that are critical for visitors with disabilities include:

Clear Width: In order for visitors using mobility aids such as wheelchairs to get around, all areas of the site need to be located on a route that is at least 36 inches wide. When possible, providing routes that are at least 5 feet wide is preferable. If parking is provided, make sure that an accessible route connects the parking area(s) to the accessible features of the site.

Ground Surface: Choosing materials that are stable, firm and slip resistant is required by the ADA Standards and is important for the safety of visitors. Surfaces such as loose gravel and wood chips do not typically comply with the ADA Standards.

Slope: In the developed areas of a site, accessible routes (that are not designed as ramps) should not have running slopes greater than 5%. Cross slopes should not exceed 2%, as excessive cross slopes make balancing difficult. There are

additional allowances for the running slope of recreation access routes in areas such as trails.

Ramps: Ensure that ramps do not exceed a running slope of 1:12. If overcoming a rise of 6 inches or more, handrails are needed on both sides; the width of the ramp between handrails must be at least 36 inches, and edge protection (that prevents wheelchair casters or other mobility aids from falling off the sides of the ramp), is needed along the bottom of the ramp.

Maintaining Accessible Routes: Accessible routes are only beneficial to visitors if they are clear. Items such as trash cans near doors can interfere with someone’s ability to get close enough to physically push/pull a door. Do not store items along accessible routes that limit the clear width of the route to less than 36 inches.

Want to know more about how the ADA applies to community recreation?

Contact the Northeast ADA Center at: www.NortheastADA.org | 1.800.949.4232 | NortheastADA@Cornell.edu

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