The long term impact of strategies and interventions promoting physical activity is enhanced by supportive environments. One element of supportive environments is to create community recreation facilities and spaces that attract and support all community members in pursuing opportunities for active living.

Strathcona County is an urban-rural municipality in Alberta that includes one large urban centre and eight rural hamlets. Responding to community demand, the County Council approved the Open Space and Recreation Facility Strategy (OSRFS; Strathcona County, 2008). The OSRFS will guide the (re)development of recreation facilities and open spaces to meet community needs over the next 15 years. The County invested $40 million in the first phase (2009 – 2013) to revitalize existing indoor recreation facilities and outdoor spaces.

This study evaluated the implementation of phase one of the OSRFS. To do this, barriers to accessing recreation facilities and open spaces by users and non-users were examined. This data was compared to facility users and non-users of a community similar in size and facility profile (City of Spruce Grove/Town of Stony Plain/Parkland County — referred to as Tri-Municipal Region).

Methods

Data collection included two stages:

1) A 12-minute phone survey with approximately 1050 residents in each community (Strathcona County and Tri-Municipal Region). All participants were over the age of 13. The phone survey was used to understand what facilities and outdoor spaces were used, frequency of use and motivation for use.

2) Focus groups with youth and adult current users and non-users in both communities. Focus groups explored factors such as who uses facilities (why/why not), preferences for and barriers to use, and how people get to facilities. A total of 22 focus groups were held with 105 residents across the two communities.

The telephone survey and focus groups were initially conducted in the fall of 2011 (baseline data collection). This occurred before the revitalization of facilities and spaces in Strathcona County. After the revitalization efforts, both the telephone survey and focus groups were conducted again (follow-up data collection), in fall 2013/winter 2014.
Results

Telephone Survey Results

Overall, there was a significant increase in the number of residents visiting many indoor and outdoor recreation facilities and spaces from 2011 to 2013. These increased visits corresponded with revitalization efforts in both Strathcona County and the Tri-Municipal Region. However, urban community members were much more likely to use recreation facilities and spaces. This indicates the need for recreation strategies to target improved access in rural areas.

Focus Group Results

In both communities, participants described a number of factors that influenced their use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces. The themes are organized into facilitators, barriers and recommendations. The themes are presented in Figure 1 with example quotes. While the themes presented in Figure 1 are only from Strathcona County, they provide examples that other communities may learn from.

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**Key Terms**

Supportive Environments: Creating environments where people live, work and play that are supportive of healthy choices, including physical activity and active living (Edwards & Tsouros, 2006).

Recreation Spaces: Includes both indoor recreation facilities (e.g., municipal multi-purpose recreation facilities) and outdoor spaces (e.g., soccer field, baseball diamond, trails).

Revolitization: The renovation or expansion of existing community recreation facilities and outdoor spaces.

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**Figure 1. Focus Group Themes and Illustrative Verbatim Quotes from Strathcona County**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDOOR FACILITIES</th>
<th>OUTDOOR SPACES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FACILITATORS</strong></td>
<td>Diversity of recreational opportunities (R, N, Y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of infrastructure and programming (N)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility of passes (R)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly staff (R, N, Y)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role models (Y)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BARRIERS</strong></td>
<td>Lack of awareness and communication (R, N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of recreational opportunities (R, N, Y)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well maintained and clean (R, N)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational guide (N)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RECOMMENDATIONS</strong></td>
<td>Infrastructure improvements and expansion (R, N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial disclosure (R, N)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership improvements (R, N, Y)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More payment options and subsidies (N)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness and communication (Y)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth programming improvements and expansion (Y)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Adult Regular Users = R, Adult Non-Regular Users = N, Youth = Y

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"They're really good facilities, and there are lots of opportunity, and I think that the County's done a really good job." (R)

"I think this is the Cadillac of suburbia. I mean you know there are a few places...that have the facilities or the infrastructure that this place has. It is well maintained, and you know they do keep it up to date." (N)

"If you go to the gym and you see like a really fit person, and you're a youth and that – that person's an adult. It kind of, it almost motivates you, cause it's like I want to look like that when I'm older, too." (Y)

"I'm not a huge fan of mega facilities...I think they are too big and too impersonal. And easy to lose your kids, and noisy and busy, and kind of impractical." (N)

"[It costs] ten bucks or something to go for a visit for an hour, that's – that's out there. So I think cost is an issue." (N)

"I would prefer access 24 hours...it seems like there's a demand for that [for night shift workers]." (R)

"I know that there's a bus that goes to Millennium Place, but it's hard to get back on it...and then it takes you a long time, because Millennium Place is like at the end of most of the buses routes." (Y)

"It might be nice to have sort of a – a smaller, multi-generational room...there's really no one spot where you can go, as a family, if you've got various ages." (N)

"I would like to know a little bit more about where the money's going." (R)

"The reciprocal thing is a big one...I really think there is a – an opportunity for both the County and the, you know, Leduc and Edmonton, all to benefit." (N)

"Maybe even [advertisements] in schools too. Cause if we're trying to get the youth to go to them...So maybe if they had like a couple of slides of like come to Millennium Place, work out, get active. Maybe that would encourage more people to go there." (Y)

"They're really good facilities, and there [are] lots of opportunity, and I think that the County's done a really good job." (R)

"In Sherwood Park, there are a lot of public areas, like parks and ball diamonds and walking trails and the outdoor rinks." (N)

"I'm relatively happy with – with what's available to me. You know they're well maintained, clean; there's garbage cans and everything there." (N)

"My mom brings [the Recreation Guide] home. So like, I'll read it if she brings it home. And she usually has like a copy, so yeah, I read them. And usually I know that GARCI always has a copy there that you can grab." (Y)

"You're kind of relying on word of mouth or people telling other people. And that's – that's okay, but you know, it's not going to be the most effective way of marketing things that are happening in the community." (R)

"The trails are – I must say, I don't see a lot of policing on them. Like we live in Craigavon, and I know that there's drug sales and stuff that go on behind our house, on the path...so that is an issue." (N)

"I think that Sherwood Park, it is pretty good, but it's mostly like a field. I think they could either expand it or move it, so that it's in like bushy areas with all these trees and paths, cause that's where my dog likes to go." (Y)

"We need proper signage out there to lead people to those facilities so that it's easier to get there." (R)

"I think they could do a little better job of after a snowfall...and get out there and clear it [the trails] quicker, so that it's – it's, can be used more efficiently." (N)

"It is so dangerous, they have no shoulders on [Baseline Road] at all...[there are] no paths out there for bicycles." (R)

"I don't really know any places that say like 'Hey, we're going to meet in this field somewhere and do like an organized activity, or an organized work out'. Like, I think there needs to be more of that. Like, the only ones I know is indoor." (Y)
Practical Implications and Conclusions

The findings suggest that revitalization efforts in both Strathcona County and Tri-Municipal Region were likely a key contributor to increased visits to indoor facilities and outdoor spaces between 2011 and 2013.

Based on the results of this project, a series of recommendations for municipalities were developed:

- provide a variety of advertising strategies about recreation spaces (e.g., road signage, posters at key community locations, community recreation guides) and programs (e.g., highlight specific programs);
- ensure regular maintenance is performed and keep facilities and spaces clean;
- increase public transportation to recreation facilities and spaces;
- reduce drop-in admission prices (particularly for marginalized populations, e.g., youth, seniors, persons with a disability);
- provide increased recreation program options for youth;
- build a seniors’ area within recreation facilities and offer specific programs for this age group;
- extend hours of recreation facilities (e.g., late evening, early morning);
- ensure regular snow removal, install outdoor exercise equipment and promote events in outdoor spaces;
- show how municipal funds are being allocated towards physical activity opportunities within the community; and
- promote community-based physical activity programs and meet-ups at community centres or halls particularly in rural areas.

The findings from this project may help decision-makers in municipalities throughout Canada develop recreation strategies and make decisions about how to improve existing indoor facilities and outdoor spaces through revitalization in their respective communities.

Acknowledgements

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References
