

Recreation

Recreation is often thought about as sport; however, a quick look at Winnipeg's Leisure Guide shows how vast programming can be, including arts and crafts, outdoor play, culture and spirituality, as well as sport, physical activity, and exercise. Recreation can be highly structured or less organized games, and these programs are often hosted in third places. Third places are neighbourhood spaces away from home or work that are easy to access and cultivate community connection.¹ Glover and Parry name recreation and leisure activities as the 'sphere of sociability,' meaning that, although we might be motivated to engage in recreation because of the activity, the social connections that arise out of such spaces are paramount; recreation is where we build and maintain supportive friendships and it is where community comes alive.²

In 2024, the Women's Age Lab in Toronto reported on the epidemic of loneliness, stating that one third of older adults feel lonely at least some of the time and that this negatively influences a variety of health outcomes measures. One of their recommendations includes a national strategy to address loneliness.³ Neighbourhood recreation that is hosted in third places is the antidote to loneliness and a facilitator of individual and community health. However, in 2018, the average condition of recreation and leisure centres, arenas, indoor and outdoor pools, was ranked at 'fair' with many amenities in poor condition. Many of these facilities were constructed prior to the 1972 amalgamation of 12 municipalities into the City of Winnipeg and have not received adequate funding to sustain operations and maintenance, even as use increases (e.g., the number of public swim visits to outdoor pools increased 29 per cent from 2014 to 2016).⁴



City of Winnipeg splash pad / Alanna Yuen

Winnipeg's recreation strategy emphasizes developing and maintaining facilities at a small and large scale, from neighbourhood (within 2km of home) to community (2km to 4km), regional (4km to 6km), and city-wide amenities. While regional and city-wide amenities are meant to serve their catchment area, a growing body of research shows a connection between low income and lack of access to recreation services⁵ and the Winnipeg Recreation Strategy acknowledges clear geographic and socioeconomic gaps in facility quality and access. To address this problem, the City of Winnipeg offers free public swims and has a Recreation Fee Assistance Program that includes facility passes (e.g., for pools, arenas, active living) and leisure guide activity credits.

However, there is much criticism about how assistance programs are distributed and accessed, including that community members are not aware of them⁶ and that, once found, applicants need to prove their poverty through processes that are stigmatizing.⁷ Further, a focus on reducing or eliminating program fees does not address other important constraints like transportation.⁸ For example, regional recreation complexes are more difficult to access for individuals and families who rely on transit, and new builds may not be a part of current routes.

Additionally, these larger multipurpose amenities may not facilitate community building or be as welcoming as nearby and walkable neighbourhood amenities, which act as third places.

Recent regional recreation facility development projects have overrun the budget, including South Winnipeg Recreation Campus (construction to begin in 2026, currently over budget by \$23 million and funded through debt)⁹ and the East of the Red RecPlex with current estimates over \$155 million to build (a Class 3 estimate for a 2028 build).¹⁰ These funding shortfalls burden the municipality and divert funds from needed neighbourhood amenity upgrades. As a result of this neglect, the City of Winnipeg decided to close neighbourhood outdoor pools (i.e., Norwood, 2019, Happyland, 2025). These outdoor pools, which could be open from May to September and had subsidized entry fees, were closed against substantial community outcry. Impacted communities were able to mobilize precisely because the pools acted as third places, connecting residents and cultivating friendships.

Recreation is made more accessible to community members who live on low income through, for example, the General Council of Winnipeg Community Centres (GCWCC), who rely on volunteers and offer free or low-cost programs at the community and neighbourhood level. Neighbourhood recreation amenities foster accessible and equitable services, social inclusion, and community connections. The Winnipeg Recreation Strategy¹¹ recommends an “equity-based planning approach prioritizing programs, tools, and resources that remove barriers to participation and achieve successful outcomes for all residents” and the AMB addresses this by focusing on smaller scale amenities.

Actions

- **The AMB will** re-fund recreation infrastructure to invest in Winnipeggers equitably. According to the 2021 Winnipeg Recreation Strategy, the City of Winnipeg’s recreation assets have a \$778 million total infrastructure deficit. Over the next ten years, this infrastructure deficit will be addressed at \$77.8 million per annum. Financed over 20 years at an interest rate of 5.5 per cent the annual cost of debt is \$4.1 million.
- **The AMB will** emphasize maintaining existing walkable neighbourhood recreation amenities (defined as community centres,

recreation and leisure centres, and outdoor pools), particularly in low-income communities. When amenities are decommissioned, they will be replaced. The Association of Physical Plant Administrators (APPA) guidelines for facility maintenance investment, which includes replacement reserves of between 3–4 per cent of current replacement value, at \$56 million per annum. Financed over 20 years at an interest rate of 5.5 per cent the annual cost of debt is \$2.95 million.

- **The AMB will** support volunteer development in community centres. This includes paid staff with a mandate to engage volunteers, as well as volunteer capacity building programs. A study of the 63 General Council of Winnipeg Community Centres is necessary to determine the volunteer engagement requirements in Winnipeg, as well as a comparative study of cities in Canada for their community centre governance and administration models. One full time programming coordinator for each community centre in high needs areas as identified in the General Council study, four staff at \$260,000 per annum.¹²
- **The AMB will** increase the capacity of neighbourhood associations and community groups to lead neighbourhood activities (e.g., walking/running/biking groups, community gardens and gardening clubs, walking or biking school buses). Edmonton's 'Neighbouring for Climate' program offers a toolkit that can act as a model for this initiative. One full time program leader for each community centre in high needs areas as identified in the General Council study, four staff at \$168,000 per annum.
- **The AMB will** introduce third party referral options for Fee Assistance Programs (FAPs) that will serve citizens who are living on low or no income. Third party referral responsibilities should be shared among Winnipeg nonprofit organizations and emergency shelters, school divisions, and mental health and health professionals. One full time programming coordinator to support nonprofit engagement at \$60,000 per annum.

Notes

- 1 Oldenburg, R. (1997). "Our vanishing third places." *Planning Commissioners Journal*, 25(4). Page 6–10.
- 2 Glover, T. D., & Parry, D. C. (2008). "Friendships developed subsequent to a stressful life event: The interplay of leisure, social capital, and health." *Journal of Leisure Research*, 40(2). Page 208–230.
- 3 Savage, R. (2024). "Recommendations for Action to Tackle the Loneliness Epidemic Among Older Adults in Canada: stronger action is needed to address loneliness in Canada." Women's Age Lab, Women's College Hospital. March 2024. <https://www.womensacademics.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Recommendations-for-action-to-tackle-the-loneliness-epidemic-among-older-adults-in-Canada.pdf>
- 4 City of Winnipeg. (2018). "City Asset Management Plan." <https://legacy.winnipeg.ca/infrastructure/pdfs/City-Asset-Management-Plan-2018.pdf>
- 5 Hendry, L., & Rocha, R., & Shingler, B. (2021). "How sports and recreation facilities are unequally spread across Montreal" CBC News. October 15, 2021. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/montreal-sports-recreation-1.6210731>
- 6 Schnirer, L., & Cutler, H. (2011). "Recruitment and engagement of low-income populations: Service provider and researcher perspectives." Edmonton, Youth and Families.
- 7 Oncescu, J., & Fortune, M. (2022). "Neoliberalism's influence on recreation access provisions: Municipal recreation practitioners' perspectives." *Journal of Leisure Research*, 54(1). Page 89–108. April 18, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2022.2044942>
- 8 Oncescu, J., Froese, J., Fortune, M., Green, L., & Jenkins, J. (2021). "Facilitating recreation programs and services for low-income citizens: practitioners' challenges and strategies." *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 29(2), Page 205–220. November 25, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2021.2005468>
- 9 CBC Manitoba. (2024). "'I'm furious': High costs put construction of Waverley West recreation complex on hold" April 9, 2024. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/south-winnipeg-recreation-campus-delay-2025-1.7169028>
- 10 City of Winnipeg. (2025) "East of the Red RecPlex." October 6, 2025. <https://engage.winnipeg.ca/east-of-the-red>
- 11 City of Winnipeg. (2021). "Winnipeg Recreation Strategy." Page 9. December 2021. <https://engage.winnipeg.ca/11755/widgets/46343/documents/76403>
- 12 Volunteer Canada. (2017). Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement. https://volunteer.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Volunteer_Canada_Canadian_Code_for_Volunteer_Involvement_2017.pdf