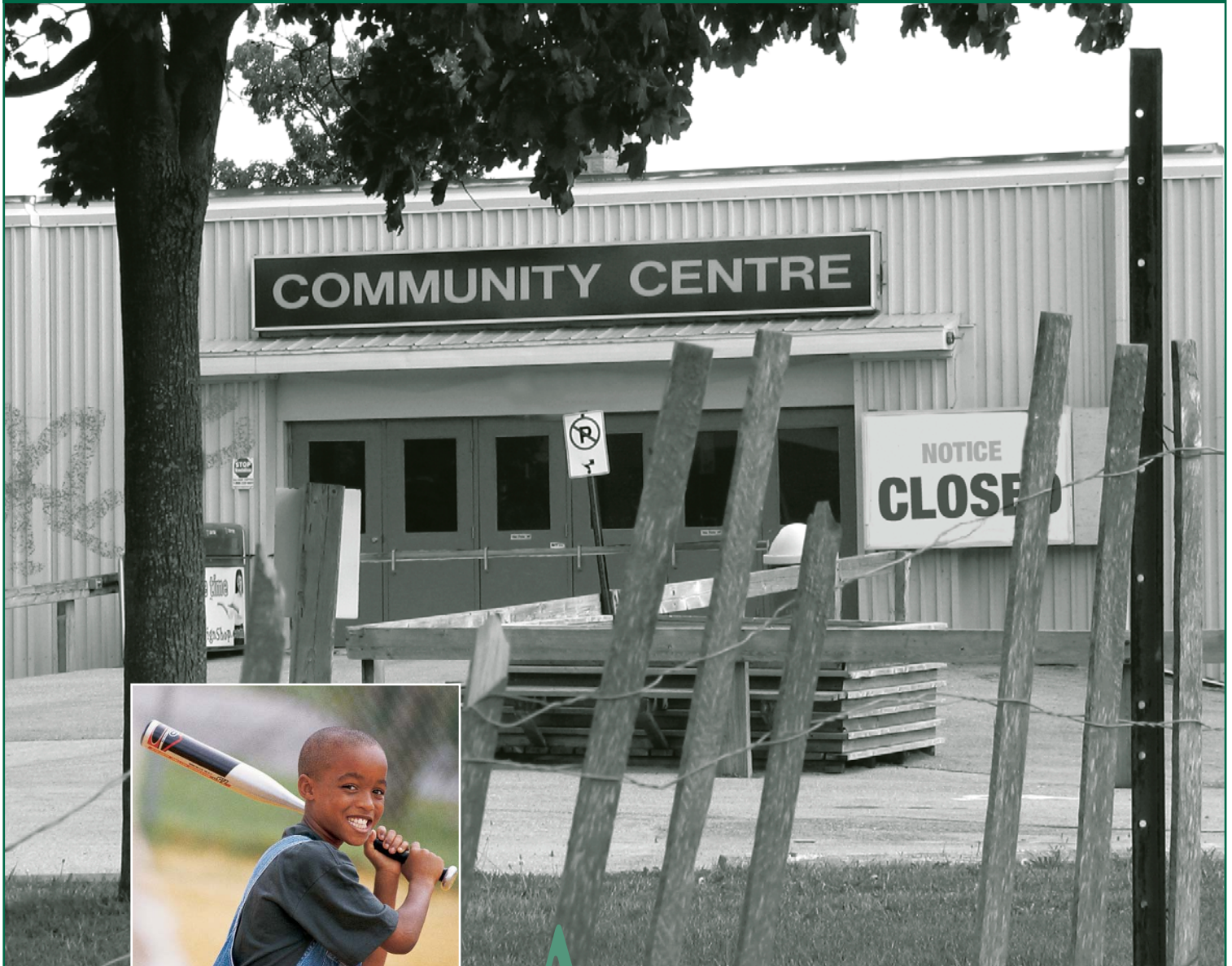


# Investing in

Healthy and Active Ontarians through  
Recreation and Parks Infrastructure



**A** Summary of Trends  
and Recommendations  
August 2006



## Background

Recently there has been an increased focus on the need to help Ontarians place more effort on making healthy life choices, including increasing physical activity. This new emphasis is in large part due to the unprecedented escalation of obesity within the Ontario population, which is now at epidemic proportions. Not surprisingly, the obesity crisis is placing considerable strain on our health care system.

## Health Care in Ontario

According to a recent report released by the Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion, “obesity costs Ontario approximately \$1.6 billion annually, including \$647 million in direct costs and \$905 million in indirect costs”<sup>1</sup> – money that could otherwise be redirected to underfunded areas of our burgeoning health care system. “The existing and emerging pressures within Canada’s health care system are real and immediate. While investments in treatment and care are central to the future of the public health care system, investments in prevention measures will ease the burden of public expenditures on health care. This is not to suggest that money be moved from the health care system to the prevention system, but that a good part of the current delivery capacity could be directed to accomplish more of these outcomes.”<sup>2</sup> Healthy people use fewer health care services. Right now, Ontario spends almost half its provincial budget on the health – or illness – care system. A healthier population could save us billions every year in health care costs. Good health drives economic growth, which helps create a prosperous province that can compete in global markets.”<sup>3</sup>

A recent report by Ontario’s Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Sheela Basrur, stated that, “between 1981 and 1996, the number of obese children in Canada between the ages of seven and 13 tripled. This is contributing to a dramatic rise in illnesses such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, hypertension and some cancers.”<sup>4</sup> A growing body of knowledge suggests that these numbers could be dramatically reduced through a combination of healthy food choices and physically activity. To bring the latter to fruition, it is crucial that there is adequate sport and

recreation infrastructure available for children throughout Ontario.

In 2003, almost half of Ontario adults (18 years and older) were overweight or obese. Men were more likely to be overweight than women. About 57% of Ontario men and 42% of Ontario women were overweight or obese, based on 2003 data.”<sup>5</sup> And the remedy is the same as with children – more activity and healthier eating will help to reverse this disturbing trend.

## Creating Healthy and Active Communities

Ontario must embrace a culture of healthy and happy communities to ensure that our province remains a place where people want to live, work and raise their families. Recreation and sport facilities act as gathering places that build healthy people and vibrant neighbourhoods. In fact, these facilities often become the “centres of the community.”

There are three approaches required to build healthy and active communities.

**1) Accessibility and Outreach.** People need recreation opportunities located in accessible areas, close to where they live and work. Additionally, activities need to be enticing and barrier-free.

**2) Human Resources.** Every community in Ontario requires leaders who are knowledgeable and skilled at designing, coordinating and implementing recreation opportunities. These individuals may be municipal staff, volunteers, other service providers or the private sector. According to the National Recreation Statement, “municipal governments are closest to the people; they are likely to respond more flexibly, more quickly and more effectively to the needs of the community in matters of recreation.”<sup>6</sup> For this reason the municipality is the primary public supplier or facilitator of direct recreation services.

**3) Physical Infrastructure.** Ontarians need safe, enticing, well-designed facilities, parks and trails. There is a correlation between increased levels of physical activity and a well-maintained physical infrastructure designed to meet the specific needs of each community. Furthermore, community needs will change over time, requiring facility adjustments that can respond to recreation preferences and shifts in demographic profiles of local populations.

## Wide Range of Recreation Activities Needed

The status quo is not an option. People are living busier lives and working longer hours. To effectively persuade Ontarians to adopt healthier lifestyles, it is imperative that they have access to a wide range of structured and unstructured recreation activities in both indoor and outdoor environments. For governments to make a positive impact on the obesity rate and chronic disease in the province, recreation and sport opportunities must be readily accessible and affordable to all Ontarians – especially at this time of public readiness. “When asked about the number one thing they could do to improve their health, 80% of Canadians say they should be more physically active. Over 50% of inactive Canadians intend to be active and intention is a strong predictor of future behaviour. Two-thirds of Canadian adults recognize the importance of physical activity in preventing chronic disease.”<sup>7</sup>

## Municipal Perspective

Recreation opportunities and facilities are key components of caring, healthy communities. Without adequate facilities, recreation services cannot effectively contribute to the quality of life in communities. Parks and recreation provide not only facilities, but also a wide range of programs and services that leverage other community partners and investors.

Parks and Recreation Ontario’s (PRO) recent study, *Major Municipal Sport and Recreation Facility Inventory*, states that: “Municipalities are a significant provider of major facility types that support sport and recreation sectors throughout the province. The inventory of municipally-owned facilities is aging, with between 30% and 50% of the stock in each facility type at, or approaching, its useful life. Smaller municipalities with more aged facilities – especially arenas – face an immediate capital crisis in terms of funding requirements to either retrofit or replace deteriorating stock. Twenty-five-year-old facilities of all types will likely require capital improvements to update designs and to increase customer appeal, irrespective of renovations required to deal with age deterioration. In all likelihood, most municipalities will require funding assistance to perform the necessary renovations or replacement of existing facilities – given the magnitude of the capital costs involved.”<sup>8</sup>



## The State of Ontario’s Recreation Infrastructure

Ontarians need to have recreation opportunities that are “inclusive and encompass every environment that accommodates leisure, recreation, physical activity and sport endeavours. As such, a

dedicated infrastructure funding program should cover built form in which traditional sports and physical activities occur (arenas, community centres, pools, etc.), outdoor environments that are increasingly popular with most target populations (trails, parks, etc.), and non-physical recreation venues such as youth centres and facilities for older adults.”<sup>9</sup>

Recreation infrastructure in Ontario is aging and is in a state of physical decline. The vast majority of the publicly owned recreation facilities was built between 1956 and 1980. Facilities of this vintage not only require capital funding for renovations or replacement, but are more expensive to operate.

According to PRO’s recent study of major sport and recreation facility inventory in Ontario, “there are more 50-year-old publicly owned community centres (22%) than centres that have been developed in the past 10 years. While it is safe to assume that many of these older facilities have received capital infusions throughout their life cycles, it is also quite possible that the majority of centres in this age category will require replacement in the near term.”<sup>10</sup>

- “More than 80% of Ontario’s single pad arenas are over 25 years old – 13% are over 50 years of age. Single ice surface facilities are operationally inefficient and their advanced years suggest they are likely in need of capital rehabilitation. Although successful renovations have been undertaken to arena facilities in the 30 to 40 year age bracket, frequently these projects have not been able to completely rectify operating difficulties inherent with designs that were popular in the 60s and 70s.”<sup>11</sup>

- “About half (48%) of the provincial municipal indoor pool inventory is less than 25 years old. One in five municipal pools (20%) have been built since 1995 and are almost certainly in good physical condition. Although facilities in the 11-24 year age category (28%) will have required some capital upgrades during the second half of their life cycle, it is reasonable to assume that they remain in reasonable repair. One of two (50%) municipal pools is between 25-49 years old. The extent to which repairs are required for these facilities will largely depend upon the quality of maintenance and the level of ongoing capital improvements that have been undertaken throughout the history of each pool.”<sup>12</sup>
- “All communities in Ontario will be required to significantly retrofit or replace up to 55% of their community centres in the near future. At least half of community centre facilities in municipalities of all sizes are 50 years of age or older. Although larger communities have slightly fewer old community centres, facilities in these jurisdictions are generally larger and more complex, which would suggest that a renovation may be several times more expensive than a retrofit or replacement of a facility in a less populated area.”<sup>13</sup>

The deteriorating state of Ontario’s recreation facilities will only worsen over time if nothing is done. “The estimated order-of-magnitude capital repair and replacement cost of existing municipally-owned community centres, arenas, indoor pools and outdoor pools is approximately \$5 billion (\$4,959,195,000) in [1995 dollars].”<sup>14</sup>

This summary was prepared by **Parks and Recreation Ontario** as part of the Infrastructure Renewal Strategy for Recreation in Ontario. The first phase of this strategy, an inventory and assessment of sport and recreation in Ontario was implemented by an alliance of the **Ontario Parks Association**, the **Ontario Recreation Facilities Association** and **Parks and Recreation Ontario**, with support from the **Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion**.

## Dedicated Recreation and Sport Infrastructure Funding Programs

In September 2002, federal/provincial/territorial ministers of health made a commitment to improving the overall health of Canadians by addressing common preventable risk factors – including physical inactivity and unhealthy eating. In addition, federal/provincial/territorial ministers responsible for sport, physical activity and recreation, established targets for reducing the number of inactive Canadians by 10% by 2010.

One of the main goals of the Canadian Sport Policy is increased capacity and achieving this goal includes the provision of adequate facilities for sport and recreation. During their annual conference in August 2005, the ministers responsible for sport, physical activity and recreation recognized the link between appropriate provision of community and recreation facilities, (including parks, trails and active transportation corridors), and enhanced physical activity. As a result, these ministers identified sport and recreation infrastructure as their number one priority.

In order to achieve the goals that have been established by these ministers, it is imperative that new dedicated recreation and sport infrastructure programs be immediately developed and implemented. It is clear that there is a desperate province-wide need for capital investment in community recreation and sport facilities. For governments to tackle the provincial obesity crisis, appropriate facilities must be available to allow individuals to take action on their intentions of becoming more physically active. ✂



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6 – *National Recreation Statement*, Interprovincial Sport and Recreation Council, 1987. Also, Canadian Sport Policy, Federal/Provincial – Territorial Ministers Responsible for Sport, Recreation and Physical Activity, 2002  
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