



For your health

The city preps an Active Recreation and Sport Plan to break down barrier to health living

#992: Edmonton Active Recreation and Sport Plan

// Curtis Hauser

Living in a country where obesity rates are on the rise—one in four Canadian adults are clinically obese, according to the Canadian Obesity Network—the need to exercise has never been greater. In Edmonton, where the options range from working out at the gym to playing a sport to going for a walk in the river valley, you might also say it's never been easier. And yet for some, the path to a healthy, active lifestyle isn't so simple, as they remain in the dark about the current opportunities available in Edmonton, while others struggle to participate due to financial or transportation barriers.

John C Spence, a professor and Associate Dean (Research) in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta, says Edmonton “does a decent job” of taking the accessibility of its programs into consideration, and indeed, “82-percent of Edmontonians participated in active recreation or sport,” according to a 2013 Current State Assessment Snapshot Report compiled to help inform the city's upcoming Active Recreation and Sport Plan. However, the report also revealed some challenges in the form of economic barriers, one being that “Lower-income residents [feel] participation is unaffordable, given that active recreation and sport is primarily participant funded.”

The report also showed that while a large number of Edmontonians are active, “Edmonton household incomes and gender seem to be a factor in terms of who participates in active recreation and sport.” An accompanying graph shows that in households with an income of more than \$80 000 there was an active recreation participation rate of 87 percent and a sport activities participation rate of 43 percent, while those with less than \$30 000 in household income only had an active recreation participation rate of 67 percent, while their participation in sports activities dipped to 18 percent.

Technically, Spence notes, our ability to get enough physical activity shouldn’t be constrained by economic difficulties, since cost-free activities like walking to school, going for long runs or playing on a playground count as exercise. It’s usually when participating in other activities like gyms/leisure facilities and organized sports teams—which often require equipment, memberships and/or transportation—that financial barriers can come into play.

“Economic factors do affect overall physical activity,” Spence says. “We’ve seen it both for children [and] for adults, and we’ve seen it both for overall physical activity and for sport. There’s no question it does, to the extent that there are any requirements to pay for services. So as you get more into organized sport or into exercise, then that gradient gets a lot steeper.”

In an effort to make exercise more accessible to those facing economic barriers, the City of Edmonton offers programs like the Leisure Access Program, which provides free, unlimited access to dozens of the city’s recreation facilities. Residents must fall within a certain household income bracket in order to qualify for the program, ranging from an income of \$23 861 for households of one to \$63 147 for households with seven or more people. The program jumped from an enrolment of 23 977 people in 2006 to 31 360 people in 2012, and according to Brad Badger, Director of Programs & Events and Facility Director for the Kinsmen Sports Centre, Leisure Access patrons constitute approximately 30 percent of admissions at facilities like the Commonwealth Community Recreation Centre.

Spence explains that accessibility into facilities like these is important when looking “at things like social capital and people feeling like they belong in a community, to the extent that they can engage in everything that’s out there, the extent that they can have as much of the pie too, so to speak.” And yet, he says it’s also important to remember that recreation facilities are not the only—or even the best—exercise option.

“It’s about how we move around in our communities and engage in our communities,” he explains. “It’s those activities of daily living: it’s how we walk to and from work, it’s how we walk to and from school, how we walk to and from the store. If people go and exercise in their local facility, that’s great. But if people can live in a place where they can walk to work, or walk to the university if they’re students, that’s even better, in my opinion.”

The city is hoping to further develop all those aspects of exercise with its new Active Recreation and Sport Plan, which Badger and several other steering committee members are in the midst of creating. They've already completed the first of three consultation sessions with a number of the approximately 40 key stakeholders ranging from universities to community leagues to professional sport associations. The second round of consultation will take place next month, with the goal of presenting a final document to city council in late 2015.

The final plan will consist of a handful of broad, overarching goals for bettering active recreation and sport for all Edmontonians, and although it's still in the early conceptual stages, Badger says possible deliverables stemming from it could include anything from quarterly awareness campaigns to databases of available recreation options within the city to an increased emphasis on physical literacy in schools.

"[It] isn't just about what the City of Edmonton does, it's really what the city of Edmonton as a whole does," Badger says. "So with recommendations around roles of certain associations and really trying to piece what we call the whole system together so that at the end of the day, people looking for active recreation and sport opportunities will have a broad range of opportunities. [So eventually] these organizations are kind of speaking to each other, a system has been set up and is trying to address some of the challenges, from females in sport to finance as a barrier to volunteers in organizations."

A key aspect of the plan involves strengthening communications between the city, sports associations, community associations and other key players in Edmonton's recreation scene. By increasing awareness of what's available from within, Badger says organizations can help patrons find the best fit for their recreation needs. As an example, Badger points to programs like the YMCA's Opportunity Fund and the Community League Wellness Program, which are viable options for those who might not qualify for a service like the Leisure Access Program, but may still need some kind of financial assistance to participate. The hope is that with more collaboration between organizations will come a more socially connected community and increased participation in a diverse amount of activities.

"[The plan is] aggressive in its standpoint of trying to get everybody to work together," Badger says. "Some of the things we heard in the consultations were ... 'I'm busy running a business, running an association, why would I want to do this?' And the answer is you want to be able to make Edmonton a better-coordinated city as far as active recreation and sport, as far as opportunities, as far as communication, as far as awareness campaigns, as far as programs. It can be all of that."

"The success or the failure of it will [depend on] if everybody buys in, so the real challenge is going to be how these goals that will come out of [the plan] will be presented or how groups will see themselves aligning to it."