



Photo credit: istockphoto.com

Strategic Challenges Facing Recreation and Parks

Recreation and parks must excel, evolve and advance so that the field can take a lead role in shifting Alberta toward a healthy, happy, affordable future in which quality of life is the norm.

Recreation and parks in a new era: Challenged to change

Spinning in a nexus of change, Alberta is being propelled into a future we can only imagine. We do know this: our very survival depends on a dramatic shift toward a more collaborative, caring culture. Toward a society that nurtures all individuals, communities and environments, no matter what their circumstance.

Working respectfully with individuals, communities and environments is central to recreation and parks' historic mandate. It follows that this field can play important roles in shifting Alberta from old, more individualistic habits to the collaborative, people-centred approaches needed now.

This is a time of great opportunity for recreation and parks—but only if the field

gets its own house in order. For recreation and parks has somewhat drifted toward a facility-focused user pay philosophy in recent years,

"Few Canadians believe sport is realizing its powerful potential. Clearly, Albertans need to become serious about creative play spaces and opportunities, about universal access to play and about excellence in play leadership."
Foundations for Action
ARPA, 2006

turning what should be a public good into another option for those with money to pay.

Rekindling passion for historic values will equip recreation and parks to build grassroots capacity for the significant task of shifting Alberta from where it is headed to where it needs to go. Acting boldly in the spirit of historic values is a wise course not only because it's

ethically sound, but because these same values will make Alberta a leader in a post-industrial, creativity-hungry time when people matter more than things.

The strategic challenges described in the following pages cry out for action in the coming decade. The future of the field depends on understanding these challenges and creating solutions that make life better for all.

For in-depth analysis of the challenges and the action needed, see *Foundations for Action—Enhancing the Quality of Life in Alberta*. Based on the insights of leaders from recreation and parks and other fields in the Quality of Life sector, this foundational document is already guiding the work of the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association (ARPA) and a growing number of communities.

For the full report, please visit www.vision2015.arpaonline.ca.



INSIDE
Strategic challenges facing recreation & parks...2
Meeting the challenge of change4
Find out more..... 4

Alberta populations needing focused attention

- Aboriginal peoples. Earning below-average income, they struggle with health issues related to lifestyle, including epidemic Type 2 diabetes.
- Economically disadvantaged. Personal bankruptcy and credit card debt are higher than the national average and the gap rich-poor gap is growing.
- Children and youth. Urgent needs include better afterschool care, outreach, contact with nature and informal opportunities to play.
- Persons with disabilities. Barriers to access must be eliminated.
- Seniors. One in four Albertans will be 65-plus by 2050; many will seek services similar to those of previous middle age Albertans.

Priorities for environmental action

- Protecting water, ecosystems, natural environments and historic landscapes
- Seeking ways to design with nature
- Reducing forms of recreation that have significant environmental impact
- Instituting green measures such as sound forest management, drought resistant plantings, integrated pest control, energy retrofits
- Requiring sustainable design and management of facilities
- Inspiring citizen stewardship through interpretive programs and other environmental education



Strategic challenges facing recreation and parks

Given its historic ability to engage individuals and communities, recreation and parks holds the power to play a lead role in equipping Alberta for an entirely new way of living with each other and in the world. To fulfill that role, the field must rise to the following challenges.

1. **Ensuring equitable access.** All physical, mental, social and financial barriers must be identified and mitigated, or some Albertans who most need the services will continue to be left behind.
2. **Getting more people, more active more often.** Across Alberta, barely half of us are active enough to experience health benefits. Physical inactivity is not simply a personal problem, but a public health crisis—and the future of recreation and parks depends on its ability to activate all segments of the population. The current emphasis on prescribed physical activity falls short of motivating many who would benefit most, signaling a need for greater focus on enjoyable, flexible, physically active and socially engaging lifelong activities. We must help people understand the benefits of recreation and parks, discover healthy activities they enjoy, learn the necessary skills and stick with the program.
3. **Designing active livable communities.** The very design of Alberta's sprawling cities makes it harder to be active. We need planning that relies less on the car and instead invites walking, biking and other active, environmentally friendly forms of living and moving. We need community design that supports social, economic, environmental and cultural prosperity while remaining sensitive to local climate and natural features. We need streetscapes and places that encourage people to connect to be social.
4. **Building capacity for and through community governance.** Bringing community groups and agencies together to address common concerns is essential to the new Alberta. As a longtime community catalyst, recreation and parks must hone the collaborative coaching that knits people together and expands their skills as decisionmakers, doers and leaders.



5. **Building environmental integrity.** Despite preaching environmental sustainability, recreation and parks has not always walked the talk. Some forms of recreation use large amounts of energy and mar landscapes. The field must become a leader in ecosystem thinking and sustainable action.
6. **Renewing recreation infrastructure.** Alberta's aging facilities, with their multi-billion capital maintenance deficits, are draining municipal budgets. What's more, many are not well suited to today's mix of diverse recreation interests. Recreation and parks must work with other fields to entice investment in a new generation of sustainable infrastructure that facilitates wellness by meeting a broad range of public health and quality of life needs.
7. **Leadership renewal.** As the baby boomers hired during the rapid expansion of the '70s enter retirement, there is growing awareness that the next generation of leaders requires an expanded skill set. Enhanced recruitment, succession planning, post-secondary training and professional development are essential. Training is also needed to ensure that new technologies improve customer service and planning without replacing personal interaction.
8. **Ensuring quality recreation programming.** Children are dropping out of sport programs even as citizens express doubt that community sports are achieving their potential for promoting positive values and building character. Clearly the field must take strides to ensure quality sport and recreation programs that are not only safe and welcoming, but achieve healthy child development outcomes.
9. **Widespread leisure education.** Increasingly, citizens are turning to non-work time for life satisfaction and identity. In a society that promotes leisure in terms of time, money and goods, leisure education will greatly enhance fulfillment by opening doors to healthy activities that participants can enjoy more holistically.
10. **Measuring what matters.** Recent reliance on financial bottom line indicators in recreation and parks has emphasized paying customers and downplayed the field's indirect contribution to community quality of life. Recreation and parks, like many other fields, needs broader measures of success that reflect its value as a public good as well as direct user benefits.

"The paradox is that the world's protected areas face ever greater threats to their continued existence just when their values are growing in importance to humankind."

Michael Beresford and Adrian Phillips, Protected Landscapes: A Conservation Model for the 21st Century

"Fewer than one in five feel very confident that community sports are, in fact, promoting positive values and character building in youth as they feel it should be doing."

Canadian Public Opinion Survey on Youth and Sport Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, 2002

"... like other forms of capital, natural assets require careful stewardship and investment for their value to grow and pay dividends over the long term.

Just as we would not take other forms of capital for granted, we ignore the value of natural assets at our peril."

Canada West Foundation Green Among the Concrete, 2004

What is leisure education?

Leisure education helps individuals better understand themselves, recreation and the relationship of recreation to healthy lifestyles. Participants discover the benefits of recreation, learn how to choose healthy activities, practice the skills involved in a chosen activity and are motivated to change their behaviour.

11. **Integrated planning.** Policymakers' focus on the fiscal bottom line in recent decades has prompted recreation and parks to justify its existence in economic terms. The evolving "triple bottom line" approach to public planning calls for an integrated planning framework that sets social, cultural and environmental as well as economic goals, ideally achieved through interdisciplinary and intersectoral initiatives.
12. **Revaluing recreation and parks as essential public services.** Lack of clarity about the field's role in citizen, community and environmental wellbeing has allowed recreation and parks to be marginalized and devalued to a discretionary service. Alberta's shift from silos to more integrated paradigms opens the door for recognition as an essential public service, but only if the field clearly demonstrates social, community building and economic as well as environmental and health outcomes.
13. **Refinancing the delivery of recreation and parks services.** The marked shift from top-down government to shared governance does not erase the need to advocate for public sector reinvestment in recreation and parks. But the field must also build bridges with the corporate sector by demonstrating how employers and corporate citizens stand to benefit by supporting these essential services.
14. **Rebuilding community sport.** Recent restraint at each level of government has created significant angst among local public and non-profit sport delivery organizations, which have been expected to deliver more and become more accountable with fewer resources. Accepting that the onus for grassroots programming now lies at the local voluntary level, it is essential to unite and reorient the system, which will survive only with significant cooperation among local recreation organizations, community, city and school educators.
15. **Keeping pace with recreation patterns.** Close attention to trends and demographics is crucial to ensure that services meet evolving needs. The current shift from large blocks of scheduled activities to individualized, informal pursuits dictates a move away from facility-based programming to trails, passive parks, needs-based drop-in programs and other flexible offerings that are fun and "for life."
16. **Ensuring public safety.** One of the preconditions for personal and community wellness is the perception of safety where we live, work and play. While other fields may be more central to safety, recreation and parks plays a significant role by engaging citizens in activities that contribute to community cohesiveness, tolerance and understanding. From park design to youth service outreach, the field must be part of the safety solution.
17. **Responding to liability issues.** Safety worries, insurance costs and liability concerns are erecting barriers to active living. Yet the recreation activities most likely to result in injury, such as snowboarding, skateboarding and mountain biking, are the very activities that attract youth. Initiatives are needed that enable volunteer and low-budget recreation organizations to play safe, manage risk and find affordable insurance.
18. **Mitigating recreation related health disorders.** Beyond injury, individuals with an overwhelming urge to win or to fit a particular body image fall prey to such risky behaviours as illegal drug use, over-training and eating disorders. The field must devote resources to studying and combating those and other recreation related health disorders.



Meeting the challenge of change

Imagine an Alberta that is not stymied by tradition or blindsided by environmental calamity, but rather builds on the best of its past to make life excellent for all. Recreation and parks has no choice but to play a significant role in making that vision come true. After all, its work intersects with many of the aspects needing focused attention: active leisure, sustainable design, community leadership and capacity building and more. The challenge now is to excel, evolve and advance so that the field can help redirect Alberta toward a healthy, happy, affordable future in which quality of life is the norm.

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.