

Recreation

RECREATION PROGRAMMING IN Winnipeg has suffered for years from underfunding, neglect and a culture of status quo and stagnation. Now, more than ever, this needs to change. Recreation is a critical tool at the City's disposal to tackle negative outcomes brought on by the COVID pandemic: social isolation and exclusion, poor mental health and poor physical health.

For decades advocates have pointed out that recreation programming not only helps people develop their physical health, but also provides opportunities to practice self-expression, learn skills, build friendships and access positive mentors. These opportunities help Winnipeggers improve self-esteem, establish a sense of community, and increase social-inclusion. However, for too long recreation has failed to address access and inclusion in its programming.

Through a more holistic lens we can see how investments in recreation advance Oshki Anishinabe Nigaaniwak, the City of Winnipeg's Indigenous Youth Strategy, Newcomer Welcome and Inclusion Policy, and Poverty Reduction Strategy, generating benefits across departments. Recreation programs act as an important space for children and youth to engage with positive role models and develop critical life skills. For newcomers, recreation provides an opportunity to integrate and build a sense of place. Finally, recreation programming can advance reconciliation by creating spaces for cultural resurgence from art to gardening to traditional games.

Recreation programs need to be seen by City Hall as an investment in a healthy and equitable society which enhances wellbeing, builds com-

munity, and delivers cost reductions across other departments, including emergency services.

Declining Revenue, Collapsing Infrastructure

Recreation is often first on the chopping block for municipal cuts as it is not deemed an essential service. Years of neglect have left Recreation funding in a critical state. Between 2008 and 2020, per-capita inflation-adjusted

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operating funding for municipal recreation has been cut by 31.9 per cent.¹ Much of this decline comes from staff lay-offs and a lack of new hires. Over the same 12-year period, the number of full-time equivalent positions (FTEs) in recreation declined from 356 to 273. At the same time, the City's Community Trends and Performance Report shows that demand for municipal recreation programs has continued to increase along with population growth.² Recreation staff are forced to do more with less, with this added burden being placed on frontline staff working in recreation facilities.

On top of the decline in operations funding for municipal recreation, the City is in serious need of capital funding for recreation facilities. Many municipal recreation facilities need essential repair or replacement in the coming years. According to the City's 2018 State of the Infrastructure report, 57 per cent of pools, spray pads, arenas, leisure centres, and community centres are in poor or very poor condition.³ That adds up to \$843 million needed between 2018 and 2027 to address the infrastructure deficit in recreation. Despite knowledge of the infrastructure needs in recreation, the City has not committed more than \$25 million in capital spending per year since 2018. The size of this infrastructure deficit has likely increased since 2018, as these deferred repairs continue to cause deterioration.

Unequal Access to Recreation Facilities

There is a fundamental inequality in access to quality recreation facilities and programs in Winnipeg. This inequality is due in part to the fact that deteriorating City owned Leisure Centres are in mature neighbourhoods in the inner city and surrounding inner suburbs. However, the inequality is intensified by the City's reliance upon volunteer run community centres and the private sector to manage recreation facilities and programming in the



City. Meanwhile, programming in many City run centres has stagnated over the years, with few program evaluations conducted and a lack of infusion of new ideas which could lead to more inclusive and culturally appropriate programs.

Community centres across the City operate sports and recreation programming as well as facilities like arenas, gyms, and community halls. These independent community centres operate at widely different scales, with some home to a small gym or community hall, while others operate multi-million-dollar sports complexes. Community centres are run independently from the City; however the City provides some operating funding through an annual grant to the General Council of Community Centres. In addition, the City distributes capital funding to community centres through Community Centre Renovation Grant Program administered twice yearly.

The community centre model relies on volunteer capacity to run the community centre board, apply for advertising and grants, and solicit donations. Furthermore, sports and recreation programming at community centres rely on participant and rental fees to be financially viable. Marginalized communities in many inner-city neighbourhoods do not have the volunteer capacity or financial resources to operate under this semi-private model. As

a result, inner-city neighbourhoods are left with worse facilities and fewer programs. This inequality is reflected in figures from the Community Centre Renovation Grant Program, which shows that only a small fraction of capital funding has gone to inner city neighbourhoods in the last few years. New innovative partnership models with community based organizations or other community stakeholders should be explored to govern and run inner city Community Centres, as well as prioritizing additional funds to staff and program at Community Centres in areas of high poverty. Community Centres should also be more responsive to community needs, expanding beyond Sport and Recreation programming to include initiatives related to food security and other social supports.

One-Size-Fits All Programming Not Working

The Recreation Services Division must ditch its one-size-fits-all approach to recreation programming. According to the 2016 Canadian Census, 25.5 per cent of Winnipeggers are immigrants⁴ and 12.2 per cent identify as Indigenous.⁵ Furthermore, the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability finds that 24.7 per cent of Winnipeggers identify as living with a disability. The City of Winnipeg's 2021 Recreation Strategy has rightly identified newcomer inclusion, reconciliation, and accessibility as focuses of future recreation policymaking and program development.⁶ However, as we have highlighted throughout this document, the City still has a long way to go in addressing the systemic inequalities that marginalize many Winnipeggers. By developing innovative, holistic, responsive and culturally relevant recreation programming, the City of Winnipeg can further its commitments to advancing newcomer inclusion, advancing Oshki Anishnaabe Nigaaniwak, responding to Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action,⁷ and increasing accessibility. Part of this means hiring and building the capacity of more diverse staff, not only on the frontlines, but at the coordinator and management levels.

The City has made some progress on these files already, which should be noted. Women's recreation programming and the new Third Party Referral initiative to increase access to the fee subsidy program are reducing barriers for marginalized communities. The City also funds many community organizations that develop and run innovative, community-focused programming through their Community Grants Program. This includes organizations like the Broadway Neighbourhood Centre, Spence Neighbourhood Association and Winnipeg Aboriginal Sports Achievement Centre. Targeted funding has

also been made available for inner-city sports programming through the SPIN program, which supports organizations like the Newcomer Sports Academy. However, even programs such as SPIN have limited staffing and resources, preventing them from fully reaching many marginalized children and youth.

More funding, increased partnerships and regular community input could increase the effectiveness and reach of these programs. However, the City has offloaded much of the responsibility for program innovation onto community organizations who are already struggling to meet their needs. Recreation granting between 2017 and 2019 did not keep up with inflation (grants increased by 4.1 per cent while inflation grew by 4.28 per cent⁸⁹), and in 2020 the City announced 10 per cent cuts to all community grants,¹⁰ which affected recreation. Winnipeg's reliance upon community organizations to develop community focused programming is not all bad, as these organizations have the knowledge to develop programming from an equity lens, however these organizations need to be adequately supported in this work.

If Winnipeg is to adequately support community-focused, innovative recreation programming for Winnipeggers facing barriers to recreation, the City needs to address the bureaucratic burden within the Recreation Services Division. Furthermore, the Recreation Services Division needs to incorporate an anti-racism lens into its staff recruitment and retention strategy at all levels. Community organizations interested in using City owned spaces or staff are often confronted with overbearing, slow and cumbersome approval processes and strict rules around how space, funding or staff time can be used. This has prevented community organizations from offering snacks, bus tickets, or child-minding as part of their programming. It has meant that spaces that should be used by the community are often empty or under-utilized, despite the demand from the community. At the same time, the City's reticence to engage with harm reduction methods has excluded marginalized Winnipeggers from accessing community administered recreation programming. Community-focused policy development and program evaluation with strong community input and consultation is critically needed to address these exclusionary practices.

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Addressing the Infrastructure Deficit

In March 2022, the City released its latest Recreation Strategy with capital spending plans to address the infrastructure deficit and invest in planned recreation facilities.¹¹ This spending plan was met with harsh reaction from city councillors, who argued the capital spending is “unrealistic”.¹² However, with the Community Services infrastructure deficit well over \$700 million dollars, the City’s current spending plans merely kick the problem down the road. In the 2022 preliminary budget the City committed \$22.2 million to recreation capital spending, which barely makes a dent in the infrastructure deficit and does not provide for sufficient expansion.¹³

In order to begin addressing the backlog in facility repairs and upgrades, we recommend the City follow the spending plan laid out in the Recreation Strategy and begin with \$80.3 million in 2022 for upgrades to leisure centres, community centres, aquatic facilities, the Freight House community centre and the Freight House outdoor pool.¹⁴ The Recreation Strategy capital spending plan is made with a focus on equity, accessibility, and addressing access in underserved areas.

\$80.3 million in capital spending will add \$6.66 million in annual debt servicing to the operating budget, which is sustainable under our proposed budget.

Benefits from critical recreation facility improvement will be passed on to future generations, thus it makes sense to distribute the costs amongst present and future taxpayers. If the City continues to delay these repairs and improvements, the social and economic costs of crumbling recreation infrastructure will only continue to balloon.

Increasing Community Grants

As noted above, community organizations have become a central pillar of recreation programming, particularly in the poorly served inner-city neighbourhoods. However, the City has not increased support at the rate it has offloaded responsibility. We recommend the City increase community grants by 20 per cent to reverse the cuts imposed between 2017 and 2020 and provide a boost to recreation programming in the covid recovery. A 20 per cent increase in community grant funding would amount to a \$443,474 increase in the operations budget.

Inner City Youth Employment Strategy

Hiring inner city youth into recreation positions is a poverty reduction strategy that has been identified by Both Make Poverty History Manitoba and the City of Winnipeg's own Poverty Reduction Strategy. The City has run a similar program through Oshki Anishnaabe Nigaaniwak to certify indigenous youth to work in recreation. While providing jobs with good wages to youth, an inner-city youth employment strategy would help increase knowledge around inner city recreation needs among staff.

Hiring is only one part of the equation: mentorship, leadership development, flexibility and supports are also needed to support inner city youth staff, as well as shift the workplace culture so that it aims to build recreation leaders and values lived experience. We recommend the City invest \$150,000 to expand inner city youth employment in recreation. This would amount to one FTE to run this program, two summer hires to work with youth (\$115,000 staffing), \$15,000 for training, certification, and other program costs and \$10,000 to provide youth with supports.

We further recommend the Recreation Services Division increase diversity amongst management and supervisory staff. Recreation has lost a significant number of FTEs over the last decade. As the department looks to rebuild it should prioritise staff who understand the needs of growing, underserved communities.

A Community-Based Approach to Program Development

The City of Winnipeg needs to devise new approaches to recreation that meet the diverse needs of a growing city. This includes programming that furthers reconciliation, newcomer inclusion, and universal accessibility. We recommend the City invest \$160,000 to convene community planning councils who will guide recreation programming and policy changes over the coming years. These councils should begin in the inner city, at facilities such as Sergeant Tommy Prince Place, Turtle Island Neighbourhood Centre and Magnus Eliason Recreation Centre. This would include \$150,000 for two staff to oversee the advisory councils and \$10,000 in programming costs to run meetings and give honoraria to community leaders.

Overhaul the Fee Subsidy Program

The fee subsidy program offers much needed access to those who cannot afford to pay for recreation programming. In its current form the sign-up process for the fee subsidy program is complex and intrusive. Although the new Third Party Referral Initiative has removed some barriers, the City should further invest \$77,500 to re-design the fee subsidy approval process and to market the program with partner organizations. This funding would amount to one six-month contract staff person to redesign the process and two summer contracts to publicise the revised program with partner organizations and sign up participants. A partnership with Winnipeg Transit should also be established to provide individuals on low incomes transportation to Recreation Programming, with an initial \$50,000 toward bus tickets for organizations working with marginalized youth.

Next Steps

Currently, there are no Recreation Centres or Community Centres located in Winnipeg's downtown, which has a high density of low-income families. The development of an accessible and culturally safe recreation facility should be explored for the downtown area, potentially in partnership with Indigenous led and community-based organizations in the area.

New Expenditures:

- Infrastructure spending – \$80.3 million (2.75 per cent over 20 years)
 - \$6.66 million debt servicing costs
- Increase grants to community organizations by 20 per cent from 2019 levels – \$443,000
- Provide free menstrual products at rec centres – \$58,000
- Overhaul fee subsidy program – \$77,500
 - 1 FTE – 6 month contract to redevelop program (\$37,500)
 - 2 Summer positions to publicize and sign people up (\$35,000)
 - \$5000 in program expenses
- Inner city youth employment strategy – \$135,000
 - FTE – Program coordinator (\$75,000)
 - Two summer staff to work with youth (\$35,000)
 - Training and program costs (\$15,000)
 - Youth supports (\$10,000)

- Recreation programming local advisory councils – \$160,00
 - 2 FTE – Program managers/facilitators – \$150,000
 - Meeting expenses – \$1000
 - Honoraria – \$8000
- Bus tickets for youth organizations – \$50,000

Total: \$7,583 million

Endnotes

- 1 Calculation by CCPA Manitoba Research Associate
- 2 City of Winnipeg, 2021. Community Trends and Performance Report. Pg. 184
- 3 City of Winnipeg, 2021. State of the Infrastructure Report. Pg. 35
- 4 Statistics Canada, 2016. Census of Population.
- 5 Infrastructure Planning Office, City of Winnipeg, 2018. City of Winnipeg Indigenous Peoples Highlights.
- 6 Draft Recreation Strategy, City of Winnipeg, 2021. P. 43
- 7 We call on the City of Winnipeg to respond to TRC calls 12, 23, 61, 66, and 90. Although not all of these are addressed to municipal governments, it is within the power of the City of Winnipeg to address these calls.
- 8 City of Winnipeg, 2021. 2021 Adopted Budget Operating and Capital Volume 2. Pg. 193. Calculations by author.
- 9 Bank of Canada. Consumer Price Index.
- 10 CBC News. Across-the-board cuts to community grants in Winnipeg budget will have 'significant impact': non-profits. March 6, 2020.
- 11 City of Winnipeg, (2022). *Winnipeg Recreation Strategy December 2021*
- 12 Pursaga, Joyanne, (2022, March 3). Rec strategy will wreck finances, councillors predict. *Winnipeg Free Press*.
- 13 City of Winnipeg, (2021). *Preliminary Operating and Capital Budget 2022 Volume 2* (pg. 172)
- 14 City of Winnipeg, (2022). *Winnipeg Recreation Strategy December 2021* (Appendix C)