



**PRINCIPAL FINDINGS OF A PROJECT ON:  
COMMUNITY RECREATION DEVELOPMENT AND  
DELIVERY  
IN ALBERTA**

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# PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

## Purpose

The purpose of the project on *Community Recreation Development and Delivery in Alberta* was to produce “ ... a general, broad-level assessment of the priority issues, trends, opportunities, capacities and needs involving the development and delivery of community recreation and parks services ...’ in the province (ARPA. *Request For Proposals*, January 23, 2001).

## Outline

The project was composed of three parts:

- ❶ First, a review of issues, trends, opportunities, capacities, and needs, as identified through current and recent documents (*Document Review*);
- ❷ Second, a series of informal in-depth interviews with selected individuals active in the field (*In-depth Interviews*); and
- ❸ Third, a survey of recreation and parks practitioners who were members of ARPA (*The Survey*).

While each component of the study was conducted as a distinct activity, the themes addressed were common to all three.

## The Document Review

In all, eight primary documents prepared at various times during the three years preceding the study were examined in order to identify issues that should be addressed as part of the present study. These were:

- The *Alberta Recreation Survey* (2000)
- The Alberta Recreation and Parks Association (ARPA) *Organizational Review* (1999)
- *Evolving Municipal Roles in the Delivery and Support of Sport Services* (Clark, 1999)
- The Report of the ARPA’s Workshop on *Community Recreation Priorities and Roles* (1999)
- The ARPA *Membership Survey* (1999)
- The Canadian Parks/Recreation Association’s study *Illuminating Our Future* (1998)
- *Merit Goods, Public Recreation and the Enabling Authority of the State* (Burton, 1999)
- The City of Edmonton’s study *Reshaping the Public Good*.

The issues identified from these previous studies were incorporated into the in-depth interviews and survey components of the present study.

## The In-depth Interviews

Unstructured interviews were conducted by telephone and/or in person with selected individuals with considerable experience in the recreation and parks field who are affiliated with the following organizations:

- The Edmonton Sports Council
- The Alberta Foundation for the Arts
- The Indigenous Sport Council
- The Alberta Association of Recreation Facility Personnel
- The Albert Centre for Well-Being
- The City of Edmonton

The issues drawn from the Document Review provided the foundation for these interviews. However, the content was allowed to range over whatever issues the persons being interviewed considered to be important.

## The Survey

**Final survey sample size was 144 members. With 80 completed surveys, the rate of return was 55.6%**

The Survey of members of the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association (ARPA) was carried out via e-mail. In all, 187 questionnaires were sent out, with 41 returned as *undeliverable* – leaving an effective sample of 144 members. Completed questionnaires were received from 80 members - a rate of return of 55.6%.

The respondents fell into four groups according to position or category of membership, as follows:

- Managers, directors, and supervisors of departments, agencies, and service units made up just under half (43.8%) of the total;
- Programmers, program coordinators, and managers of facilities made up one-quarter (25.0%);
- Educators, consultants, and students made up about one-sixth (18.8%); and
- Lay members – consisting of elected officials, members of advisory boards and committees, members of affiliated associations, foundations, and centers, and corporate members who are not consultants – made up about 1-in-8 (12.5%).

The respondents were also very experienced in the community recreation and parks field. Their years of employment or involvement in the field were as follows:

- None had been employed or involved for fewer than two years;
- One-in-ten (10.0%) had more than two and up to five years in the field;
- About one-fifth (21.3%) had more than five and up to 10 years experience; and
- More than two-thirds (68.8%) had been in the field for more than 10 years.

## Timing

All three components of the Study were carried out during the months of February and March 2001.

# FINDINGS

**The recreation and parks community must speak with a unified voice.**

**(Document Review)**

**The definition of recreation must be promoted as inclusive of play, physical activity, sports, arts and culture, and outdoor pursuits.**

**(In-depth Interview)**

The findings from the Study encompass 23 topics that have been organized into eight themes: principles; processes; places; people; partnerships; products; problems; and priorities.

## I. PRINCIPLES

### **1. Making the Recreation and Parks Community Inclusive**

A theme that has surfaced frequently over the past couple of years or so has to do with the perceived fragmentation of the recreation and parks community. The *1999 ARPA Organizational Review*, the 1998 Canadian Parks/Recreation Association (CPRA) workshop that produced *Illuminating Our Future*, and the *1999 ARPA Workshop on Recreation Priorities and Roles* all raised awareness of the multiplicity of organizations and groups that claim to speak for a part of recreation: the arts, facilities and parks, sport, therapeutic recreation, and so on. A concern in each report was with ways in which to draw all of these organizations together so that the recreation and parks community can speak with a single voice to governments, corporations, foundations, and the general population.

This concern was echoed in the in-depth interviews. One participant suggested “people have a silo mentality” and “a lack of trust”. Another observed that “the therapeutic recreation community recognizes the need to bridge with the (recreation and parks) community”.

This was not an explicit theme in the survey, but occasional comments reflected concern about it. One respondent, in particular, stated that “over the years, ARPA has made several attempts to include the arts into their conference and the activities they do – but most attempts have failed due to a lack of understanding of what the arts and culture communities are all about”.

In short, there is a clear and growing concern that, if ARPA is to be effective in its advocacy and lobbying roles, it must be seen to speak for - and with - all of the component strands in public recreation.

As demand for our services is increasing at all levels, resources are decreasing – which results in the most significant impact falling on people at risk because the user pay model does not work for them.

(In-depth Interview)

## **2. Remembering the Less Fortunate**

The roots of community recreation and parks are to be found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century social reform movement’s concern for the disadvantaged in urban (and, later, rural) society: children in the rapidly growing industrial cities, immigrants, youth, and more. In short, the ‘have-nots’ of that era. Historically, the community recreation and parks field has prided itself on a commitment to meeting the needs of the disadvantaged. This focus has been diluted significantly during the past quarter century or so, as public recreation has embraced the notion of universality. But, there are still many ‘have-nots’ today. The Report of the *ARPA Workshop on Community Recreation Priorities and Roles*, the *1999 ARPA Membership Survey*, *Illuminating Our Future*, and *Reshaping the Public Good* all, in varying ways, reflected on the field’s commitment to the less fortunate.

This concern also surfaced in the in-depth interviews, where one participant worried about the impacts of decreased resources on people at risk. Another remarked on the particular circumstances of the Native community: “Because of the disparity in wealth among Bands, an important initiative is to focus on the specific needs of each Band. In some cases, a decision has to be made between eating for survival and joining in a (recreation) activity”.

This topic was not a specific concern in the survey, although the overwhelming belief that community recreation is a social service not unlike education and health care attests to the underlying principle of universality.

Almost four-fifths (77.5%) of respondents strongly or very strongly support the statement that ‘recreation is a social service not unlike education and health care’.

(The Survey)

### **3. A Need for Increased Government Funding**

**More financial resources are needed from governments to support recreation in its broadest definition, including active living.**

**(In-Depth Interview)**

The period between 1994 and 1998 saw a decline of 4.3% in real terms in per capita government spending on recreation and culture in Alberta. In keeping with the overwhelming view that community recreation and parks are a social service, there is a strong sense among many in the field that this trend must be reversed: that there must be an increase in government funding, *as a matter of principle*, in order to maintain a system facing facility decay and increased user demands.

This theme was stressed repeatedly in all three components of the study. It arose in several of the documents that were reviewed: the *1999 ARPA Membership Survey*, the 1998 Canadian Parks/Recreation Association (CPRA) study, *Illuminating Our Future*, and the *1999 ARPA Organizational Review*.

It appeared in statements made by participants in the in-depth interviews: for example, “more funding is needed from government to support initiatives”; and “federal and provincial governments need to become financially involved in recreation once again”.

**Almost two-fifths (37.5%) of respondents rank increased government funding among the five highest priorities for municipal recreation and parks policy.**

**(The Survey)**

Finally, increased government funding for programs and activities was sixth overall in the list of priorities for municipal recreation and parks policy identified by respondents to the survey, with 37.5% ranking this among their five highest priorities.

### **4. The Dilemma of User Fees**

The place of user fees in community recreation and parks has always been a somewhat contentious issue among social and political commentators; but, among recreation practitioners, there has been little serious opposition to their existence. Debates have tended to revolve, instead, around the levels at which they should be set and their impacts on the less fortunate in our communities: the unemployed, youth at risk, the poor, and those whose options are severely limited in one way or another.

**Pricing strategies should be re-balanced so that low-income youth are not subsidizing high-income seniors.**

**(Document Review)**

**Almost three-fifths (58.8%) of respondents believe that user fees, at current levels, have negatively affected rates of participation – significantly or to some extent.**

**(The Survey)**

**We must conduct a focus group to identify opportunities for networking and sharing information.**

**(Document Review)**

*Illuminating Our Future* was the only one of the documentary sources which addressed the subject – and then primarily from a relative point of view. There was concern that lower-income groups might be subsidizing those with higher incomes.

In similar vein, one participant in the depth interviews noted that “the user pay model does not work for people at risk”. Some questions about user fees were included in the survey, but, once again, the dominant concern was about the negative effects that fees have on participation rates: almost three-fifths (58.8%) of respondents believe that user fees, at present levels, have negatively affected rates of participation in municipal recreation and parks programs and facilities. The increased application of user fees as a priority is supported by only 16.3% of respondents. All in all, it appears that the existence of user fees, as a matter of principle, has not received significant debate among practitioners.

## **II. PROCESSES**

### **1. Improved Information Systems and Networks**

The belief that community recreation and parks agencies need to know more about the changing characteristics of their clients, and must share such information among themselves, was evident in all three components of the study. There was a strong sense that the system cannot provide quality services to clients if it lacks information about who they are and what they want. This was an important theme in both the *1999 ARPA Membership Survey* and the *1999 ARPA Organizational Review*.

As well, a participant in the in-depth interviews mused about the need for “... communication, sharing information, and joint problem solving”. Another noted that “an electronic linkage for knowledge and information is a real option; developing websites and then providing links across them will be a major asset”.

Improved information about the changing characteristics of participants was identified as a priority for municipal recreation and parks policy by almost one-in-eight respondents (11.8%).

(The Survey)

The need for greater consultation with, and empowerment of, community groups in public recreation was identified as a priority for municipal parks and recreation policy by almost one-quarter (22.4%) of respondents.

(The Survey)

Respondents to the survey endorsed the idea that patterns of demand are shifting – from team sports to individual activities, by time of the day, and by day of the week. They also agreed that such things as serving the increased needs of the economically disadvantaged will be *very important* in the immediate future. And while only about 12% chose improved information about changing characteristics of participants as a priority for policy, improved community consultation (a primary means of obtaining information about needs) was supported by more than one-fifth (22.4%).

## **2. Greater Community Development and Consultation**

Community recreation and parks programs and facilities have become increasingly linked to the community development concept in recent years. Integration of recreation and parks departments into broad-based social service agencies is one (not always welcome) indicator of this. Collaborative programs are another. However, there is a wider sense in which the concept of community development itself is viewed as a natural outcome of community recreation and parks programs and facilities. Whether this is so – or, indeed, whether recreation and parks ought to be part of the community development continuum at all – is a matter of debate within the field. That there is a need for greater consultation with, and empowerment of, community groups in recreation and parks is generally agreed. What is contentious is whether or not this needs to take place under the umbrella of community development.

While the notion of incorporating recreation and parks into community development was addressed in *Illuminating Our Future* and *Reshaping the Public Good*, the context was invariably one of cooperation rather than integration.

Participants in the in-depth interviews were sharply divided on the subject. While one suggested that “the community school concept needs to be re-visited”, another stated baldly that “recreation and sport need to be moved out of the (provincial) Department of Community Development and once again set up on their own, as we have lost focus about what is important to us”.

Community development, as such, was not addressed in the survey, but, as noted earlier, the need for greater consultation with, and empowerment of, community groups in public recreation was clearly recognized; it was perceived as a priority for municipal recreation and parks policy by almost a quarter (22.4%) of respondents.

In sum, people in recreation and parks have long recognized and strongly support community consultation, involvement and empowerment in their work, but are ambivalent and, even, unconvinced about the need to link it to formal ideas and organizations promoting community development.

While three-fifths (58.8%) of respondents believe effective risk management systems are common or very common in municipal recreation and parks agencies, one-quarter (25.1%) believe they are rare or not very common.

(The Survey)

### **3. Risk Management, Safety and Security**

Recreation practitioners are aware that municipal recreation and parks agencies face important liability and risk management issues in their work. Attention was drawn to this in *Illuminating Our Future* and in the *1999 ARPA Workshop on Community Recreation Priorities and Roles* – with particular respect to safety in the latter case.

One participant in the in-depth interviews saw this as a serious problem because “a lack of trust causes problems because people do not feel safe in taking risks”.

This topic was also a concern for the survey respondents: while about three-fifths (58.8%) believe that effective risk management systems are either *very common* or *common* in municipal recreation and parks, one-quarter (25.1%) believe they are *not very common* or are *rare*, and almost one-sixth (16.3%) did not feel comfortable in responding to this question at all.

More than half of respondents (57.5%) expect marketing activities of municipal recreation and parks agencies to increase significantly in the immediate future, while one-quarter (25.0%) rank improved marketing as a priority for municipal recreation and parks policy.

(The Survey)

### **4. A Need for Improved Marketing**

Considerable attention was given in the 1990s to the idea that users of community recreation programs and facilities are not simply recipients of government services, but clients with competing alternatives open to them - giving rise to the proposition that municipal recreation and parks departments must engage in marketing their programs and facilities if they are to continue to attract sufficient numbers of users.

This notion was recognized in the *1999 ARPA Organizational Review*, in *Illuminating Our Future*, and in the *1999 ARPA Membership Survey*. As well, several of the participants in the in-depth interviews pointed to the need to ‘target’ groups about the wide range of benefits, including wellness and health, that come from participating in community recreation.

Almost one-quarter (22.5%) of respondents to the survey suggest that marketing of community recreation has grown significantly in the recent past, while more than half (57.5%) expect it to grow significantly in the immediate future. As well, one-quarter (25.0%) ranked improved marketing as a priority for municipal recreation and parks policy.

### III. PLACES

#### 1. *New Facilities and Redevelopment of Existing Facilities*

We have an aging infrastructure that must be rendered more useful.

(The Document)

Many community recreation facilities were built in the late 1960s, as monuments to Canada's Centennial, and in the 1970s, as products of a dramatic expansion of public services throughout the country. They began to come to the end of their effective lives at a time, in the 1990s, when public sector retrenchment was dominant. Faced with aging facilities and increasing demands from rapid population growth, Alberta's recreation and parks departments desperately need new and redeveloped facilities.

This theme was central to all three components of the study. It was raised in the *ARPA Membership Survey*, in the CPRA study entitled *Illuminating Our Future*, and in the City of Edmonton's 1999 study *Reshaping the Public Good*.

It was also evidenced in the in-depth interviews through such comments as "our recreation facilities are in a state of disrepair" and "we need to retrofit and/or replace the majority of the inventory".

It was also a significant concern for respondents to the survey, 80.0% of whom indicated that retrofitting of facilities will be *very important* in the next five years. As well, energy consumption and facility lifecycle management programs were the highest priority for municipal recreation and parks policy, with new facilities/redevelopment of facilities immediately behind - supported by 56.3% and 51.3% of respondents, respectively.

#### 2. *Greater Protection for Natural Areas and Enhancement of Trail Systems*

We need to ensure access to public lands within a framework of protection.

(In depth Interview)

The need for municipal recreation and parks agencies to enhance their parks, trail systems and natural areas – for both use and protection – has been a recurring theme for a decade or more. It is now becoming a matter of some urgency. It was a consistent theme across all components of the study.

It was found in the *1999 ARPA Membership Survey*, the *1999 ARPA Workshop on Community Recreation Priorities and Roles*, and *Reshaping the Public Good*, and was evidenced in a comment from the in-depth interviews that emphasized the need to ensure both access and protection.

As well, respondents to the survey were overwhelming in their view that municipal recreation and parks agencies must enhance trails systems, parks and natural areas, with almost three-quarters (72.5%) stating that this will be *very important* in the next five years. Almost one-quarter (23.8%) chose protection of natural areas as a priority for policy, making it tenth overall.

#### IV. PEOPLE

##### **1. Re-training and Upgrading for Professional Staff**

Concerns about a lack of opportunities for re-training and upgrading of professional staff in municipal recreation and parks agencies have surfaced frequently during the past half dozen years or so, as the roles of staff have changed – for example, from program manager to contract monitor – and as the mandates of integrated broad-based social services agencies have expanded to include community recreation and parks.

There is a need for more joint training opportunities with groups such as ATRA (the Alberta Therapeutic Recreation Association).

(In-depth Interview)

These concerns were voiced in several of the documentary sources. The *1999 ARPA Organizational Review* commented on the need to identify opportunities to partner or share training and professional development sources and activities with others, while the *1999 ARPA Membership Survey* saw this as a valuable resource for members.

It also emerged from one of the in-depth interviews as a matter for cooperative activity with other recreation and parks organizations.

The issue was included as a specific item in the survey. Respondents gave Alberta's Colleges and Universities a good (though not excellent) grade in preparing practitioners, with about two-thirds (65.0%) saying that they do the job *very well* or *quite well*. And as far as policy priorities go, one-quarter (25.0%) of respondents suggested that re-training and upgrading opportunities should be a priority.

##### **2. More Volunteers, Better Trained and Better Screened**

The fiscal restraint of the 1990s placed severe stresses on a voluntary sector in Alberta that was already stretched almost to capacity. (The *1997 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating* found that 40% of Albertans aged 15 years and over volunteer for an average of 146 hours per year – or 2.8 hours per week.) There are sound reasons to believe that the toll on volunteers in community recreation and parks is having increasingly serious impacts on program delivery. This is a major concern for the field.

**Volunteers are burning out at an unprecedented rate.**

**We need an umbrella organization for groups using volunteers.**

**(In-depth Interview)**

The *ARPA Membership Survey, Illuminating Our Future*, the 1999 *ARPA Organizational Review*, and *Reshaping the Public Good* all recognized the strains and stresses placed on the voluntary sector – and, specifically, on volunteers – in community recreation and parks. This concern was echoed by comments from the in-depth interviews, and evidenced in responses to questions in the survey. Specifically, in the latter case, about two-thirds of respondents (63.8%) thought the use of volunteers in community recreation and parks had increased during the past five years; about half (51.3%) thought obtaining volunteers had become more difficult; and more than two-thirds (68.8%) believed that volunteer ‘burnout’ is either *common* or *frequent* - with almost as many (62.5%) suggesting that the impacts on community recreation have been *severe* or *serious*. Respondents were about evenly divided on whether or not screening procedures for volunteers in the field are adequate. Perhaps, most significantly, almost one-third (30.0%) rated recruitment and improved training for volunteers as a priority for policy, making it seventh overall.

### **3. Accessibility**

**Accessibility needs to be a consideration in everything we do.**

**(In-depth Interview)**

Accessibility has been an important issue in community recreation and parks for at least the past two decades. But, while the initial focus was upon access for the physically and mentally disabled – and, later, for women – this has now been broadened to encompass accessibility to all services for differing ethnic groups within Alberta’s municipalities, as well as the economically disadvantaged.

Both *Illuminating Our Future* and the 1999 *ARPA Workshop on Recreation Priorities and Roles* addressed the importance of responding to the needs of the unemployed, youth at risk, low-income residents, and the changing ethnic composition of the population.

**Sport must find ways of restoring accessibility to low income groups. Cultural diversity is also a challenge. Finally, the challenge of accommodating women in sport remains. We need to remove all barriers to accessing service.**

**(Document Review)**

As well, one participant in the in-depth interviews noted that “disability and diversity are growing in our communities; the needs of the economically disadvantaged and individuals from other cultures must be addressed”. Another commented: “inclusion is the answer”. Yet another concluded “we need to be more inclusive and demonstrate diversity by working in an open way”.

Respondents to the survey clearly recognized the importance of accessibility, since 60.0% suggested that meeting the needs of the economically disadvantaged will be *very important* in the immediate future, while 32.5% stated that changing ethnic demands will be *very important* (with a further 42.5% suggesting this will be of *some importance*).

## V. PARTNERSHIPS

### **1. More Collaborative Programs With Other Social Service Agencies**

**It is essential to bring together multidisciplinary teams (police, social services, recreation) to deliver programs.**

**(Document Review)**

There is strong support within municipal recreation and parks agencies for collaborative activities with other social services organizations: health authorities, school boards, family and social services agencies, provincial Justice Department groups, police services, and others. In some jurisdictions, this has been formally endorsed through integration of some of these agencies into a single broad-based social services organization. But, even without formal integration, there is a strong interest in collaboration. This theme was advocated in the *1999 ARPA Membership Survey*, in *Illuminating Our Future*, and in *Reshaping the Public Good*.

As well, there were comments from the in-depth interviews to the effect that: “a lack of coordination between public organizations is causing resources to be wasted”; “some form of plan to work together is needed”; and “the benefits of partnering/linking with health, education and criminal justice need to be promoted”.

Respondents to the survey had mixed feelings about the integration of community recreation into a broad-based social services agency, but they recognized that program collaboration is important. The latter was identified as a priority for policy by almost half (45.0%) of respondents, making it the fifth highest priority overall.

### **2. Increased Partnerships With Private and Not-for-Profit Organizations**

An important development through the 1990s was the growth of partnerships between municipal recreation and parks departments, on the one hand, and organizations in the private and not-for-profit sectors, on the other. Such partnerships were perceived both as a means of obtaining funds for municipal agencies facing declining resources as a result of fiscal restraint, and as harbingers of greater efficiency and accountability in community recreation and parks service delivery.

There is a need to develop strategies for building positive partnerships and strategic alliances with private and not-for-profit organizations – especially established sports and recreation groups.

(Document Review)

Such partnerships were encouraged in four of the documents reviewed: *Illuminating Our Future*, the *1999 ARPA Organizational Review*, the *1999 ARPA Membership Survey*, and in *Reshaping the Public Good*.

As well, one participant in the in-depth interviews proposed that “we need to look at contracting out as a solution in relation to our mandate of working for the public good”. Another suggested “we must partner with the private sector”. Yet another proposed that “there is a need for specialized programs in which new models are utilized with partnerships among a number of providers”.

Respondents to the survey appeared to have an ambivalent attitude toward partnerships. While more than two-fifths (45.1%) were concerned that partnerships had affected the profile of users of public facilities, more than half (51.3%) ranked partnerships and contracting as a priority for municipal recreation and parks policy, making this the second most important area (jointly with the need for new and redeveloped facilities).

### **3. Increased Corporate Sector Support**

As community recreation resources were stretched in the 1990s, a drive to find corporate support for programs, facilities, and events emerged. There is, however, a strong feeling among practitioners that the search for sponsorships has occurred in a haphazard way, and that community recreation agencies and groups have little understanding of what drives corporations to become involved in supporting community activities. The need to join with corporations is recognized, but so is the need to understand why corporations become socially engaged and what motivates corporate philanthropy.

This need was recognized in the *1999 ARPA Organizational Review* and in *Reshaping the Public Good*, as well as in the in-depth interviews where the following comments were made: “outside funding is needed because facility operators cannot afford to give the facility away”, and “sponsorships from related corporate sources can enable us to enhance our services”.

Recruitment of recreation and parks ‘champions’ and advocates was an important message in the *1999 ARPA Organizational Review*, and was identified as a priority for policy by one-fifth (20.0%) of respondents to the survey. As well, one-quarter (25.0%) noted that it is *very important* for ARPA to understand corporate social innovation and philanthropy, while 47.5% rated this as being of *some importance*.

Almost three-quarters (72.5%) of respondents believe it is very important or of some importance for ARPA to understand corporate social innovation and philanthropy in order to be successful in attracting corporate support.

(The Survey)

## VI. PRODUCTS

### **1. Identification and Measurement of Benefits of Community Recreation and Parks**

**We must measure outcomes and benefits more effectively than we have done.**

**(Document Review)**

Recreation practitioners have been aware for some time now of the need to demonstrate that recreation and parks are a source of significant benefits to society. They still grapple, however, with understanding how best to do this. An essential need for many is the development of practical ways of measuring benefits and using benefits assessments in everyday activity.

This issue arose repeatedly in the current project. It was identified as a priority in the *1999 ARPA Membership Survey*, in *Illuminating Our Future*, in the *1999 ARPA Workshop on Recreation Priorities and Roles*, and in *Reshaping the Public Good*.

The in-depth interviews produced varied comments on the subject: “the social benefits of programs such as after school need to be promoted”; and “groups need to be educated about the broader benefits of recreation”.

As for the survey, not only did a large majority (78.8%) believe that it is currently *very necessary* or *necessary to some degree* for municipal recreation and parks agencies to measure benefits of community recreation and parks, half (50.0%) rated social marketing and benefits measurement as a priority for policy, making it fourth overall. As well, 48.8% chose developing practical ways of using benefits assessments in municipal recreation and parks as a *very important* topic for ARPA begin to address in the next five years.

### **2. Improved Measurement of the Economic Impacts of Community Recreation**

**There is a need to integrate recreation into regional economic development. It is also important to examine the economics of recreation service delivery.**

**(Document Review)**

The need to better understand the economic impacts of community recreation and parks facilities and programs has been a constant theme among practitioners for more than two decades.

While it began with attempts to assess the economic consequences of major special events, it has gone beyond this, attempting to show that many of the everyday activities of public recreation have positive economic consequences. But, as with benefits measurement, there is a need to identify methods of carrying out consistent and practical economic impact assessments.

This need was raised in *Reshaping the Public Good*, with specific reference to sport. Also, one participant in the in-depth interviews commented on the topic, suggesting “there is a need to

investigate the economic significance of recreation to identify local, regional and provincial impacts”.

Respondents to the survey were asked specifically whether or not ARPA should take up this topic as a matter of some priority in the immediate future. More than half (55.0%) suggested that it is *very important* for ARPA to address ways of carrying out consistent and practical economic impact assessments for recreation, sport and culture.

## VII. PROBLEMS

### ***1. Disparities in Base Levels of Community Recreation Services Across Alberta***

Some communities have nothing and this needs to be changed in order for equal access to a base level of services to be achieved.

(In-depth Review)

Linked to the concern for the less fortunate, but broader in its focus, is the recognition that there are wide disparities in base levels of community recreation and parks provision across Alberta. This concern is not rooted in social justice per se, but in a more pragmatic recognition of the role that community recreation and parks play in promoting individual and community health and wellness, enhanced educational opportunities, and crime prevention. Respondents to the *2000 Alberta Recreation Survey* rated several of the benefits of recreation and parks as very important. They agreed that recreation provides opportunities for children and youth to participate in a variety of activities; parks and open spaces preserve Alberta’s landscape, plants and animals; recreation provides opportunities for families to spend time together; and recreation and parks facilities and services improve quality of life. But, if these benefits are to be realized, there must be a base level of services in all communities. It is believed that this is not presently the case. Rather, there is an evident disparity in base levels of service across communities in the Province, especially among and between the many small and medium-sized municipalities.

The *1999 ARPA Workshop on Community Recreation Priorities and Roles*, the *1999 ARPA Membership Survey*, *Illuminating Our Future*, and *Reshaping the Public Good* all addressed the significance of community recreation for its positive impacts on health, education, and justice.

Participants in the in-depth interviews addressed this theme frequently. Two particular comments were that: in Native communities, “recreation and sport are seen as an alternative to substance abuse and other social problems”; and “the social benefits of programs such as after school need to be promoted in relation to their impact on other sectors such as education, health and justice”.

This topic was not addressed directly in the survey, although there was a related concern expressed about the perceived effects of user fees on base levels of participation: three-fifths (58.8%) of respondents believe that user fees have negatively affected rates of participation.

## **2. The Unique Problems of Rural Communities**

We have a serious shortage of pool staff in rural communities.  
(Written Comment from the Survey)

There are issues in community recreation and parks that are either unique to rural communities, or which affect rural and urban communities differently. While these were not addressed specifically in any of the three components of the study, they emerged in several forms and places. They range from concerns about the ability to attract and hold permanent and seasonal staff in rural communities, to perceived inadequate levels of support for the arts and culture in rural areas, to general concerns about the adequacy of rural playgrounds and parks.

Some respondents to the *1999 ARPA Membership Survey* had noted the special importance of ‘rural playgrounds’, ‘rural parks’, and ‘rural issues’. When considering priorities for municipal recreation and parks policy in the present study, one respondent to the survey suggested “dealing with the shortage of pool staff in rural communities”.

As well, one of the participants in the in-depth interviews observed that “the level of support for arts and culture in rural areas needs to increase”. So, although not given direct attention in the three components of the study, it is clear that there are issues unique to Alberta’s rural communities that require attention.

Energy consumption and facility lifecycle management programs were the highest priority for municipal recreation and parks policy among respondents to the survey, with 56.3% support.  
(The Survey)

## **3. The Particular Case of Energy Consumption and Rising Energy Costs**

During the years when the documentary sources reviewed in this study were prepared (1998-2000), oil, gas and electricity were relatively cheap and plentiful. It was only in the latter half of the year 2000 and in the first half of 2001 that soaring energy costs seriously affected municipal recreation and parks operations – although the impact was ameliorated considerably through the Provincial rebate program. However, there is significant concern about the effects of any long-term increases in energy costs on the quantity and quality of municipal recreation and parks programs.

Given the timing of the most recent explosion in energy costs, it is not surprising that there was no mention of this topic in the documentary sources that were reviewed. It is, perhaps, a little

more surprising that the issue was not raised in the in-depth interviews.

The subject was, however, an important concern in the survey. More than half (56.3%) of respondents believe that rising energy costs had affected operations *very significantly* in the preceding months, while about the same proportion (57.5%) expect the effects to be *very significant* in the immediate future. Perhaps, more significantly, energy consumption and facility lifecycle management programs are the highest priority for municipal recreation and parks policy, with 56.3% support among respondents.

## **VIII. PRIORITIES**

### ***1. For Municipal Recreation and Parks Policy***

Respondents to the Survey component of the Study were asked to identify what will likely be the highest priority areas for municipal recreation and parks policy in the next five years). They were restricted to a maximum of five choices each from 15 listed topics, although they could add topics if they wished. While all 15 topics received some selections, six were chosen by one-third or more of respondents. These are, in rank order:

- Energy consumption and facility lifecycle management programs (56.3%);
- New facilities and redevelopment of existing facilities (51.3%);
- Increased partnerships with private and not-for-profit organizations (51.3%);
- Increased emphasis on social marketing and the benefits of recreation (50.0%);
- More collaboration with other community services agencies (45.0%); and
- Increased government funding for programs and activities (37.5%).

### ***2. For the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association***

Respondents to the Survey component of the Study were also asked to identify priorities for action by the ARPA. They were given a list of 11 topics and asked how important they thought it was for the ARPA to address these in the next five years. Responses were given on a scale from *very important* to *some importance* to *not very important*. All 11 topics were selected in the overall responses, but six were classified as *very important* by one-third or more of respondents. They are, in rank order:

- Development of ways of carrying out consistent and practical economic impact assessments (55.0%);
- Development of practical ways of using benefits assessments (48.8%);
- Development of methods of empowering community groups as partners in municipal recreation and parks (46.8%);
- Increased understanding of pressures on the voluntary sector and their implications for recreation and parks (42.5%);
- Enhanced ways of conducting integrated strategic planning for recreation, sport, arts, playgrounds, and parks (38.8%); and
- Development of ways of carrying out recreation and parks services performance evaluations (36.3%).

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