

CLOSING RECREATION CENTRES WON'T WIN OVER YOUTH

On January 24, 2007, Mayor Katz and City Council voted in favour of closing Kelvin Community Centre. Kelvin is located in the Elmwood community, one of the poorest communities in Winnipeg.

Mayor Katz frequently talks about the need to keep and attract young people to Winnipeg. But closing a recreation centre in a high-needs neighbourhood would suggest that the Mayor has a narrow vision when it comes to meeting the needs of youth. As a young person about to finish university, this concerns me.

Access to recreation is important for youth. Research shows that if kids are participating in sports and recreation activities, they are less likely to get involved in criminal activity. Christian Smith (1991) found that participation in organized recreation helped youth develop the skills to manage their free time, and leads to a reduction in the need for other government and social services to deal with anti-social behaviours after they occur. In a study

completed by Witt and Crompton (1996), in Fort Worth, Texas, crime statistics indicated that within a one mile radius of community centres offering a midnight basketball program, crime dropped by 28%, while at 5 centres that did not offer the program, crime increased by an average of 39%.

Recreational facilities offer a chance to meet other young people, to learn how to socialize with kids in their own peer group, and to build a sense of community. Marsh (1990) shows that high self-esteem can be developed through participation in sport and recreation and can lead to a higher level of motivation, acting as a buffer against adverse influences such as substance abuse and delinquent behaviour. A 1998 study by Winnipeg researcher Shirley Forsyth, titled "Mother's Health and Access to Recreation Activities for Children" found that children who par-

ticipate in programs show a higher level of self-esteem. These facilities can provide kids with positive role models in neighbourhoods where the lure of gangs can be great. Given this research, it's easy to see the benefits that come from investment in recreational facilities.

Mayor Katz has directed \$43 million to renew our community centres and recreation facilities. Investment in community centres and recreation facilities is money well spent, and that investment can have long-term benefits for all the citizens of Winnipeg. However, less than 25%

of this investment will be used towards facilities in Winnipeg's Inner City, which is undoubtedly the area in the most desperate need of recreation options for children and youth. City spending in the Inner City is planned as follows: \$7 million for the construction of a new recreation and leisure facility in the North End, \$2.7 mil-

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lion towards the redevelopment of the Sargent Park Recreation Complex, and another \$400,000 for a spray park in the Point Douglas Neighbourhood.

But these investments are offset by the closing of some facilities, such as Kelvin, and the starving of others, like Sherbrook Pool.

The closure of Kelvin is being justified by City Council because of the planned upgrade to Bronx Park Community Centre, 1.5 km down Henderson Highway in East Kildonan. This is a problem for a couple of reasons. It is going to take three years to finish the upgrades on Bronx Park, and the city has yet to set the date when the reconstruction will begin. When Bronx Park is closed during the upgrades and Kelvin has already closed, where will community members go? And even when Bronx Park is rebuilt, smaller kids and those without the means of transportation will have difficulty accessing the new centre. Bigger and better is only useful if you have access.

Sherbrook Pool is another centre in danger of being shut down. The 2004/05 Public Use Facilities report declared Sherbrook Pool "surplus". Tell that to the residents of the West Central neighbourhood who use the pool regularly. Although there has been no official announcement that Sherbrook Pool will close, maintenance on the facility has been almost non-existent over the

past few years, and none of the Mayor's \$43 million investment is designated for the centre. The surplus designation and the failure to invest in much needed repairs suggests that Sherbrook Pool's days are numbered.

In areas with a high concentration of poverty, such as the Inner City and Elmwood, facilities that provide recreational opportunities for children and youth can have a positive impact that has far reaching benefits for us all. But the City is spending the majority of its investment in the suburbs and eliminating small but important centres in high needs neighbourhoods. And the problem is likely to become worse as the city spreads outward with new neighbourhoods like Waverley West sure to be calling for recreation centres in a few short years.

All youth, rich and poor, should have access to recreation. But if we are to level the playing field we need to make sure that low-income neighborhoods have affordable programs at facilities that they can get to. A few years ago I was living in Victoria; one of greatest things about that city was the convenient access to recreational facilities. I lived in one of the poorer neighbourhoods of the city, and I had a rec centre two blocks from my house that I walked to everyday. If I went in the afternoon, admission was only \$1, and this gave me access to all the facilities in the build-

ing, including the pool, sauna, and weight room.

The decision made by City Council on January 24, in spite of the organized opposition of Elmwood residents, tells me that our Mayor and the councillors who supported this decision are not as aware as they should be about the diverse needs and interests of Winnipeg youth. As a young person living in Winnipeg, one of the things I would like to see is equal access to recreational facilities for everyone in the city, regardless of what area you live in, and all the benefits that come along with those facilities.

By Amy Reinink

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