



# Recreation Master Plan

Summary Report

## Trends and Issues affecting Rural Recreation

August 2019





## Introduction

The economic benefits of a strong rural recreation plan have been emphasized in several studies in Canada and the United States. These studies highlight the projected trends and issues in parks and recreation and recommend several factors to consider. Recreation Magazine cited the differences in urban, suburban and rural parks and recreation departments, and emphasise the unique choices and challenges that rural areas experience. This review outlines the general trends and issues that rural recreation is expected to encounter.

Many studies have shown that a satisfying quality of life for residents in rural communities is a direct result of recreational options. Recreation provides opportunities within a community to strengthen rural life in a variety of ways. Recreation enhances socialization and the lives of seniors, and enriches individuals and families. When youth are provided with recreational choices, they build a solid base for their adult lives.

Recreation may make the difference between gaining or losing population, particularly in rural municipalities (Oates). The survival of rural communities is largely connected to a shared sense of ownership that propels leadership and volunteering within the residents, but there are challenges that stifle civic involvement.

Research has emphasised the importance of engaging rural communities as active participants in designing the future of their communities. According to the 2015 State of Rural Canada report there has been a lack of attention on rural settings, and there is a need to re-invest in rural and small-town areas (Lauzon, et al). A 2016 ParticipACTION Report Card also noted the need to develop leadership and community capacity building opportunities to support physical activity in rural communities (POWER UP!).

There is an overall decline in civic engagement in rural districts, which is vital to addressing needs and this decline erodes community cohesion. Some of the factors contributing may be a result of rising transportation costs, and limited ability to access resources when community services are centralized. Rural communities are more likely to experience declining populations because youth leave for urban opportunities. To summarize, "Current challenges faced by rural communities have transformed them from cohesive self-sufficient entities into places where residents seek to access resources and services in other communities (Onescu & Robertson)."



# Challenges in Rural Communities

## Participation

A lack of free time is the top barrier to participation because of busy households, socio-economic drawbacks, commuting, single parent families and low-income households. Many youth are unable to participate due to the constraints of sports with a high financial commitment. Offering affordable activities to those in low-income households can encourage a more physically active lifestyle.

Rural facilities were the least likely to expect increases in the number of people visiting their facilities with less than 60 percent experiencing an increase between 2005 and 2006 and did not expect an increase in revenues from 2005-2006.

## Obesity among all Age Groups

Physical inactivity due to the digital age contributes to a life of sedentariness, especially for youth. Inactive parents are also linked to sedentary youth, suggesting that engaging with the family as a whole may contribute to families being more physically active.

## Aging Population

Seniors are becoming more physically active than in the past. Seniors often refuse to participate in “senior activities,” creating a demand for multi-use facilities and opportunities to engage in activities with family members and that appeal to multi-generations (Information

that Works by Julie).

## Ethnic Diversity

Recreation is considered a family event by many cultures that prefer to do activities together. There is a growing need for multi-use facilities that offer a broad variety of activities.

## Aging Infrastructure

Quality of life requires improving social and cultural infrastructure such as libraries, parks, and community centres. The main attractions in most communities are sports tournaments, festivals, parks, and major recreational facilities operated by park and recreation departments. Youth leaving the area for larger centres has resulted in declining populations, causing taxpayers to resist funding construction and maintenance of recreational facilities (Onescu & Robertson).

Rural communities projected a 7.3 percent increase in operations, but in a national U.S. survey, 25% responded that they were still the most likely to plan changes to facilities by adding on or renovating existing facilities (Heintzman & Dawson).

Older facilities with a single purpose are unable to meet the evolving and growing demands of youth, seniors and ethnic diversity. Multi-use parks and facilities that are also multi-seasonal and offer something for everybody are becoming more important. This is corroborated by the RRA, “Maintaining safe, functional and inviting



facilities and parks is key to any future plans.”

## Volunteerism

Rural communities have limited funding for recreational services and depend upon the community to facilitate opportunities rather than access structured programs. Rural communities struggle to recruit volunteers to organize recreational activities, leaving the same few individuals to do all the work, resulting in burnout (Onescu & Robertson).

Today, seniors are the leading volunteers in most communities, but there is mounting

pressure to attract new volunteers. Barriers to volunteering among youth include, school, organized sports, part-time jobs, and today’s digital age. The City of Vaughn report advises more concerted efforts on organizations’ part to communicate well and to show an appreciation for what youth can offer. Youth can bring new skills and fresh ideas. Some positive results of volunteering for youth consist of strong development of social skills, confidence, and creating connections within the community. Additionally, immigrants contribute a large proportion of volunteer service (City of Vaughn).

# *Trends in Rural Recreation*

## Types of Facilities

Rural facilities are much more likely to include schools, school districts, campgrounds, private camps and RV parks, in addition to resorts and resort hotels. Park spaces, park structures, trails and open spaces are some of the top planned facilities over several years, and the likelihood of adding skate parks.

Rural communities tend to include concession areas, trails and open spaces, and waterfronts or marinas. Outdoor and traditional options are more common, with outdoor sport courts, playgrounds, sports fields, trails and open spaces and park structures among the top amenities included in these facilities. Rural facilities are far less likely to include synthetic sports fields.

## Libraries

As a universally accessible and free service to the community, libraries continue to be highly valued. Libraries are evolving as the centre of strong, well-informed communities. Libraries are also being designed as flexible spaces that can adapt to changing needs. They offer support to all citizens and bring in the latest technologies. The demand for technical innovations such as online services, eBooks and digital reference services has made libraries appreciated and desirable spaces.

Libraries are more likely to be integrated into civic spaces and other multi-use facilities. The evolving uses of libraries have caused some to predict that library space will need to be increased by 8-10% “to accommodate accessibility standards”(City of Vaughn).



## Environmental Awareness

Stewardship programs are being adopted to engage locals and often rely on partnerships for support. The trend toward greener designs has started to gain more support, particularly among parks and recreation clients. In 2003, just 45 % of respondents were willing to pay 5% to 10 % more for energy efficiency. By 2007, the prediction was that with energy costs and the effects of global warming, people would be more willing to back initiatives (Heintzman & Dawson).

## User Fees

Just slightly more than half of the U.S. national respondents in rural areas charge a fee for membership or usage. Increases in the numbers

of people using recreation facilities are expected in all community types over the next several years.

## Future Goals of Rural Recreation

The top ten planned amenities in the U.S. national rural survey included:

- Park structures
- Trails and open spaces
- Fitness centers
- Climbing walls
- Waterpark and splash play areas
- Bleachers and seating
- Playgrounds- Parks and Playgrounds
- Natural turf sports fields
- Indoor sport courts
- Locker rooms

## Summary Remarks

Many studies strongly urge the attempt to recreate a strong social cohesion to bring back vital and healthy lifestyles, and to generate satisfaction among residents. Researchers have recommended several actions to move towards these goals involving parks and recreation working closely with community leaders, practitioners, and policy/decision makers to create opportunities for collaboration, to identify gaps in knowledge between their domains ([abpolicycoalitionforprevention.ca](http://abpolicycoalitionforprevention.ca)). In order to meet resident's needs, local leaders must offer programs that appeal to multiple generations, interests and abilities. "Park and recreation agencies are being expected to be

innovators for community solutions that involve conservation, health and wellness and social equity (Burk, Shinew, & Stafford)." It has been noted that park and recreation programs are better able to identify and meet the specific needs of different age populations.

Leaders with an eye to the future while making decisions are integral to successful economic development. Rural communities have an advantage in the ability to cross boundaries between government, corporations, social institutions, ethnic groups, unions and neighbourhoods. Ideal and creative partnerships that contribute to short and long term investments involve municipal departments, the



private sector, and service groups to ensure that local government have a solid understanding of the benefits of the facilitation and coordination of recreational services, to contribute to a high standard of quality of life. Partnerships can combine resources and enjoy cost savings. Cooperative agreements between municipalities will maximize access and usage (RRA).

The studies for the City of Vaughn and the County of Lanark, Leeds and Granville, Ontario conclude that maintaining quality recreational and lifestyle amenities is fundamental for residents, businesses and visitors, and are viewed as competitive advantages that encourage local economic development.

The U.S. department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (2019) cites recreation as an 'economic driver' that showed great potential, along with agriculture, mining, mixed sectors, manufacturing and government jobs. Studies of rural areas with a strong recreational economy revealed that those, when compared to areas that did not develop recreational pursuits, grew by 1.3 per 1000 (Oates). Brown suggests that growth in recreation surpasses even that of agriculture or mining. Studies have concluded that counties that remain dependent on industries are declining, while rural areas where retirement, recreation and service related industries are thriving, have been growing (Ulrich-Schad, Das & Rainey).

Rural communities especially are more likely to attract new residents when investments are made in recreation. They also attract more wealth and have faster growing wages than non-recreation areas (Lawson). Investing in rural recreation creates jobs and bolsters local business. "Parks and recreation are one of the few 'businesses' in a community likely to bring in new money" (RRA). Additionally, profits will not leave the area, nor pull business away as commercial chains do (Lawson). Whether natural or not, recreational amenities are an attractive draw for migrants and visitors. There are steps municipalities can take to increase attachment to an area.

The direction and magnitude of growth is affected by age or life-stage groups. Economic factors are more important when attracting young adults (Ulrich-Schad). Many areas hope to attract the "Boomer" generation as one of the wealthiest populations in North America. Das and Rainey cite several studies that agree- retirees have positive economic impacts on the communities where they choose to relocate. Seniors stimulate growth in health services, banking, restaurants and entertainment sectors etc., and specifically real estate (residential & commercial), and finance (banks, insurance, stocks, financial planners, and accountants), recreation and entertainment, hospitality (lodging & restaurants), retail, utilities, and tourism.



At the same time, property and sales taxes enable local governments to improve local services. Das and Rainey continue to explain that in general, communities with a sizable elderly population are more likely to have a stable economy and are resistant to economic downswings. However, aging populations demand higher recreation amenities (BCRPA 2009). Other implications also include several socio-economic costs such as a rise in public spending for elderly healthcare and support services, and the possibility of affecting the social fabric of the community. The policy of attracting retirees “becomes sustainable only if it is pursued over a long period and with the Municipality having a healthy demographic mix of old age and working age families. The two groups cross-subsidize each other in a sustainable economy. While the working age families subsidize the healthcare and other elderly assistance service needs, the older generation subsidizes the education and other public services that they often do not use (Das & Rainey).”

Communities that choose to develop recreational amenities should be aware that service sector jobs tend to be low paying and often seasonal. Additionally, communities may need to factor in the results of population growth, such as housing and infrastructure for successful integration (Oates).

The RRA also reports, “Outdoor Leisure Recreation and open spaces contribute strongly to healthy communities, a higher quality of life, and attract and retain businesses and families. Outdoor pursuits are considered to be a necessity for economic, social and health benefits.” Sport can make people healthier, and help put children on a positive life course and equip them to meet future challenges. Sport also strengthens communities by bringing people together and building trust and inclusion, fosters economic development by building skills, attracts tourism, and makes communities more attractive. (RRA)”





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