



Medicine Hat (Mega) Leisure Centre opened in 2000. Photo courtesy of The City of Medicine Hat

Historical Trends in Recreation and Parks

The new Alberta demands that recreation and parks recapture the concept of leisure as a central common good, something everyone is entitled to and everyone shares.

Recreation & parks: Central to quality of life

In Alberta, recreation and parks matter. People seek out parks when choosing where to live. They value the recreation facilities and services in their neighbourhoods. The majority would even pay more taxes to improve recreation and parks.

That should be no surprise, for recreation and parks improve both individual and community health. Consider the soccer tykes blasting past as parents chat on the sidelines during Alberta's annual rite of spring. Besides building stamina and skill, the

game knits people together both on the field and off. The fact that those players need grassy fields helps to preserve green spaces for future generations to enjoy. The equipment they use adds to the local economy.

alongside sewers, roads, education and hospitals. It is Alberta's best buy in public health.

Have we capitalized on that potential? In a word, no. But now we must. The urgency of the issues facing our time, from climate

change to obesity to the increasing gap between rich and poor, makes united action imperative. Alberta needs the best every discipline can offer. And for the field of recreation and parks, that's a lot.

This bulletin is part of a series based on *Foundations for Action: Enhancing the Quality of Life in Alberta*, a plan for



Enormous potential

The field of recreation and parks contributes to holistic wellbeing by addressing four aspects of life that are more important than ever.

In fact, recreation and parks hold potential few of us fully grasp, offering proven antidotes to many of Alberta's most troubling issues. Obesity. Diabetes. Isolation and community breakdown. Environmental decay.

Rural exodus. In short, this field is an essential public service,

working together spearheaded by the Alberta Recreation and Parks

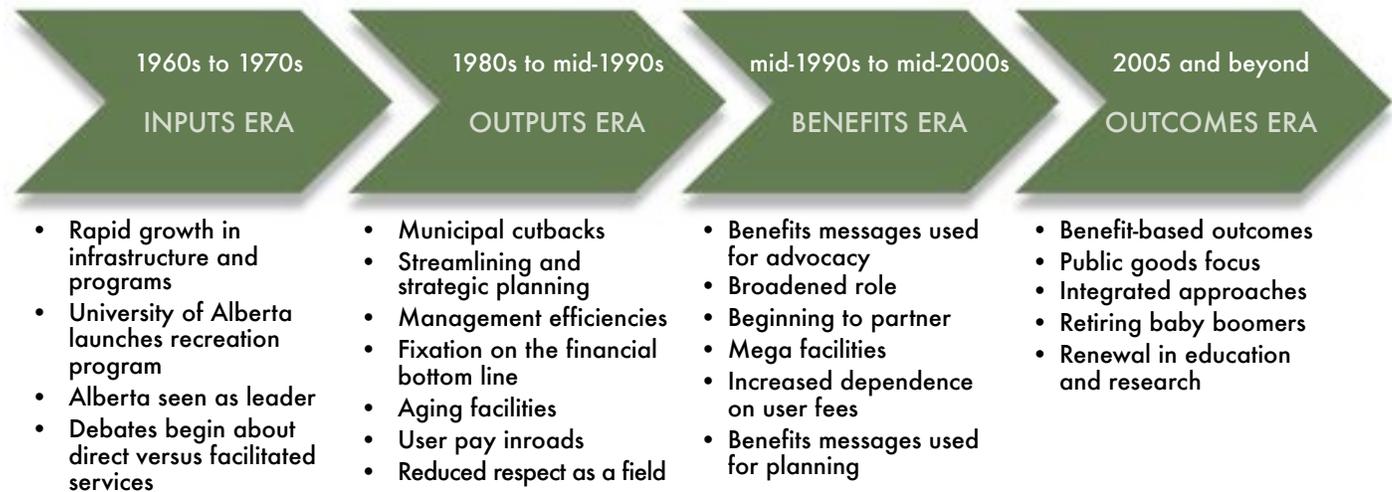
Association (ARPA). For the full report, please visit www.vision2015.arpaonline.ca.



Alberta Recreation & Parks Association

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Evolution of recreation and parks in Alberta



A short Alberta history of recreation and parks

Public investment in recreation and parks has swung wildly in Alberta, reflecting economic ups and downs as well as shifting views of the field's worth.

Many elements of the field can be traced back well over a century, for early Albertans shared a strong belief that communities need places to play and enjoy nature. But the 1960s mark the beginning of rapid growth and evolution, shown above as the Inputs Era.

As the baby boom heightened demand, communities expanded beyond parks to offer recreation, initially with a focus on children and youth. A broad array of mostly single-purpose facilities resulted, including a 1967 crop funded in part by Canadian Centennial dollars. Many remain open today, posing increasing maintenance and usability challenges as they age.

In the 1970s, a shift from single-purpose to multi-purpose complexes began, and linear parks with trails and bikeways became more common. To qualify for capital grants under the first of several provincial government matching fund programs, communities began doing master plans—and spotted gaps and overlaps in service. Programs became more diverse and

paid more attention to citizens with limited access to recreation, including persons challenged by disabilities and/or low income.

During this period, the province employed a network of recreation and parks coaches who advised and connected communities. The University of Alberta's post-secondary recreation degree program received accreditation in 1964, and graduates brought new skills and approaches, including commitment to community development, meaningful citizen participation and partnered service delivery. Alberta's recreation and parks professionals became recognized leaders in the field.

As a result, Alberta was at the forefront of important debates about whether public staff should shift to a facilitating or enabling role rather than providing direct programs and services. Some believed the roles were mutually exclusive, but by the end of the decade most understood the need for a balanced approach.

The early '80s recession hit hard in Alberta. Federal and provincial governments continued to run up deficits, but municipalities lacked that option.

Recreation and parks became an easy target, due in part to a growing sense that it offered "just fun and games."

Elora Prescription
Concerned over direction being set in the field, the Ontario government called 11 leaders together in 1978 to chart a future for the recreation movement. The resulting Elora Prescription became a national landmark document. Declaring many existing practices bankrupt, the document prescribed fundamental shifts to a more collaborative, enabling way of working. For many in Alberta, this was a familiar prescription.

Some good resulted as many departments embraced strategic planning, cut energy expenditures, upgraded services and improved marketing. On the other hand, fixation on the financial bottom line gave birth to a user pay philosophy that has eroded the field's ability to serve everyone well.

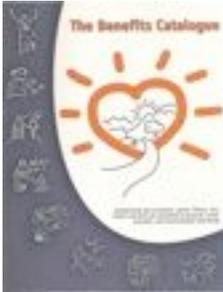
The mid-'90s era of fiscal restraint added to the challenge. Even as provincial transfer payments and capital grants disappeared, municipalities became responsible for services devolved by other levels of government. Citizens lived with service cuts and fee increases, while maintenance delays added to the decay of old facilities.



Calgary's Talisman Centre (Lindsay Park Sports Centre) was built in 1983 to host the Western Canada Summer Games.

Struggling to cope with reduced budgets and staff, some public and not-for-profit providers became more innovative. They explored alternative delivery systems, looked for new revenue sources and began to forge partnerships. Others turned insular, becoming providers of products (parks, facilities, programs) rather than partners in creating personal, family and community benefits. As a result, they were easily dismissed as irrelevant to broader community needs.

The field became increasingly market-driven in this Outputs Era. Many wondered whether publicly accessible recreation would survive calls for privatization. National leaders urged colleagues to demonstrate the



field's potential by building strategic alliances and addressing key community needs.

Recreation and parks gained an important tool with the *Benefits Catalogue*. Published in Ontario in 1992 and republished nationally in 1997, the catalogue demonstrated the breadth of the field's potential by itemizing significant personal, social, environmental and economic benefits. Surveys revealed that the benefits were even less commonly known by practitioners than by politicians,

underscoring a need for internal as well as external advocacy.

By the late '90s, benefits messages informed not only advocacy, but also municipal and ARPA planning documents. In a natural extension of the Benefits Era, many departments began tying their choice of strategies to benefit-based outcomes.

The ability to prove results that matter is essential in today's Outcomes Era, a time when citizens and politicians are demanding increased accountability and relevance. Logic models and other performance measures have become commonplace. At first, the measures focused primarily on *outputs* (number of registrants, kilometers of bike paths, revenue levels), but there is a shift to expecting *outcomes* (healthier individuals, communities and environments). While more difficult to measure, well-founded outcomes help to prove that the field contributes significantly to the public



Benefits worth counting

The Benefits Catalogue identifies the following eight umbrella outcomes of recreation and parks. Each one is linked to numerous proven benefits that help people understand the breadth of the field's potential.

good. Choosing the right measures of success is crucial. Even today, many recreation & parks departments across Alberta focus on running facilities and balancing budgets rather than meeting public needs. Some of our newest, largest indoor complexes use revenue generation as a significant measure of success, prompting user fees that keep low-income patrons away. Some municipalities have deleted essential services such as youth outreach and drop-ins because those activities don't recover costs. They rent space to the highest bidder rather than to users with the highest need. Food and beverage services are often driven by profit rather than health and wellness.

Such enterprise approaches ignore the fact that all citizens need access to recreation facilities. When publicly funded user pay facilities pull resources away from other public services, who is left to ensure full access?

Several wakeup calls add to the sense that many recreation and parks departments remain insular at a time when they could be more beneficial than ever. Those signs include delivery shifts to other fields and

From focus on outputs	To focus on outcomes
What we do	Why we do it
Resource inputs & activity outputs	Whether activity meets goals set out for it
Direct benefits to users	Public goods, or indirect benefits to all
Efficiency	Effectiveness
We can do this ourselves	We can do this better if we collaborate with others who share our goals

players, loss of department status in some municipalities, reduced participation in traditional programs and diminished federal and provincial support.

Public recreation and parks has been slow to innovate and develop new products, services and approaches in response to changing interests and demand. Without a concerted turnaround strategy, the field is at risk of standing outside decision making circles a time when Albertans need places to play and

to connect with nature more acutely than ever before.

It's time to recapture the concept of leisure as something everyone is entitled to and that everyone shares. Then recreation and parks will achieve its potential as a vehicle for equipping individuals and communities to actively engage in weaving together healthy, fulfilling lives.



"A healthy recreation industry has a crucial role to play in Alberta's future, with potential to deliver even greater economic gains as well as personal, community development and societal benefits."

Alberta's Growing Business of Recreation, ARPA, 2006

The way ahead: New era, new purpose

We are living in an era when leisure is not an add-on, but integral to life. This is a distinct shift from the industrial age, when manufacturing led the economy and leisure was merely time to recuperate for more work. Our service-centred economy flips the equation, opening the door wide to recreation and parks.



A 2006 study by Caminata Consulting on behalf of ARPA found that direct spending in recreation and parks increased more than 30% in real terms in just four years. Thus the field's growing role is apparent even in the GDP, which ignores the many leisure experiences we provide for ourselves, not to mention the field's powerful psychological, physical, spiritual and social benefits.

For decades, recreation and parks has offered exactly what Albertans need now: places to play and connect with nature. Leading practitioners in the field

have forged relationships of trust by engaging citizens with respect. Given that heritage, recreation and parks has potential to act as a powerful catalyst for bringing overdue attention to the ingredients that are essential in today's paradigm shift. Values such as togetherness, creativity, care for each other and care for the world that sustains us.

For recreation and parks, as for Alberta, this is a time of opportunity—but also a time of challenge.

Leaders in Alberta's recreation and parks field are rising to the challenge. Seeing the need for united action, ARPA called this field and others together through Vision 2015 to imagine what could be and chart a way forward. One of the outcomes is *Foundations for Action: Enhancing the Quality of Life in Alberta*. This collaborative action plan provides a template for working better together toward a future in which life is good for every Alberta citizen. For recreation and parks in particular, the plan charts a unique yet complementary role that will most certainly enhance quality of life.

Recreation and parks stands at a point in history when its potential to make a difference is huge. By shifting our focus

from bottom-line efficiency to serving societal needs, from going it alone to building together, we can create the Alberta we all want to see: inclusive, healthy, sustainable, creative and dynamic.

The Paradigm Shift	
From nouns	To verbs
From material/measurable	To all realities
From unchanging	To time matters
From produce fragments	To co-create
From silos	To contexted wholes
From hierarchies	To networks
From impersonal	To personal
From knowledge	To knowing

Find out more

This bulletin is part of a series based on *Foundations for Action*, a collaborative action plan for Alberta wellness and quality of life. The plan draws from the insights of individuals and agencies from many disciplines that share the vision of a future Alberta with healthy people, sustainable environments and strong vital communities. *Foundations for Action* is a key outcome of Vision 2015, an ARPA-led project that is linking the good work of organizations, government and agencies and creating new ways to make a difference together. For a full copy of *Foundations for Action*, go to the Vision 2015 website at www.vision2015.arpaonline.ca.