

SMART GROWTH AND RECREATION

SUMMARY

Most Canadians do not get enough physical activity each day, leading to significant health implications. Community-based recreation is a significant service that municipalities provide, and yet it seems that isn't enough to keep our residents active and healthy.¹

Recreation includes physical, social and cultural activities and improves the quality of life for residents. The top five activities Albertans enjoy for recreation actually involve limited physical activity on the part of the participant:

- Walking for pleasure
- Gardening
- Attending a fair or festival
- Attending sports events
- Doing a craft or hobby

The aging population will have a significant impact on recreational service provision, and there continues to be a significant lack of sufficient physical activity among children. Socio-economic factors are also having an impact on recreational programming.

There are a number of barriers that prevent people from taking part in more physical activity. They include lack of time, people are too busy, the costs and a number of factors related to the physical environment such as poorly maintained or lit sidewalks or bike trails.

Most participation in recreational activities occurs in informal settings such as walking or cycling. To meet the recommended amount of physical activity each day requires people to be able to incorporate it into everyday activities like getting to work or school, going to the store, visiting friends or running other errands. Streets have long been overlooked for their potential as important recreation spaces.

Recreation would be an important element in Smart Growth development, with existing trail systems being enhanced by a more connected, pedestrian-friendly street system. The addition of urban parks in closer proximity to a greater percentage of residences will enable more people to enjoy and be active in public spaces. A greater focus on design will also provide a more welcoming public realm, where residents can easily incorporate informal physical activity into their daily lives to supplement the more formal activities.

To Read:

Free-range children by Ken MacQueen on giving children more freedom to live and learn and make mistakes.

Find it at:

http://www.macleans.ca/culture/lifestyle/article.jsp?content=20080402_47686_47686

To Watch:

Play is more than fun, Stuart Brown talks about the importance of play for our well-being.

Find it at:

http://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_brown_says_play_is_more_than_fun_it_s_vital.html

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Places to see:

Orillia, Ontario is an active participant in WinterActive, a federal initiative to help Canadians improve their health while enjoying the best of winter. Orillia organized a number of events this past winter including a Co-ed Sno-Pitch Tournament, Snow Volleyball, A Snowman Building contest, cardboard box toboggan races, all of which were going ahead regardless of weather conditions.

The articles and videos referenced in the Bulletins do not necessarily reflect the position of the City of St. Albert and are meant to encourage debate and discussion.

¹ For additional information, see Bulletin #8 Health & the Built Environment

INTRODUCTION

“The opposite of play is depression.”

Stuart Brown

Most Canadians do not get enough physical activity each day, leading to significant health implications. Community-based recreation is a significant service that municipalities provide, and yet it seems that isn't enough to keep our residents active and healthy.²

Some suggest recreation focuses on physical activities (Queensland, ND), while others broaden the concept to include social and cultural activities in addition to physical ones (Recreation Rendezvous, ND).

The Queensland government in Australia provides a good summary of recreation activities as those that:

- people undertake for enjoyment in their own free time;
- people undertake by voluntarily allocating resources (time, money, equipment);
- may be an expression of the self-identity of many people;
- provide for the expression of distinct (recreational) sub-cultures; and
- may be essential to the quality of life of many people.

Recreation and leisure is important for many reasons. It promotes quality of life and enables residents to become involved and feel part of the community. It gives people satisfaction, enjoyment and pleasure. It allows them to be challenged and increases self-esteem and confidence. And it increased the opportunity to gain and develop new friendships or promotes friendship through shared experiences (Recreation Rendezvous, ND).

RECREATIONAL TRENDS

What people do

According to the Alberta Recreation Study (2008), the top activities Albertans prefer to engage in the most in their leisure time are:

- Walking for pleasure
- Gardening
- Attending a fair or festival
- Attending sports events
- Doing a craft or hobby
- Playing video, computer or electronic games
- Visiting a museum, art gallery
- Bicycling
- Swimming (in pools)
- Aerobics/fitness/aquasize/yoga

A recent study by the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (CLFRI) found the top reasons for engaging in recreational activities are for pleasure, for physical health or exercise, to relax, to enjoy nature and to be with family (CFLRI, 2004a). It is interesting that of the top activities, only about half of these involve physical activity by the participant, despite physical exercise being a primary motivator.

Over half of respondents in the study indicated no wish to take on any additional activities. However, 41% were interested in taking on something more. In this case, they are primarily

² For additional information, see Bulletin #8 Health & the Built Environment

physical activities like gym/fitness, swimming, yoga, dancing, canoeing/kayaking, curling, bicycling, golf, cross-country skiing and aquasize/weight-training (CFLRI, 2004a).

Canadians are more likely to engage in informal activities than in organized sporting activities. About 70% have engaged in informal activities, such as walking or bicycling, in the past year, while only one-third have participated in organized activities. (CFLRI, 2004a).

Those least likely to be active include: women, teenage girls, older teenagers (as compared with younger teenagers) and older adults. Adults with lower levels of income and education, or who are widowed, divorced or separated are also less likely to be active (CFLRI, 2004a).

While activity levels are increasing slightly, one half of Canadian adults and approximately 80% of youth are not active enough to meet international guidelines. They go on to suggest reasons could include “development of urban design and suburban environments which favour motorized vehicles or other non-active modes of commuting. Estimates place the cost of physical inactivity at \$5.3 billion (CFLRI, 2004a).

Aging population

The aging population³ will have a significant impact on the demand for, and in turn the provision of, recreational opportunities in our communities. Currently the majority of recreational services for seniors involve creating buildings that provide gathering spaces for learning. This cohort lived through an era where they learned how to do more with less and they are now enjoying time to relax and try something new. They also are highly likely to give of their time and volunteer to help others.

In general contrast, the Baby Boomers, with their large numbers heading for retirement, have never had to do without. They do not see retirement as a time to slow down and learn. “The Boomers seek solace in programs designed to reduce stress and balance their obsession with youthfulness, financial success and family.” They look more to self-directed groups, and health and fitness continues to be very important.

The Baby Boomers want to be heard, and want greater involvement in public consultation. They tend to be more willing to donate money rather than time, and choose to volunteer based on how it helps attain status or improve opportunities in their business world.

Municipalities and other organizations that provide recreational services to seniors will now need to change or augment their role to that of service facilitator.

“Continued efforts to make our facilities more accessible to those with physical limitations should be a focus from now on. The importance of social interaction will become more and more evident as people speak through face to face dialogue. The coffee house mentality will encourage happy-feeling spaces with places to play.” (Johnson, 2003)

The aging population is reducing the demand for traditional, higher intensity team sports like hockey, baseball, basketball, and increasing demand for individual recreation such as golf, walking, aerobics and other fitness programs (ERA, 2004)

Children and recreation

In contrast to their active elders, it is quite a different story for children and youth. Predictions in the 1990s were already pointing to the sedentary lifestyles of youth leading to an obesity crisis (Hunter, 2003). 73% of children and youth aged 5 to 19 do not accumulate sufficient daily activities to meet the gender-specific criteria associated with a healthy body mass index (CFLRI, 2005). Only 21% of Canadian teenagers are active enough to meet international guidelines for optimal growth and development (CFLRI, 2004a). This is despite 61% of youth aged 15-19 participating in sport.

³ For additional information, see Bulletin #4 Demographics

Recent surveys suggest people recognize the importance of recreation for children and youth, but the daily activities do not reflect this. The Alberta Recreational Survey (2008) found that people surveyed felt that some of the most important benefits of recreation are the opportunities for children and youth to take part in a variety of activities and for families to spend time together.

Socio-economic changes

As pointed out in an earlier bulletin⁴, there is a growing disparity between those who are financially comfortable versus those who aren't. This is reflected in people's recreational activities as well. (Hunter, 2003) Those who are less well-off are far less likely to be physically active and their children are less likely to be physically active (CFLRI, 200X). These people are more likely to have less time, insufficient funds and find transportation a greater barrier to participation.

Recreation agencies are being asked to provide services and programs to at-risk populations, and these groups are growing faster than many municipal populations as a whole (ERA, 2004).

Young single professionals have been increasing participation in socially-oriented team sports due to their limited leisure time but relatively high amount of disposable income (ERA, 2004). With recent trends showing young people staying single longer, there are implications for demand in organized sports.

Provision and use of recreational facilities

Formal recreational facilities include playing fields like soccer, baseball, football; swimming pools; ice rinks; fitness centres or any space specifically designed for a recreational purpose. More often than not these are provided through public funding and operated by public bodies. Standards for the provision of these facilities are often based on a per capita or per neighbourhood basis.

Many of these spaces are expensive to build and have significant ongoing operational costs that can be a challenge for municipalities. The majority of municipalities indicate that local sport and recreational facilities are in need of repair or maintenance and it is difficult to find funds to cover the costs (CFLRI, 2004b)

The main challenge is the timing of the demand. There is growing demand for peak times such as after school or in the evening, but limited demand during the day. The increased competition for sports facilities by adults with children is being offset by growth in the senior age markets, where more leisure time is available (ERA, 2004)

In the future, there will be a need for more flexible spaces with opportunities for multiple uses. Single use facilities are becoming obsolete. Agencies are looking at more leisure oriented facilities such as waterparks or are partnering with hospitals, universities, schools or other groups looking to cater to diverse market segments, and generate greater economies of scale. Mobile facilities and a broader scale of programming are also being seen (ERA, 2004). Interestingly, some suggest recreation centres will become like town centres, with multiple agencies and businesses in the complex, similar to recent trends in medical facilities or grocery stores.

There is increasing competition between the public and private sectors to provide recreational activities. There are opportunities for shared development and partnering among various groups, enabling cost sharing. However it isn't all positive. In the US, some private developers have actually taken legal action to stop publicly funded recreation projects.

BARRIERS TO RECREATION

Despite all the programs and facilities municipalities, local organizations or businesses provide, many people are still nowhere near as active as they should be to maintain a good level of health. Just under half of all Canadians do not even get moderate amounts of activity in their leisure time (CFLRI, 2007).

⁴ See Bulletin # 4, Demographics.

What barriers prevent people from being active? A study by the CFLRI (2007) found that of those who are not active, the biggest barriers are lack of time, lack of energy/too tired, lack of interest/motivation and long-term illness/disability (most common among seniors). Other barriers included cost, ill at ease/uncomfortable (most common among young people) and fear of injury (most common among seniors). What is interesting is that while seniors saw barriers in illness, disability and fear of injury, they were actually one of the lowest groups citing lack of interest. These perceived barriers to activity have not changed significantly since 2002.

The top reasons cited by Albertans (ARS, 2008) for not starting a recreational activity they desire included: too busy with work, the cost of buying equipment, too busy with family, costs and too busy with other activities.

A similar study by the same group in 2004 found that a number of barriers were related to the physical environment and the social aspect of it. For adults, the top barriers included difficulty finding other people with whom to be active, and finding family-oriented classes and programs. But they also found barriers with poorly maintained and poorly lit sidewalks and bike lanes, too much traffic and being unaware of how to build physical activity into their lifestyle.

This last barrier cited regarding poor maintenance and lighting was also cited as the biggest barrier when considering activities for respondents' children. Also high on the list are not enough places where children can be active with family, difficulty getting to places where children can be active and difficulty finding other children for their child to be active with.

What's interesting is that many people cite a top reason for engaging in recreational activities is to be with family. Yet it doesn't seem to be happening as much, given the lack of activity among children.

ACTIVE LIVING AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

"Most sustained exercise is taken during the course of everyday activities, such as travelling to work or going to the shops, rather than specifically for health purposes. It makes sense, therefore, that our built environment should provide a network of routes and destinations that maximize the potential for activity on foot or by bicycle, rather than by [vehicles]" (CABE, 2008).

The built environment can play a key role in minimizing barrier to active living. The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (2006) suggests that "Shaping and using the built environment for the promotion of health is a powerful tool ... but it is either barely mentioned, or viewed too narrowly, as merely a question of where to locate ... facilities, rather than looking at how to use the built environment as a tool for reducing demand on those facilities." There is a growing focus on the built environment as a mechanism to facilitate more active living. It can also supplement the demand, and high costs, of facilities, because people are more likely to engage in informal activities like walking and cycling.

Parks and Greenspace

Parks and green spaces are key components in the built environment people recognize as supporting recreation and leisure activities. People can walk, cycle, walk the dog, throw a Frisbee, have a picnic, play soccer or football or just twirl around in circles with their children.

Suburban parks tend to be separate from being an active component of neighbourhoods, as they are mostly grass, largely have rear yards fronting on the open space component. These parks are designed to accommodate approximately 100 – 600 people per hectare per day. Playing fields would fall into the lower half of that range, and dense picnic areas would be in the upper half. As for walking, these parks would generally accommodate about 20 people per hectare per day. Trails within a suburban park are typically spaced 200 m apart (Baud-Bovy & Lawson, 1998).

Urban parks are located within neighbourhoods, often as focal points of nodes of higher intensity development, and accommodate from 450 to 800 people per hectare per day. Urban parks tend to have double the daily turnover rate of suburban parks. Trails accommodate 400 walkers per hectare per day and are typically located 100 m apart (Baud-Bovy & Lawson, 1998). Considerably

more people have the opportunity to walk or participate in their favourite recreational activity, in these urban spaces. Access is also generally closer to their homes and the park space is more integrated into the community with the majority of the park having street frontage or buildings fronting onto the park.

“A well-designed park establishes a virtuous cycle: when more people are attracted to a space it becomes more interesting, which in turn attracts more people, who stay longer and undertake more activity.” (CABE, 2006)

Streets

As most sustained exercise is done during the course of daily activities and through informal means, streets have a critical role to play in encouraging physical activity. “Streets are an important part of the landscape of everyday life. People rely on them for such activities as travel shopping and interaction with friends and relatives.” (Francis cited in Williams, 1995) This provides the opportunity for easily incorporating physical activity into everyday life and provides social opportunities, which are both cited barriers to people’s involvement.

“Streets are also a key element in urban outdoor recreation, although within the extensive literature on streets that significance is not always afforded the attention it merits.” (Williams, 1995) Unfortunately “the advance of urbanism of the twentieth century has been associated with a significant and widespread reduction in the utility of streets and thoroughfares as recreational spaces.”

Just improving the occasional street is not sufficient. In order to maximize streets as recreational facilities, they must be connected, well-maintained and well-designed. “Active transportation infrastructure consists of systems of sidewalks, road lanes and trails that support human-powered transportation and keep them separate from motorized modes of transportation. The degree of coverage, continuity and maintenance of this infrastructure are significant determinants of the amount of travel by active modes.” (Metrolinx cited in CFLRT, 2008)

In many cases, these amenities exist; the majority of Canadians agree that sidewalks exist on most streets in neighbourhoods. However, as cited in this bulletin earlier, poorly maintained and poorly lit sidewalks are a major barrier to more active living. More Canadians wish to take up cycling, but poorly maintained, and sometimes non-existent, bike lanes are a major barrier.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN ST. ALBERT

Parks and Open Spaces

St. Albert is known for its extensive trail system associated primarily with Red Willow Park along the Sturgeon River. Well-paved trails connect the environmentally sensitive River Lot 56 at the northeastern boundary and Big Lake at the southwest corner, and many of the existing neighbourhoods have connections to this trail system. Recreational walking is popular.

Carrot Creek runs along the western boundary of the City and the intent is to incorporate that into the Red Willow Park system. But the challenge for neighbourhoods in much of the annexed lands is the lack of natural features, such as ravines and valleys, found throughout the older areas in St. Albert, as well as the greater distance to the existing trail system.

Recreational facilities

St. Albert has a number of high-quality, well-used community recreational facilities. There continues to be peak demand for swimming lessons, a popular activity, although there has been a noticeable decrease in the demand for public swimming at the Fountain Park pool complex. This is likely due to the addition of the water play park in Servus Place. In combination usage has likely increased. School groups continue to access the pools at the same rate.

The demand for ice rinks continues to exceed availability despite additional ice rinks added in the past few years and groups increasing scheduling during less popular times. Sports fields are most heavily used during May and June, and the type of sports fields required fluctuates. Proximity to

schools may not always be an advantage as expansions to the buildings can encroach upon existing fields. According to the City of St. Albert Recreation Services, outdoor rinks continue to be well-used throughout the city between December and February, but use is increasing during summer and fall as sports fields.

The addition of the two field houses in Servus Place have allowed an increase in bookings, and program demand has recently shifted to favour ball hockey over roller hockey, while the use for lacrosse has remained the same.

Streets and the Built Environment

The challenge in St. Albert is the lack of connectivity of streets and the strong separation of uses that limits opportunities for many citizens to incorporate walking or cycling as part of their day-to-day life. Long blocks and multiple cul-de-sacs limit the opportunity for walking.⁵ The main streets, like arterials and St. Albert Trail, are designed for vehicles with disconnected, or non-existent, pedestrian facilities.

SMART GROWTH ST. ALBERT

Smart Growth St. Albert would easily enable recreation facilities to be located as needed in the neighbourhoods. It would be more likely that community facilities would be located in nodes of higher intensity development where they would be accessible by active transportation as well as by car. These facilities would benefit from the clustering of various activities in a town centre style setting, creating not only a recreation centre but a pedestrian-friendly, multi-use place attracting people for many uses and activities. This style of development would provide a better framework for adaptation over time, allowing parks and open spaces to change with the needs of a community.

Smart Growth would extend Red Willow Park along Carrot Creek, but would also add various urban and suburban parks throughout the area. The street system would be highly connected, enabling more opportunities for walking, cycling and improving the ability of transit to provide frequent, accessible service. The opportunities for more informal physical activity to become a part of people's everyday activities would be greater than under current development patterns.

CONCLUSION

Recreation would continue to be an important element in Smart Growth development, and will be enhanced by a more connected, pedestrian-friendly street system. The addition of urban parks will enable many more people to enjoy and be active in public spaces. A greater focus on design will also provide a more welcoming public realm, where residents can easily incorporate informal physical activity into their daily lives to supplement the more formal activities.

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⁵ For additional information, see Bulletin #5 Street Systems.

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