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# Trends and Their Implications for Recreation and Parks

Most trends offer substantial opportunity for the field, but some threaten negative impact if not dealt with wisely.

## What the trends imply for recreation and parks

The future of recreation and parks depends as never before on the field's ability to understand and respond to today's trends while remaining true to core values. The following pages detail the significant trends sweeping across Alberta. Most offer substantial opportunity for the field. The fact that leisure is

increasingly valued even as obesity becomes epidemic, for example, makes this an ideal time to promote active pursuits that offer not only a break

from routine, but a healthy alternative to sedentary living.

Some of today's trends, however, threaten to swamp not only recreation and parks but our entire province if not dealt with wisely. Environmental degradation, growing gaps between have and have-not citizens, looming leadership vacuums—those are but a few of the realities that demand united and strategic response.

For more in-depth analysis of the trends described in the following pages, see *Foundations for Action*:

*Enhancing the Quality of Life in Alberta*, an action plan based on the insights of leaders in recreation and parks and other Quality of Life fields. This foundational document is already guiding the work of the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association (ARPA) and a growing number of communities. You'll find the full report, and other bulletins based on the report, at [www.vision2015.arpaonline.ca](http://www.vision2015.arpaonline.ca)



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**Given its growing economic stature and the acute need for its services, what better time for recreation and parks to advocate for the resources to shoulder its vital role as an agent of wellbeing and quality of life.**

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## Demographic trends

Growing and increasingly diverse, Alberta needs recreation and parks services that are affordable, culturally sensitive, welcoming and appealing to a wide range of ages. At present, some who could benefit most from these essential services are poorly served.

1. **Young yet aging.** An influx of young workers has made Alberta the youngest province in Canada. But our average age is climbing as child/youth cohorts shrink and many baby boomers enter retirement. By 2050, more than a quarter of Albertans will be 65-plus.

*Implications: Expect school closures and lower registration in children's programs coupled with rising demand among older adults for leisure services previously associated with middle age.*

2. **Canada's fastest growing province.** Every year since the turn of the century, Alberta has posted the nation's strongest population growth.

*Implications: Communities are experiencing more demand for services and greater pressure on natural capital. On the plus side, there are more people to help pay for services and some potential economies of scale.*

3. **Growing aboriginal population.** One in every 20 Albertans is Aboriginal; nearly half are under age 20. More than three-quarters live off reserve, predominantly in cities. Earning lower than average income, they struggle with lifestyle-related health issues, including epidemic Type 2 diabetes.

*Implications: It's crucial to ensure that Aboriginal peoples, both in cities and on reserves, have access to effective and culturally sensitive wellness initiatives, recreation programs, services and facilities.*

4. **Increasing diversity.** Nine of every 10 visible minority Albertans live in Calgary or Edmonton, making up about one-sixth of those cities' population. Smaller communities are also home to newcomers, seniors, singles and others who may be at risk of isolation.

"On a per capita basis, our expanded cities, towns and villages have less parkland than they had a decade ago.

Our wildlands are under more stress and our provincial and national park systems are used more heavily than ever before." Budget 2007 analysis, Government of Alberta

*Implications: There is growing need to address language barriers, educate staff about cultural sensitivity and match programs and services to increasingly diverse interests.*

5. **Rural to urban shift.** Many small communities are losing youth and shrinking in size even as urban centres grapple with expansion and sprawl. The Calgary-Edmonton corridor is a particular magnet, with 72% of Alberta's population and growing.

*Implications: Both urban and rural communities are struggling. Urban growth rarely pays for itself in property tax income, while loss of businesses and jobs makes it hard for small centres to sustain the services and amenities needed and desired by both older and younger residents.*

6. **Shallower roots.** People are putting down less permanent geographic roots and forming international communities of interest. Yet the creative people demanded by a knowledge-based economy pay close attention to quality of life when choosing where to live. They seek "people places" that are alive and active. Authentic places that invite creativity, celebrate diversity and nurture growth.

*Implications: Communities cannot settle for mediocrity, sprawl, intolerance, disparity, exclusivity, and environmental degradation. To thrive, they need inviting people places, parks and streetscapes that offer authentic cultural and recreational experiences.*

Young yet aging



Canada's fastest growing province



Growing aboriginal population



Increasing diversity



Rural to urban shift



Shallower roots

Leisure is more than commercial activity, a commodity to be consumed. It is an agent of public good.

## Economic trends

A shifting economy



Wealthy seniors



Growing gap between rich and poor



Recreation & parks gaining significance

Whether measured in dollars or in human benefit, the significance of recreation and parks is escalating as the Alberta economy shifts from resource extraction to knowledge-based enterprises. Besides fueling creativity, active leisure pursuits have the potential to save health dollars and build bridges between citizens who otherwise would not benefit from knowing each other.

1. **A shifting economy.** Alberta can expect moderate growth coupled with lower than normal unemployment until conventional oil and natural gas sources significantly decline. In-migration of workers will continue, although slower than last decade. Success will depend on our ability to grow a value added, knowledge-based, green economy.

*Implications: Potential exists for increased investment in recreation, parks and other leisure services, particularly those that clearly enhance health and wellness, improve quality of life, add economic value and steward the environment.*

2. **Shifting wealth.** People older than 50 hold more than half of North America's wealth, although the shift of wealth to the elderly is tempered in Alberta by young urban professionals and resource workers. The older cohort is no longer least able to pay for services, yet seniors continue to receive the deepest discounts in many cases.

*Implications: While remaining vigilant and sensitive to the needs of low-income seniors, it is important to support younger Albertans who are less able to afford recreation and parks services.*

3. **Growing gap between rich and poor.** Personal bankruptcy and credit card debt are higher in Alberta than the national average, and many individuals face financial pressure. Evidence of lost human potential is stark. More than 80% of low income Albertans report chronic conditions, compared to about 55% of upper income Albertans.

*Implications: As the field's preventive and remedial capacities become more widely*

*understood, recreation and parks will be challenged to offer strategic leadership and effective solutions. In that light, it's crucial to address the fact that increasing reliance on fees for programs and services impacts affordability and accessibility.*

4. **Recreation and parks gaining significance.** In recent years, recreation and parks has tended to be seen as a frill and thus secondary (even tertiary) to other services. Now there is a promising shift, at least in rhetoric, to triple-bottom line public planning that places social/cultural and environmental goals alongside economics. Even in purely economic terms, recreation injects more than \$2.2 billion into Alberta's GDP and creates 22,000 FTEs of direct employment, and is growing. Private recreation enterprises are likely growing faster than public ones, but parks remain primarily public.

*Implications: Economic stature and acute need enhance the field's ability to advocate for expanded investment. What better time for recreation and parks to shoulder its historic role as an agent of wellbeing and quality of life.*

**"Urban natural capital such as parks, trees, clean air, rivers, stunning vistas, community gardens and wetlands produce a wide range of benefits. Despite this, urban natural capital often takes a backseat to other concerns and urban quality of life suffers as a result."**

**Green Among the Concrete  
Canada West Foundation, 2004**

## Behavioural trends

Epidemic obesity and other chronic illnesses due to sedentary living up the ante for recreation and parks, which holds the expertise to pull people into healthier lifestyles. The field must respond to key trends, including a shift to less structured, short-term leisure and volunteer experiences.

**"[A] picture is emerging of aging infrastructure whose minimal capital maintenance threatens to undermine decades of investment by the province and communities alike."**

**Community Recreation Infrastructure in Alberta Updated Facilities Assessment Report, 2006**



With the bulge of baby boomers in retirement, seniors will become more numerous than children for the first time in Canadian history. Foundations for Action ARPA, 2006

2. **Epidemic obesity and inactivity.** Canadian children are 40% less active than 30 years ago, and childhood obesity has tripled. More than half of Canadian adults say they are overweight (35%) or obese (16%). Although the number of Albertans who are regularly active rose to 54% in 2005, up from 26% in 1981, nearly half are still not active enough for health benefits. Older Canadians are even less active, at a time in life when activity is integral to managing chronic disease.

*Implications: Coordinated action by recreation, health, education and families is urgently needed to translate awareness about the health benefits of physical activity into positive behaviour change. Recreation and parks is well positioned to facilitate the shift through active lifestyle coaching and concentrated attention to physical literacy from an early age.*

2. **Leisure snatched on the go.** Most Albertans say they value leisure time more than work, yet many are challenged to integrate leisure into their lives. Feeling rushed, they do leisure in small chunks, often multi-tasking.

*Implications: Recreation and parks can serve genuine needs by providing islands of calm amid the hubbub of life. Programs need to be flexibly packaged, with fewer long courses and more short workshops. It's crucial to minimize or eliminate waiting times and to reduce any feeling of being rushed. Quality assurance is also increasingly important.*

3. **Clear shift away from structured activities.** Many Albertans seek individualized, informal pursuits (walking, gardening, crafts, hobbies, bicycling) that can be done at flexible times near or at home. Only a third sign up for organized sport, a sharp decline from earlier decades.

*Implications: A concerted shift is needed from facility-based programming to trails, passive parks, needs-based drop-in programs and other flexible offerings that are fun and "for life."*

4. **Episodic volunteerism.** Although Alberta is still ahead of the pack in volunteerism, today's volunteers are less numerous and more apt to want shorter stints than in the past. Retiring baby boomers offer an excellent pool of talent that could help address volunteer gaps and burnout.

*Implications: Tasks must be sliced into smaller segments, which increases the number of volunteers needed. Seniors can help fill gaps, but must be recruited and supported well.*

## Environmental trends

Dramatic evidence that we are reaching a tipping point in our abuse of the environment is tapping a groundswell of citizen action. Governments, corporations and recreation and parks leaders lag behind at a time when environmental leadership is utterly crucial.

1. **Climate change is proving real.** Although the cause is still debated, average global temperature is expected to climb five to eight degrees this century. Already we are seeing accelerated glacial melting, threatened ecosystems and exaggerated swings in weather.

*Implications: Climate disruption will dictate many operational changes, including dramatic reductions in resource use. Extreme weather events will directly impact the field. Outdoor interpretive programs offer excellent venues for helping citizens understand the significance of climate change.*

2. **Looming water scarcity.** Water is already a pivotal environmental issue, especially in southern Alberta. Demand continues to rise even as water supply dwindles due to retreating glaciers and reduced snow pack.

*Implications: Local governments must play a lead role in ensuring that water is used wisely by individuals as well as public and private institutions. Necessary strategies include improved watershed management, drought resistant plantings, automated low-use irrigation and low-flush toilets. Aquatic facilities, in*

If the entire world consumed as much energy, food, land and other resources as the average Albertan, it would take five planets to meet demand. Follow the path we've set and by 2020, it would take eight.

The Alberta GPI Accounts: Ecological Footprint  
Pembina Institute Report 28

Growing sense of stewardship



Designing with nature



Collaborative health promotion



Plethora of messages



Shift to shared governance

particular, will need to rethink how they operate. The provincial Water for Life Strategy deserves careful attention by all involved.

3. **Growing sense of stewardship.** With climate change a front-burner issue, grassroots concern about our environment is combusting into action on many fronts, from local food and community garden movements to land use trusts to watershed advocacy.

*Implications: Already challenged by drought and other extreme weather events, recreation and parks must prepare for even more significant shifts, modeling foresight and stewardship.*

4. **Designing with nature.** Sprawling suburbs enclosed by security fences have consumed vast tracts of land while turning the car into a necessity. Belatedly, communities are realizing the wisdom of design that invites mixed uses, walking, biking and other active, environmentally friendly transportation. We are also learning to build in ways that produce rather than consume energy.

*Implications: Recreation and parks must advocate community design that invites active living and transportation, and governments must make sustainable, healthy design the norm rather than the exception.*

## Health promotion and wellness trends

No single discipline has the resources to mobilize individuals, let alone entire communities, to dramatically increase their physical activity. Nor can we rely on mass media alone to promote good health. People need consistent, relevant messages and models that reach them where they live, work and play.

1. **Collaborative health promotion.** Increasingly, local, provincial, national and international organizations are teaming up on integrated initiatives grounded in determinants of health. ARPA can play a key role by connecting recreation and parks staff with

nutritionists, doctors and other health professionals who are responsible for promoting physical activity but may not have the expertise or resources to give concrete recommendations. The field can also help to identify the recreation interests of specific segments of the market. Although recreation and parks has done effective work in confirming its wide ranging benefits, those have not been communicated in a way that engages other sectors.

*Implications: Recreation and parks must put energy into demonstrating the crucial contributions it can make to a community based health and wellness model.*

2. **Plethora of messages.** Increased focus on physical activity as a key to population health has resulted in multiple and sometimes conflicting messages. Recommended physical activity levels vary from one disease to another, and nutrition information can be equally confusing. Yet the groundswell of promotion does open opportunities for action. Concern about obesity, for example, is spurring support for increased physical activity in communities, schools and workplaces.

*Implications. All fields must work across boundaries to capitalize on communication opportunities and avoid confusing citizens with conflicting messages.*

## Government and governance trends

There is a marked shift from top-down government to shared governance, both to stretch public dollars and in the hope of developing social capital as people work together. Governments are increasingly apt to speak of social and economic policy as inter-related and equally in need of investment, although actions do not always match those words.

1. **Shift to shared governance. Public services and goods increasingly involve partnerships and citizen engagement.**

Sharply diminished provincial leadership and funding



Softening of the "fiscal agenda?"



Municipalities emerging as a major force



Ensuring quality programming



Rebuilding community sport



*Implications: Shared governance provides new opportunities to demonstrate the upstream benefits of recreation and parks. It also demands new skills, including facilitation and collaborative leadership, especially at the local community level.*

2. **Sharply diminished provincial leadership and funding.** Provincial government funding of recreation and culture declined more than 40% in recent decades even as more responsibilities devolved to local governments. Fully 95% of municipal recreation and parks expenditures now come from local revenues, prompting a 90% increase in user fees over a decade.

*Implications: Cost has replaced time constraints as a leading barrier to participation. Recreation and parks must seek funding from the corporate sector while aggressively advocating for inter-ministry/public sector investments.*

3. **Softening of the "fiscal agenda?"** The fiscal restraint cutting of the 1990s has given way to a more balanced approach that recognizes local needs. Alberta's rural development strategy, for example, commits to supporting programs, youth leadership and infrastructure with the hope of revitalizing rural communities.

*Implications: Funding may be available for services that improve quality of life, but outcomes must be clearly demonstrated. The recreation and parks field will need to engage directly with agencies and departments responsible for rural development.*

4. **Municipalities emerging as a major force.** Both federal and provincial governments are increasingly apt to treat local governments as significant players rather than merely "children of the province."

*Implications: The time is ripe for communities to advocate for the capacity and senior level government support to ensure that citizens receive full access to essential recreation and parks services.*

## Recreation programming and delivery trends

Given the importance of physical activity and play at all ages, it is essential to rebuild capacity and ensure excellence in community recreation and sport programs and services.

1. **Ensuring quality programming.** Children need quality play to develop into healthy adults who are assets in their communities. Yet children are dropping out of sport programs, and fewer than one in five adults in a national 2002 survey said they were confident that community sports are promoting positive values and building character.

*Implications: Specific strategies to ensure the quality of children's recreation activities are essential. To get serious about children's creative play."*

2. **Rebuilding community sport.** Despite commitments made to community sport in the 2002 Canadian Sport Policy and the 2003 Alberta Sport Plan, governments continue to focus more on high-performance sport than on grassroots and developmental programs. Recent restraint has further fractured the system as communities attempt to deliver more and become more accountable with fewer resources.

*Implications: With the onus for grassroots program development remaining at the local level, it is essential to unite and reorient the energy of local sports organizations, community, city and school boards. A similar challenge faces the non-profit sport community supporting high-performance athletes.*

## Organizational and leadership trends

Recreation and parks has always worked closely with other sport, culture and youth-serving organizations. Now the circle is expanding to include health, social services, justice, education, the corporate sector and community service agencies. Forging partnerships demands expanded skills at the

Partnering across  
quality of life fields



Public private  
partnerships



Embracing new  
technology



Fluid work



Leadership and  
staffing gaps



Liability insurance  
injury

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very time when recreation and parks is losing many leaders to retirement.

1. **Partnering across quality of life fields.** In some municipalities, recreation and parks have been integrated into larger community services departments that may also include libraries and other services. Traditional joint-use agreements with education are expanding to include planning and programming to address youth inactivity and other community needs. Reaching across departments, the field works with police on public safety and youth initiatives; with planning and engineering on greenways and active transportation.

*Implications: Shared roles and increased accountability demand dramatically expanded skills, both to deliver recreation and parks services and to advocate for the fields' capacity to deliver increasingly important upstream benefits.*

2. **Public-private partnerships.** Across Alberta, public-private partners construct new facilities, private operators run public facilities and public services are contracted out. To be successful, those partnerships need strong and comprehensive agreements, improved accountability and excellent communication.

*Implications: Forging and evaluating public/private partnerships requires contract management competencies that have not been traditional in the field. Relevant training is essential to improve partnership outcomes and to ensure public policy outcomes are achieved.*

3. **Embracing new technology.** Recreation and parks benefits from numerous technologies, including bar-coded entry systems, web-based program registration, improved facility security, GIS mapping and voice-activated PDAs. Used well, those technologies manage and track information, model alternative courses of action, expedite customer service and improve education and awareness.

*Implications: New technology and communications should be embraced and*

*used to optimize key programs and services without replacing personal interaction.*

4. **Fluid work.** Employee loyalty has shifted from the organization to the team. Younger workers expect to participate in decision making and are more apt to choose self-employment, part-time work, flexible schedules and team-based projects whose goals match their own.

*Implications: Frequent shifts in staffing will occur, and there will be increased weekday use of facilities and open spaces, especially casual drop-in use.*

5. **Leadership and staffing gaps.** Baby boomers hired during the rapid expansion of the '70s are approaching retirement at a time when leadership and knowledge capital are already eroded due to the cutbacks and bottom-line management of the '90s. An even more significant gap is opening at the entry level, both in recreation and parks and in non-profit society management.

*Implications: The future of the field demands focused attention to recruitment, training and succession planning.*

6. **Liability, insurance, injury.** Insurance costs are rising, as are community and legal expectations that recreation programs be safe. Yet volunteer recreation and parks organizations have limited capacity to develop risk management programs and pay high insurance rates. Injuries do occur, especially in the more extreme sports that attract youth. Nor is injury the only risk, particularly for those with an overwhelming urge to win.

*Implications: Issues such as liability, illegal use of drugs, over-training and eating disorders need united research and response. Risk management should not be a constraint to active citizen participation in recreation activities.*

## Infrastructure trends

Wild swings in funding for local recreation infrastructure have left Alberta with an inventory of aging, single-use facilities plus a



handful of newer multiplexes that heavily depend on user fees to balance budgets. As a result, many Albertans lack access to inviting facilities while others stay away because they cannot afford the fees.

2. **Aging infrastructure.** Funding for Alberta's community recreation infrastructure dropped sharply in the 1990s and remains much lower than in prior decades. Much of that infrastructure is entering the last quarter of its viable life and suffering from insufficient capital maintenance. Analysis of more than 130 facilities by ARPA and partners found many older facilities with envelope, code, mechanical and slab problems. Multi-purpose centres built in the 1980s are in better shape but need work, particularly the aquatics components. Few communities have undertaken proper lifecycle capital maintenance.

*Implications: Besides being a significant drain on municipal budgets, many facilities are ill-suited to today's mix of recreation interests and pose health, safety and access concerns. Upgrading Alberta's pools, arenas and curling rinks would cost at least \$314 million, with replacement cost as high as \$1.7 billion. Communities also must commit to lifecycle planning and management of their facilities.*

2. **Bilateral commitment to renewal.** In August 2005, the Federal/Provincial/

Territorial Ministers Responsible for Sport, Recreation and Physical Activity identified sport and recreation infrastructure as their top priority and committed to a bilateral strategy for renewal, with municipalities responsible for operation and maintenance funds. Reinvestment, to date, has included Alberta's two-year Major Community Facilities Grant Program and eligibility as fundable elements in other capital grant programs.

*Implications: Continued advocacy is needed for ongoing capital funding that is tied to lifecycle planning. Upgrades and new recreation facilities must be environmentally sound and should consider integrating related services that augment health and wellness.*

3. **Serving multiple sectors.** Interest is growing in multi-service centres that meet a broad range of quality of life needs. This one-stop approach not only suits multiple interests but increases the likelihood that diverse community members will build rapport.

*Implications: It's essential for recreation and parks to work with residents and with other Quality of Life fields to create facilities that suit emerging patterns and encourage more people to be active and engaged in community life.*



"It is important to understand that physical inactivity is a public health issue, not simply a personal problem. Recreation and parks must address this crisis if we have any chance of being relevant in the future."

*Foundations for Action, ARPA, 2006*



### 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](http://www.vision2015.arpaonline.ca).