



Exploring the Impact of Community Investment in Recreation Spaces on Health Equity and Physical Activity

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Summary

This article summarizes a study that evaluated the implementation of a municipal revitalization strategy for recreation facilities and open spaces in Strathcona County, Alberta. The authors offer several recommendations to increase physical activity levels among community members.

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.

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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.

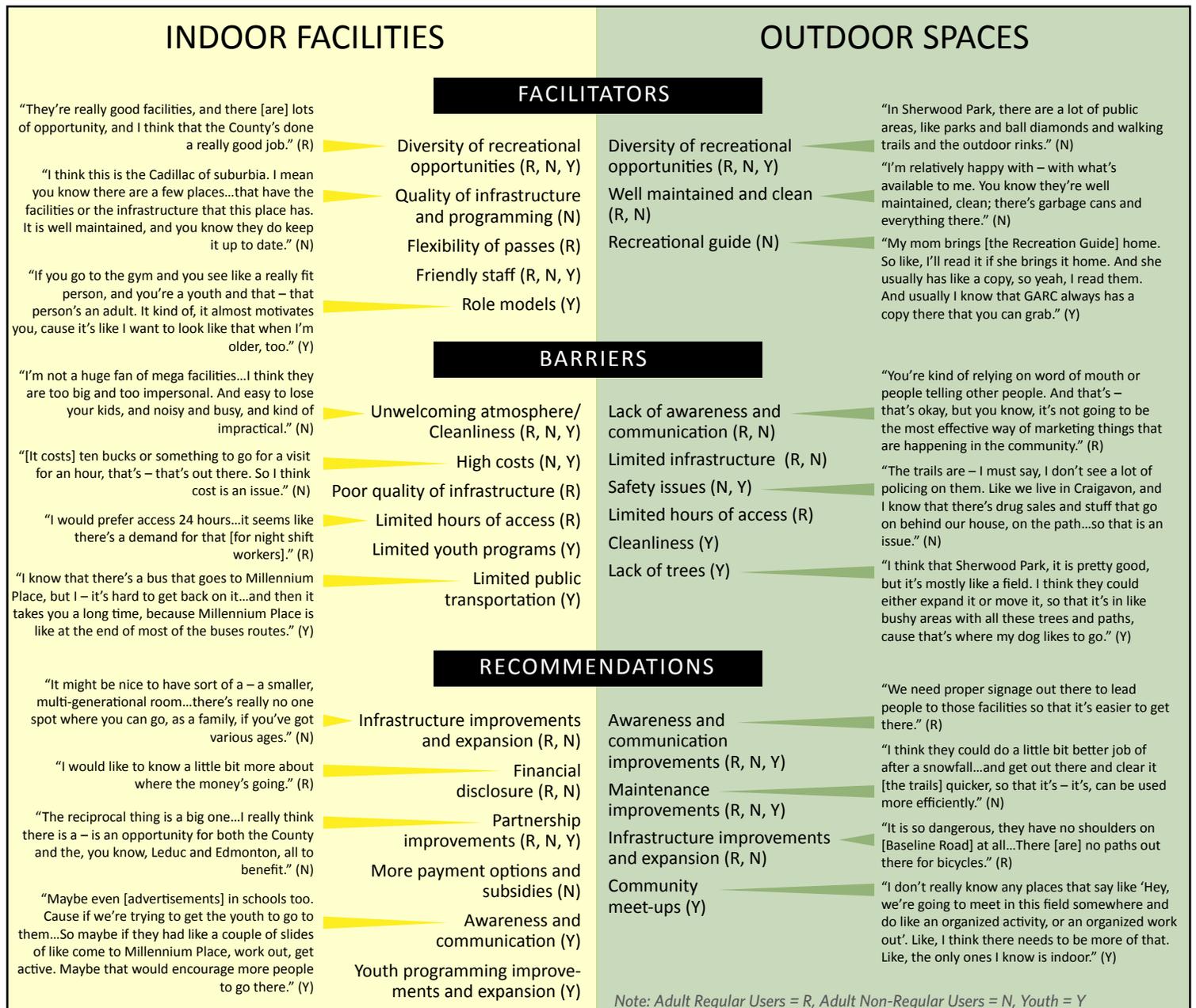
Figure 1. Focus Group Themes and Illustrative Verbatim Quotes from Strathcona County

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).

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



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. 

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