

City of Toronto – Parks Development & Capital Projects

Curling Strategy

Etobicoke Arena Users Meeting Summary

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Introduction

As part of Toronto's [20-year Facilities Master Plan](#) (FMP), City staff reviewed the existing curling facilities across the city to determine the need for new or improved facilities. At the time the FMP was developed, Toronto's supply of City-owned curling ice was in line with or better than other Greater Toronto Area and large Canadian cities.

Based on the supply of City-owned curling ice and the availability of additional privately-owned curling facilities, no additional facilities were recommended.

In October 2019, as part of the approval of the FMP Implementation Strategy, City Council directed staff to monitor and assess trends and participation in curling. Closures of three private curling facilities, two in Toronto's west end, have altered the context of curling in the city.

City staff are in the process of developing a Curling Strategy to:

- Assess the trends and participation in curling
- Consider the current context of curling ice availability
- Identify opportunities to increase public interest in and access to the sport

As part of the engagement process, a stakeholder meeting with Etobicoke Arena Users was held on June 17, 2021.

[More information about the project and the engagement process can be found on the project webpage at \[www.toronto.ca/curlingstrategy\]\(http://www.toronto.ca/curlingstrategy\)](http://www.toronto.ca/curlingstrategy)

Meeting Goals

The purpose of the meeting was to provide stakeholders with an introduction and overview of the Curling Strategy, review the May survey results, introduce and gather feedback on draft principles for shared use or arena conversion, answer questions of clarification, and share next steps.

Meeting Promotion and Attendance

Over 130 arena users groups with recent permits for Etobicoke arenas were invited to participate by email. In total, 40 representatives attended the meeting.

Feedback Summary

Questions (Q), comments (C) and answers from staff (A) presented below. The following are summaries, not verbatim notes.

Q: What is the status of the closed curling facilities? Can they be purchased or managed by the city?

A: That is something that we did look at right away and unfortunately, in Etobicoke both of the current facilities were part of combined golf and curling clubs. As part of our assessment, we met with all the clubs to understand why they closed. We confirmed it was not due to declining participation and was instead an operational decision of the clubs to prioritize golf.

Q: Why doesn't the city build a curling rink? As it stands, no one is willing to share their rinks.

A: There is currently no budget available for a new curling rink. We will document that this is an option many would prefer.

Q: It seems like everything's predetermined, and you're directed by the Council to find curling space at the expense of hockey space. Are you considering the Centennial Park arena as an option and potentially changing it to a curling rink? I mention that because it is located in the far western part of the city of Toronto and if you are going to choose an arena to make into a curling rink then it should be close to other arenas instead.

A: No decision on this topic has been made. What we present to you today is simply the feedback we have gathered and the options we have considered as per the Council's direction. We will be considering the arena's proximity to other facilities, and its level of use as we move forward with our research.

Q: Is this concentrated to the west end of the city? Are you just considering the west end of the city?

A: Yes, and the reason for that is that is where the lack of curling facilities exists. Downtown, Scarborough, and North York are better served by the existing curling rinks. The recent closures are what drove the Council to direct us to do this work. There is not a single curling facility in Etobicoke and York anymore, as they have all closed.

Q: What kind of timeline are you looking at? Is it going to affect this season, next season, or 3 years from now?

A: It's certainly not affecting this season. It will come down to the results of our staff report. That will include all the information that we're getting from you today and the opportunities that are identified from a perspective of the Facilities Master Plan. The first new arena in the city of Toronto is coming on board as part of the new Don Mills community recreation center and that's a number of years off. So that's the first time that a new arena comes into the city. Any conversion would be balanced with a new pad being brought into use, so this is a long-term project. But depending on the model selected, a part-time conversion could be considered sooner. If ever a full conversion was contemplated, it would be in the longer term.

Q: I'd like to know where you got the data that states that membership at curling facilities is stable and growing. Secondly, how can you say we're going to allocate based on demand when as far as, you know, there are only 551 curlers (whom are either on City Council or are lobbying very hard for curlers) when you haven't compared the demand for more ice time from other groups (e.g. hockey, figure skating)? I would also question whether you can convert a curling link back to a hockey rink in 4 hours. You also said research shows an overall demand for arena ice is decreasing over time; I would like to know your source on that. As far as I can tell, we scramble to get ice time every year. People in Toronto are paying a lot of money compared to other places that have more ice rinks. Finally, what are the cost implications on the number of curlers? I know budgets are constraints, but if you're going to spend two and a half million dollars to convert a perfectly good hockey arena to a curling arena versus building 10 million dollars for a new arena, you should just spend the additional funds, asking the curling community to raise money for that purpose. How much are you going to charge so that we can get our money back as taxpayers?

A: Our work started with looking at curling demand. We've worked with Curling Canada, which is the national body for curling and looked at participation data over the past five years. Comparing 2015 to 2020, data and across Canada, there's quite a large increase in demand for curling. We find that participation is going up by 30% which is quite large. But then what does that mean in the Toronto context? Because people have rightly pointed out this is not western Canada. so, then we looked at our Toronto facilities, and we have data around the three facilities we own. We don't operate all of them, but we do have the data around membership and permitting at those facilities. So, from that, we can see there's been an increase in the use and membership

at those facilities as well over the same time period, which is a 12-15%. So, the sport is growing in popularity. When we looked at the demand in Etobicoke-York, we didn't look at potential to grow; we specifically looked at those curlers that could not find another place to curl following the specific closure of Weston and St George's and those are two facilities that have had curling for many years. Some of the membership went elsewhere outside the city, for example, to facilities in Mississauga and other places. The other facilities in the city are full.

To further clarify the demand issue, we looked at the demand at all arenas. It wasn't just for hockey. It was for other uses as well. It started with the Facilities Master Plan (FMP). The work looked at the overall utilization of our arenas across the board over time. What it showed at that time (around 2015 to 2017) is there was a slight decrease in the number of permitted hours across the board citywide, and that trend has continued. Overall utilization is basically continuing at the same rate or slightly lower than it currently is. That's ultimately what resulted in the FMP recommendation to look at building new rinks and replace older rinks while maintaining the same number of ice pads going forward. We know that prime time continues to be the highest demand of all ice. So, while the overall demand may be flatlined or lowering, we know that the rinks are well used in those prime time hours which is exactly why we're here talking to you because that's where the real impacts would be felt. We hear from you that it is a strong recommendation that if the demand for curling high, the city should look at the potential of new facilities, we get it loud and clear. Just want to make sure that you know we're hearing that.

Regarding the 4 hour conversion time estimate, as due diligence around this we did talk to some facility operators that do this type of work and that was their estimate how many staff hours it would take. It's something we're continuing to research and try to understand, but that comes from people who have experience with this conversion on a regular basis.

Clarification: 4 hours refers specifically to the staff time that was required in one example to undertake conversion and did not include time to flood the ice. Staff will clarify this in future presentations.

In terms of finance, we do find from experience with publicly owned, and also private facilities in Toronto that the curling facilities certainly can break even or in the case of the private arenas, make a profit. There is a lot that goes into finances and profit isn't the only factor. We want to create accessibility and different options for lots of different users. So that's only one part of the equation. Any consideration here would have to have a business case around it, but also would have to take into consideration those pieces around accessibility and creating options for a wide range of users, as we do with every sport and recreation program.

Q: Are there any new twin pad rinks planned and if so where?

A: There is. The first is in Don Mills that's planned and that's in the Don Mills and Eglinton neighborhood. Right now we're in the early planning stages of that facility and that twin pad ultimately will be the replacement of the existing arena and it will be twinned with another arena. The FMP also identified the opportunity for a two pad arena in North York, but the location of that is not identified yet. Planning will start in the next couple of years.

Q: Have any particular arenas been a target of interest? Where are we in this process?

A: We haven't identified arenas at this point I think it's important to have this conversation and hear from the arena users before we get to that point. So, that's sort of where we are at now.

Q: Could curling facilities that were closed in Etobicoke be reopened for curling?

A: The two facilities that closed in Etobicoke-York were St. George's golf and country club and Weston golf and country club. In both cases, this was a shared golf and country club model,

which we do see across Canada. It's an interesting model because you typically have a different fee for curling and golf, you have different users and different seasons, and it is a popular model, but it has had some challenges, not only with these facilities but with many facilities across Canada. What we heard loudly was that curling didn't close because there wasn't a demand for curling. The reason that it closed was that there was a decision by the board to prioritize golf and there were changes with fees and so on that that went along with that. We don't have the ability to take those spaces over and reopen them at this point, those are private sector decisions. So I think the answer's no, I don't think there's the ability to do that.

Q: Are the existing curling facilities running at full capacity?

A: The answer is yes. The closest facility in the city of Toronto to the geography we're looking at is the High Park Curling club, which is a privately owned and operated facility. Now when we say privately owned and operated, anyone can join — it's just not owned by the city. And that's the distinction that I want to make. So, that club is at overcapacity in the sense that they can't even find enough downtime to maintain their ice with the volume of users that they have and that's the case for most of the facilities across the City. There is another model which is the kind of athletic club model, which we see at places like the Granite Club, and they have curling ice there. They don't have as many people coming in and out that are public users compared to a place like High Park because it requires membership to use it. So, there is a bit of nuance to it, but by and large, when you look at a facility that someone in the city could join as a curler today in 2020, they're full. People are usually put on a waiting list, especially for prime time. While there may be opportunities during the day, there's no capacity right now and certainly couldn't accommodate the 550 users.

Q: Has the bubble rink been considered?

A: It certainly has been something that has come up in feedback. So, we'll certainly document your feedback here and investigate. We have certainly talked about those opportunities.

Q: What date do you expect to have a final decision? Can you speak to the point around Council making decisions and what the role of staff is in this and this project?

A: Out of today's meeting and the survey, we are looking to compile that feedback clearly. Then we're looking to have a broader public meeting regarding the results that we've gathered (e.g. including participants of recreation programs and other uses).

Ultimately, the direction that we have is to report back to the Council and the confirmed timing of the report is later this year in approximately October. It will be through that report that we will be making recommendations. Council makes the decision on whether to approve the recommendations that are made going forward. We have to make sure we have a broad consultation like we're having tonight and we want to make sure we capture that. And as I mentioned earlier, the whole point of this consultation is for us to summarize that in our report to the Council. So that Council is aware of the feedback that we've heard from users.

C: Curling ice is very different than hockey ice and the transition back and forth is not an easy process.

A: We are aware of the time it takes to convert the ice and the special requirements around each type of ice.

C: A quick comment on the bubble idea. I am from a club that both invested in and utilizes a bubble for practice sites. It is a great facility. It is very limited in its use but it is a great facility that is very well used by us as well as the local community, learn to skate programs, recreational hockey. Members of our organization drive all over the place and when I looked at the map, I get very concerned because some of the criteria that you have lined up very nicely

with some of the central clubs or central arenas, and those are the prime rinks and the prime ice time are very well served by the figure skating community, the public skating community as well as the hockey community. So I do have some immediate concerns, and it's been raised with our board that this is happening. Some of these arenas have been maintained, funded, and built on the backs of the community of hockey, figure skating, etc. The curling rinks have shut down because the business model didn't work. I don't care what the golf courses are telling you if they were making money on it, they would have kept the thing open. They weren't making money on it, and they probably made as much money from food and beverage as they did from anything else. So, unless the snack bar at Lambton is going to start serving beer, I'm not sure it's going to satisfy the needs of the curlers.

As you're looking at hours, we need to remember that an organization like Humber Valley as an example utilizes both city ice and private arenas due to lack of City ice availability. This immediately drives up the cost of our grassroots programs. As you're looking at your business model, you have to think about the impact of taking away ice from community-based programs, whether it's figure skating, girls hockey, boys hockey, we've got men's hockey, whatever it could be, and the potential cost impact that's going to have on the grassroots community programs like ours that are supporting anywhere from 700 to a 1000 kids ranging in age from 4 to 18. I don't believe that the average age of a curler is 4 to 18, it's mostly older. So if you're going to be thinking about ice time, 11 o'clock at night is a great time to curl. So, I just really want to make sure that, as you're thinking about it. I really think that you should take a look at some of the potential impacts on the cost to our programming which we try to maintain as low as possible, and the potential impact for forcing families out of their community, out of premium ice, and now competing for private ice which includes a facility, like the Ford Performance Center which at an exorbitant rate of 400 dollars an hour or whatever it is today, although it's not quite in the city. I'm just hoping that you're looking at the potential cost impact to all community-based programs, not just hockey. Our enrollment would go up if we had more facilities in the community that we could build learn to play, learn to skate, and everything else that goes along with it. So I just hope you're looking at all aspects of it and I know there will be more meetings and I look forward to speaking to our city Councilors about this. But I question the logic behind it for 550 people. It's worth driving to North York to go curling. Our kids drive all over the city to play hockey. So I'm sure the curlers can leverage all the city of Toronto facilities. These are just my high-level comments, thank you for listening.

A: Thank you for those thoughtful comments. And I think that reflects some of what we heard through the survey as well.

C: Curling is basically Bocce, which is a limited group of users that may or may not be loud in what they can say to the Council and who they talk to. The city has to understand that everybody is fighting for the same core hours and if curlers want to take 11 o'clock or 12 o'clock at night they're free to do so at my existing rink or the other rinks in the west end. But they're not going to be allowed to take the hours of hockey that is played by a predominantly still younger audience and family-driven audience. Curling simply does not have that family aspect to it. We can pretend that curling if marketed correctly is going to be able to be marketed to younger families, because it has a wider range of accessibility options, and so on and so forth. But at the end of the day, if the city feels that curling is important, the city should build a curling facility. The city right now is trying to pit hockey users against curlers and it's not going to go well.

A: Thanks. We heard that hockey needs space during peak hours and that existing arena users don't mind curling taking unused time slots, but do not want their existing permit times being reduced or interrupted. We understand that perspective.

C: I went on online to see the city of Toronto curling strategy phase two analysis and it says right here that the city is committed to increasing access to recreation. And it says there are

free centers to increase access to programs in neighborhoods with high levels of low income residents. I think in the north end of Etobicoke there is a low-income area. Where we are in Centennial Park, south Etobicoke it's gentrified in that area. There's lots of land around the Etobicoke Olympium and Centennial Park. Maybe if you wanted to plunk down an arena there, that could be central. But I still think that if you make it free you're not going to get a great number of curlers. That's my thought, thank you for organizing this.

A: Thank you. I will jump in with one point, because I, I think I misspoke. When you go into the materials on the curling strategy website there are some different cost estimates. We did look at the costs of the new facility, and we thought it would be upwards of 14 million dollars, plus the cost of land, and we would have to acquire the parcel of land. If folks want to look at some of the demand analysis on the website, you'll see some of the average ages around curling and some of the youth involvement. I just think it's important because it's come up a few times to note that there is a youth and children component to it and a family component as well on it. We also found that the average age is a younger age — the most popular age for curling is the twenties and thirties. So that's just what our research showed, and I just wanted to point those things out.

C: You just made a comment you talked about off-peak hours. I don't believe there is anything off-peak between community hockey, competitive hockey, girls hockey, adult hockey, figure skating, and learn to skate recreational programs. I guess there's sledge hockey down at Ford Performance. I don't believe there is off-peak time. If there was, we would be very happy to put our older players on, but instead, we're paying absorbent amounts to play. I think the comments around off-peak are overstated. We as a very large permit holder we're constantly looking at opportunities to move back to city ice and we can't get it.

A: One time that came up through this process is the daytime. That's one time that we know is not well utilized everywhere. There are certainly those types of opportunities. We're aware that those blocks of times in the after school to evening time are well booked within the arenas. When we're talking off-peak, we're talking about times that are not utilized to the extent that we're seeing during the core prime time that the leagues are using. Also, there's quite a bit of curling use at various facilities during the day. There is that kind of 50 to 64 age group, which is a popular age group and some of those folks may be retired and there are also seniors' leagues and things of that nature.

C: The community feedback is that the city should build a separate new rink for these users if it is important to provide more curling ice, instead of taking ice away from existing users. We want more ice, there's plenty of ice in the city just not when you want it, when you want it. City Council has to decide how important it is to give its citizens the facilities that they want. The problem is that everybody wants the same hours. If the city can set up bubbled rinks, we should fill those with practice time. Curling has something that hockey doesn't and that it can be used by multiple people as it's low impact and fun. But it does not demand the same attention as hockey does. So, the City needs to understand that hockey is not in the same bracket as curling.

C: Look at other levels of government for funding.

A: Thank you for that suggestion.

Next Steps

- Refine principles based on meeting feedback and feedback from curling stakeholders (June)
- Host a public meeting and an online survey to gather additional feedback on the principles (Summer)
- Apply the principles to develop staff recommendations (September)
- Report back to Council (October -TBC)
- Any further steps to be determined by Council

Contact Us

For questions or comments related to this project, please contact:

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