



FASTFACTS



Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Mb • 309-323 Portage Ave. • Winnipeg, MB • Canada R3B 2C1
 ph: (204) 927-3200 • fax: (204) 927-3201 • ccamb@policyalternatives.ca • www.policyalternatives.ca/mb

September 1, 2005

PUFS Report: Public Use or Economic Usefulness?

The early hints of fall are in the air in Winnipeg! September, for many of us, is the start of a new 'season'. After the long slow down of summer, Winnipeggers are starting to think about winter activities. As is the custom, many are turning to good ol' fashioned physical activity to counter the temptation to hibernate.

In the spirit of the burst of activity and self-improvement this season brings, the City of Winnipeg is also considering a new look. Building on last year's controversial Public Use Facilities Study (PUFS), Winnipeg intends to revamp its rec facilities, guided by an umbrella group called the Greater Council of Winnipeg Community Centres. This new group will implement some of the recommendations made by the PUFS, to create "fewer and newer multi-use rec facilities." This year Winnipeg is not only looking to trim down and tighten her purse strings, but also to remove those blemished recreation centres which have passed their "useful economic life", as the PUFS puts it.

The overall goal of the PUFS is to eliminate those facilities, which have carried on past their "useful economic life". The social implications of such a move are not considered. The PUFS recommends that future recreation decisions made in Winnipeg align with the needs and desires of residents and that each facility's orientation be in line with that of its local users. The PUFS pays convincing lip service to "needs", "diversity", and the value of public participation from the various neighbourhoods of Winnipeg, yet goes on to recommend the closure of various pools, rec centres and libraries. These recommendations betray a narrow understanding of economics, and do not consider the broader value of these facilities.

One "useless" or disposable facility cited by the PUFS is the Sherbrook Pool, located in Winnipeg's West

Central area - a low-income inner city neighbourhood. The PUFS states that Sherbrook Pool is obsolete and too old to repair and that the City should construct a new Urban Oasis nearby on Portage Avenue between Furby and Langside.

I recently conducted research in Sherbrook Pool's neighbourhood on physical activity and active living programs for the area. I spoke to numerous residents of the West Central area. Of all those surveyed, every single one mentioned the Sherbrook Pool as one of the only existing fitness or recreation facilities in the area for adults and kids. All of the residents I spoke with stated a desire to be more active and to be able to spend more time at a place like Sherbrook Pool. All told me that the Sherbrook Pool's Free Swims were something they and their kids looked forward to on the weekends, even though those evenings and afternoons when the Sherbrook Pool is open to the neighbourhood are a certifiable community-zoo - the place is packed!

Sherbrook's bulge in attendance three short times a week is not evidence that it is at other times an underused or insufficient facility as the PUFS argues. On the contrary, the Pool is very well used when it is accessible to those in the neighbourhood. What appears to be underuse is due to the obvious financial need of the community. What West Central residents told me they need is equitable access to the Sherbrook Pool - free entrance, improved accessibility, and transportation options and childcare - not "fewer and newer" facilities.

Surely no one would turn their noses up at a fantastic new facility just down the street from the existing pool. However, a fancy new pool or Urban Oasis will not come without a significant price tag, and this creates the risk of increased entrance fees, altogether ignoring the primary



Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-MB

concerns noted by local residents.

West Central residents unanimously agreed that a lack of adequate childcare and affordable transportation are major obstacles to their leading physically active lives. Busy schedules and families coupled with limited access to a vehicle and even bus tickets quickly stifle any interest in getting involved outside the home. The PUFs not only ignores the issue of childcare, but would significantly worsen the problem of transportation by creating fewer and more centralized mega-facilities - despite its comments supporting universal access and financial support.

For inner city neighbourhoods like West Central, this is a dangerous move. While we are made well aware of the physical benefits of increased levels of physical activity - strong heart and lungs, improved flexibility and decreased blood pressure (and thus lower health care costs) - the social implications of inactivity are often ignored. Physical activity can offer a casual, fun-filled and **positively** focused opportunity to meet new people, network with others with similar interests, and to learn more about one's community and its offerings. These networks grow to build social capital, further improving a community's capacity to support itself and flourish.

So why save Sherbrook Pool? It is not the actual pool that is the issue here, but rather the risk of an entire community's needs being ignored in the name of outsiders' ideas of what the area needs. The argument in the PUFs for removing the Sherbrook Pool is its economic inefficiency. But its so-called 'economic inefficiency' is due to the low incomes of area residents, and a new facility does nothing to remedy the financial inability of the neighbourhood to support *any* facility. The danger is that West Central might lose its 'inefficient' facility, and be passed by for the political value of investing in other neighbourhoods.

While \$43 million was announced in April for Winnipeg rec centers, none was explicitly directed at the centre of the city. A \$7 million facility in North End/Point Douglas will be an important development for the North End, but it will not benefit inner-city residents in the West Central areas. Again, those living in the centre of the city have limited mobility: prohibitive transportation costs, a significant population of seniors and limited childcare. Physical activity programming and facilities must be frequent and accessible to accommodate the needs of those in Winnipeg's inner city.

The assumptions about physical activity that are contained in the PUFs and in the recent \$43 million announcement about recreational facilities are based on a suburban model of physical activity. It doesn't work for the inner city. The notion of mega-facilities works if all resi-

dents own vehicles and can afford to support a new, state of the art facility. This is not the case in the inner city. Most inner city residents, because of their financial circumstances, are likely to have a preference for smaller, more accessible and less expensive programs and facilities. This is certainly what the people I spoke with during my research told me. Simply placing one mega Urban Oasis on a bus route is not enough. Because most don't have cars, and bus service is increasingly expensive, individuals must be able to walk with their kids a short, safe distance to participate. And residents must be guaranteed affordable or, better still, free access to recreation. If it is expensive, it won't be used, not because people don't want to, but because they can't afford to. Yet ironically, everyone - those who can afford fancy new facilities and those who cannot - benefits if we are all more physically active.

Residents from *any* neighbourhood in the city should be able to engage regularly in physical activity. The health and social benefits of active living should not be made inaccessible to *any* Winnipeggers.

Yet the PUFs suburban model of facility use and programming does just this. Cars and big bucks will become necessary for a physically active lifestyle. Planning for recreation should not impose these requirements.

- Katie Anderson

Katie Anderson is a recent graduate of the the University of Winnipeg's Environmental Urban Studies program.

CCPA-MB FAST FACTS

are produced and distributed electronically on a regular basis.

They can be reproduced as an OpEd or opinion piece without obtaining further permission, provided they are not edited, and credit is given.

If you would like to receive the *FASTFACTS*, please contact the CCPA-MB to begin your free subscription.

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Mb

309-323 Portage Ave.

Winnipeg, MB

Canada R3B 2C1

ph: (204) 927-3200

fax: (204) 927-3201

ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

www.policyalternatives.ca/mb