



STAFF REPORT ACTION REQUIRED

Improving Access to Recreation: Supplementary Report

Date:	February 14, 2008
To:	Community Development and Recreation Committee
From:	Deputy City Manager Sue Corke
Wards:	All
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

This report describes the feedback received from the community consultations on the Everybody Gets to Play – Access to Recreation policy recommended in a previous report, dated December 28, 2007, to the Community Development and Recreation Committee.

The consultations demonstrated there is a high level of public support for recreation programs, as well as, concern about how to make them more accessible to a broader cross-section of the community and about how to reach out to vulnerable populations to encourage their use.

This report states that the immediate budget pressures associated with funding recreation programs are now being addressed through the 2008 operating budget process. If approved by City Council, an increase in program and permit fees would protect existing recreation programs and help begin putting the division on a more stable financial footing. The report recommends that staff report back to Community Development and Recreation Committee on policy options for extending access to recreation programs and increasing participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Deputy City Manager Sue Corke recommends that the Community Development and Recreation Committee refer the recommendations contained in the Improving Access to Recreation: “Everybody Gets to Play” report (December 28, 2007) back to staff for reconsideration and a further report on policy options for extending access to recreation programs and increasing participation.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

This report has no direct financial implications.

DECISION HISTORY

In 2004, Toronto City Council approved the Parks, Forestry and Recreation (PF&R) Strategic Plan, *Our Common Grounds*. Recommendations included improving participation in recreation and reducing financial barriers to recreation.

In 2006, PF&R initiated, as part of the City's program review process, a full costing and pricing study on selected recreation programs and services to provide information to support decision making on services, fees and subsidies.

At its meeting of January 14, 2008, Community Development and Recreation Committee considered the report titled "Improving Access to Recreation: 'Everybody Gets to Play,'" dated December 28, 2007. Adoption of the report's substantive recommendations was deferred until the Community Development and Recreation Committee meeting of February 21, 2008 to allow for community consultations and a special meeting of the Committee on January 23 at which deputations on the report were heard.

The increase to recreation fees recommended in the 2008 Operating Budget is separate from the funding of the Access to Recreation Policy. At its meeting of February 11, 2008, Budget Committee referred a motion on the funding of recreation programs to its final wrap up meeting of February 25, 2008. The motion would have the effect of applying a cost-of-living increase of 3% plus an additional increase of 5% to recreation program and permit fees in 2008. The motion also calls for an additional \$4.2 million to be transferred to the funding of recreation programs by reducing the budgeted Social Services caseload by 2,000 for 2008.

COMMENTS

Proposed Policy Components

The recommendations of the December 28, 2007 report aimed to increase equitable access, extend the availability of universal programs and ensure reinvestment by recovering a greater portion of the cost of fee-based programs. More equitable financial assistance was proposed through reconfiguring the Welcome Policy into a credit based recreation fee subsidy and by converting the Priority Centres.

Specifically, the report recommended three new instructional, targeted, skill-based, and universal programs to be delivered in partnership with the Toronto school boards. The addition of five hundred new free community-based programs was also recommended in the report.

The move to a credit based fee subsidy program would have given eligible participants a wider range of program choices and would have enabled them to use the online and touchtone registration systems. The federal Low-Income Cut-Off (LICO) would continue to be used to determine eligibility. The subsidy levels would be indexed annually to reflect fee increases. The report also recommended that the rate of recovery for the cost of recreation programs move from 30% to 50% over the next seven years.

Feedback from the Consultations

The proposed policies were presented to Community Development and Recreation Committee on January 14, 2008. Following that meeting, facilitated consultation sessions were held at Priority Centres in Rexdale and Downtown and at civic centres in Scarborough and North York. Over 250 people took part in the meetings, including 58 youth from eight Priority Centres and eleven priority neighbourhoods. Following the four community meetings, a special meeting of the Community Development and Recreation Committee heard the views of 30 deputants.

The consultations confirmed the importance that Toronto residents place on quality recreation programs and on the principles of access and equity. Participants spoke of the opportunities that such programs provide and how they increase the liveability of communities.

The following are the highlights from the feedback sessions and deputations:

Reconfiguring the Welcome Policy

Some participants expressed concern about the adequacy of the proposed fee subsidy levels and the appropriateness of the LICO as a measure to determine eligibility for subsidy. Concerns were also raised about the need to eliminate the barriers in the eligibility determination process, better screening to avoid misuse and addressing non-financial barriers for newcomers and youth. The recommended changes to program choices and registration systems were positively supported.

Conversion of the Priority Centres

The future role of Priority Centres was a contentious issue at the community consultations and the special meeting of Community Development and Recreation Committee. Many participants felt that something of real value would be lost if the special designation of Priority Centres was removed, that at least some of the centres played a central role in their communities and that they were effective in promoting social inclusion. It was also pointed out that low-income families who are now accessing programs without charge would be obliged to undergo eligibility determination if they wished to continue. Some expressed concerns about equity in the current location of priority centres and the fact that persons were using the centres from outside the designated area.

The Free Universal Programs

Most participants reaffirmed the important role recreation plays in their communities. The universal programs were well received although some felt there should be a broader range of options and additional universal programs added.. The addition of five hundred new programs was well received especially the role the community would play in selecting options by neighbourhood as a component of service planning.

Program Fees

Some participants in the consultations also expressed concern about the proposed increase in the rate of cost recovery and the fee increases it entailed. There was considerable discussion about the impact the increases would have, particularly on families who earned just above the low-income cut-off. Staff were asked to explore other funding sources and partnerships.

Further Review

The immediate financial pressures being experienced by Parks, Forestry and Recreation for the funding of recreation programs are now being addressed through the operating budget process now underway. An increase in permit and program fees and the transfer of funding from Social Services, now being considered by Budget Committee, would protect existing recreation programs

The community consultations demonstrated there is a high level of public support for recreation programs, as well, as concern about how to make them more accessible to a broader cross-section of the community and about how to reach out to vulnerable populations to encourage their use. Opinion is clearly divided on the future of the Priority Centres and how they currently function. Although there is more consensus about the proposed changes to the Welcome Policy to a credit based recreation fee subsidy program, questions remain about the most useful measure of eligibility and the appropriateness of proposed subsidy levels.

Given the complexity and importance of these issues, more work is required to formulate a policy that meets the objectives of extending access and increasing participation. This report recommends that staff report back to the Community Development and Recreation Committee on policy options for extending access to recreation programs and increasing participation. The usage and demographic data that was requested in motions adopted at the January 14 meeting of Community Development and Recreation Committee will be part of the policy review process.

CONTACTS

Malcolm Bromley
A/Director, Community Recreation
Parks, Forestry and Recreation
Tel: 416-392-7252
Fax: 416-395-0105
E-mail: mjbromle@toronto.ca

SIGNATURE

Sue Corke
Deputy City Manager