

Beach wheelchairs improve access at Fort Macon

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MIKE SHUTAK |

Correction, 10 a.m. - Chris Egan was incorrectly identified as the chairman of the N.C. Council for Developmental Disabilities. His actual position is executive director of the NCCDD.

ATLANTIC BEACH — Wheelchair-using visitors to Fort Macon State Park may once again cruise the beach now that four new Sand Rider beach wheelchairs have been donated by Access North Carolina to replace the ones taken out of service last summer.

The fort staff received its new wheelchairs from Access North Carolina on Saturday at bathhouse at the fort's western beach access.

Access North Carolina is a publication from the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services that provides travelers with disabilities information on accessibility to state parks, historic sites, museums and other destinations.

These new chairs will now be available on a first-come, first-served basis at the bathhouse.

Taking part in the reception event were representatives from the N.C. Council for Developmental Disabilities, a governor-appointed council dedicated to improving opportunities and lives for North Carolinians with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families.

After a few words from NCCDD, officials and Fort Macon superintendent Randy Newman, the 15 or so people who'd come to the event took them out for a test ride. Kelly Woodall, NCCDD councilman with a developmental disability, said the ride from the bathhouse down to the water's edge was "really cool."

"It's very unobtrusive, because I can sit back (in the chair)," she said. In the past, Ms. Woodall had avoided going to the beach because it was very difficult for her to get there.

"When I got to my teenage years, I didn't want to be carried," she said. "If we have a beach with (beach) wheelchairs, I don't have to choose between the beach or a wheelchair."

Lois Blanchard, who's also disabled, and her husband, James, both of New Bern, also tried out one of the chairs. While the others stopped short of the water, Ms. Blanchard and her husband took theirs into the surf to test the chair's ability to handle the water.

"They're very nice, very comfortable," Ms. Blanchard said.

NCCDD councilman Wendy Boyd said the council was very excited to be there for the fort's unveiling of the new chairs. The council has made March its "Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month."

Mr. Newman said the fort has a rich history of working with the NCCDD to increase accessibility.

"We had a couple of beach wheelchairs before, but they deteriorated and the company that made them went out of business," he said. "ACCESS North Carolina stepped up and provided these (new chairs)."

Chris Egan, NCCDD chairman, said having opportunities for more access means more chances for inclusion for the disabled.

"More and more opportunities like this are needed," he said. "Being able to get down to the beach means being able to get out in your community."

Mr. Egan said the fort's new wheelchairs are a great opportunity to promote access for the disabled. He said almost 650,000 North Carolinians have mobility issues.

For more information on the NCCDD, visit the council's website nccdd.org.

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