



INFORMATION REPORT

TO:	Chair and Members Emergency & Community Services Committee
COMMITTEE DATE:	April 25, 2016
SUBJECT/REPORT NO:	Affordable Access Strategy 5 Year Update (CS10047(b)) (City Wide)
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	City Wide
PREPARED BY:	Courtney Groves (905) 546-2424 ext. 1758 Laura Kerr (905) 546-2424 ext. 5015
SUBMITTED BY:	Jack Brown Director, Recreation Community and Emergency Services Department
SIGNATURE:	

Council Direction:

Not applicable

Information:

In 2010, Council approved the Affordable Access Strategy (the Strategy) (Report CS10047(a)). The Strategy identified a vision, objectives, and strategic activities to overcome financial barriers for Hamilton residents to access recreation programs and services. The Recreation Division began to implement the fee assistance component of the Strategy in February 2011 with an approved budget of \$400,000.

Over the past five years, Recreation staff have had much success in achieving the Strategy's objectives, including the implementation of a Fee Assistance Program, free drop in programming city wide, targeted program initiatives in identified neighbourhoods, and increased partnerships and collaboration with community organizations. This success has allowed staff to meet the growing community demand for access, resulting in consistent increases in community participation in recreation programs and services.

Despite the growth in recreational opportunities provided through the Strategy, there is still a growing public demand to further reduce financial barriers and improve access to programs and services. Specifically, requests have been received to provide greater financial and program support for adults and seniors, persons with disabilities, new Canadians and refugees, and for more low cost or free programs. In 2015, the Recreation Division experienced a pressure on the \$400,000 fee assistance program budget for the first time of \$23,620, which was mitigated through the Operating budget.

In 2016, the Recreation Division intends to continue with already established strategy activities and closely monitor participation and budget.

In addition to the annual monitoring, staff will also conduct an evaluation about the strategy. This evaluation will include community consultation and will identify budget efficiencies for current program activities, as well as strategic areas for growth over the next five years. Any changes to strategy activities, fee assistance program eligibility, or financial implications will be put forward in a recommendation report with funding implications addressed through the annual budget process in 2017.

Background and Strategy Activities

The Affordable Access to Recreation Strategy provides a vision and objectives to guide programs and services. The Strategy ensures a range of affordable opportunities are made available for families and children living in Hamilton, including:

- Free swim, gym, and skate programs at all facilities city wide
- Low cost recreation activities in targeted neighbourhoods (i.e. low cost swimming, toonie Waterfit)
- Recreation Fee Assistance Program to provide families living under the low income cut off (LICO) with a free Family Participation Pass, \$150 for each child to register in programs, and up to \$100 for each child to register in community minor sport programs
- Coordinated services with community recreation organizations to increase access and opportunities in partnership programs

Within the first year of Strategy implementation, the Recreation Fee Assistance Program was further expanded to include:

- Reduced passes for seniors/adults (75% off annual participation passes or 50% off annual waterfit passes)
- Up to three weeks of discounted summer camp
- Assistance to register in third party recreation programs for former YSAN Grow participants

In year two of the Strategy, Recreation staff began to equitably distribute free programs across the City. Census data was used to identify population density based on income levels to prioritize need for free programs. Minimum targets were set for each recreation centre with a focus on accountability to track free program hours, participation, and documenting other local targeted initiatives annually. As of 2015, there were 69,739 visits to the free programs offered at 40 recreation facilities.

In year three of the Strategy, Recreation staff began to focus on increased communication about the Recreation Fee Assistance Program and Free Program opportunities available. Over 100 community agencies received information from the Recreation Division about Strategy activities, including an option to purchase reduced admissions when accessing programs with their agency participants. In addition, over

10,000 “Free Program Guides” were distributed to the community with an increased social media presence to promote Strategy activities. By the end of the third year, the Recreation Fee Assistance program had grown to 1920 active families, providing direct assistance to 4,217 children and 3,835 adult/seniors.

In year four of the strategy, staff began to focus on program evaluation and greater accountability of program activities. The evaluation process identified areas to expand Strategy activities, including:

- Better tracking of families accessing free programs
- Creation of a newsletter to improve communication with clients in the Fee Assistance Program
- Free seasonal skate pass option for approved fee assistance families
- Increased coverage for registration fees in minor sport hockey registration
- Free fitness programs on community parks
- Creation of a low cost skating program for preschoolers

In 2015, the fifth year of the Strategy’s implementation, staff focused on further reducing barriers, by simplifying the Fee Assistance application form, translating the Fee Assistance brochure into 10 languages, and launching the “We’re Here” campaign to engage limited English speaking patrons. The Fee Assistance Program eligibility was also expanded to provide support for permanent residents and refugees settling in Hamilton. In 2015, staff processed 9,046 applications to the fee assistance program, averaging 36 per business day. Of these applications, 274 were from new families immigrating to Hamilton.

Over the past five years, Recreation staff have continued to closely monitor and evaluate activities related to the Affordable Access to Recreation Strategy. Each year, recommendations have been made to identify gaps in service and areas of growth to best utilize the originally approved \$400,000 budget. In addition, staff have pursued alternative sources of funding for Strategy activities, including solidifying a partnership with Jumpstart Charities and applying to community grants to fund targeted initiatives in the longer term.

Budget and Participation in Strategy Activities

Analysis of Strategy activities over five years shows consistent growth, both in the number of recreation activities offered and community participation. Five year trend analysis shows there were four key factors that contributed to the \$23,620 budget pressure in 2015, including:

1. Program Price Inflation and Higher Children’s Program Registration Numbers
2. Greater requests for registered summer camp programs
3. New targeted initiatives to support neighbourhood needs
4. Greater support for participation in community minor sport programs

Program Price Inflation and Higher Children's Program Registration Numbers

When the Recreation Fee Assistance Program was designed in 2011, the amount provided to children to register in programs (\$150/annually) was intended to cover one program per session (fall, winter, spring). This level of support has not increased since 2011, despite program registration fees increasing by just over 8%. This is resulting in families either paying more out of pocket to register in programs, or reducing the number of opportunities their children can participate in.

Over five years, there also has been a steady increase in children approved within the program, from 3,753 in 2011 to 4,795 in 2015. In 2015, a total of \$252,292 in subsidy was used to support 5,408 children's registrations in recreation programs, representing a growth of 6% from the year before.

Greater Requests for Registered Summer Camp Programs

The Recreation Fee Assistance Program was expanded in its first year to address identified gaps to pay for summer camp care for children. Families were using their allotted \$150 to pay for one week of camp, leaving children with no further subsidy to register in other recreation opportunities throughout the year.

Additional funding was provided to each child in the program so they could register for up to three weeks of camp at a 65% discount (approximately \$45/week). In 2011, \$8,353 of the program budget was used to offset camp registrations. This support has grown to \$39,517 in 2015, supporting more than 420 registrations.

New Targeted Initiatives to Support Neighbourhood Needs

Within the Affordable Access Strategy budget, funding has been allocated to be responsive to emerging recreation needs from local neighbourhoods and communities. This has also provided the financial means to implement Neighbourhood Action Strategy actions requested by residents. Some examples of 2015 targeted initiatives included:

- Leader In Training Scholarships – recreation sponsored 18 community-nominated youth to attend leader in training programs in order to increase their employment skills and job readiness
- Fun DMC (Discover My City) – partnership program with Hamilton Police to facilitate relationship building and activities with 15 youth in the Riverdale community
- Toonie Yoga – in response to requests from the Rolston Community Planning Table, low cost fitness options were offered at Westmount Recreation Centre for women
- HOOPS Basketball Program – a free basketball skill development program and league in the Beasley community to provide children with the opportunity to participate in organized sport

In 2015, 1,900 residents participated in meaningful, community-driven recreation programs across ten separate initiatives.

Greater Support for Participation in Community Minor Sport Programs

The Recreation Fee Assistance Program provides children with support to register in community minor sport programs (50% off registration fees up to \$150/annually). In 2015, this support assisted with 472 registrations in sport totalling \$43,372. These included:

- 242 accessing soccer programs
- 91 accessing hockey programs
- 55 accessing baseball programs
- 50 accessing skating programs
- 34 accessing other affiliated sport programs (ringette, football, basketball)

Overall, this represents a 20% growth in registrations and 47% increase in funding requested from 2014.

Future Pressures

Analysis shows that the Fee Assistance Program and Strategy initiatives continue to grow in popularity. Community feedback has also identified that there is an emerging demand for new and expanded programs and services, including:

- Reduced registered program costs for adults and seniors to access fitness and social programs
- Greater pass discounts for adults with disabilities on ODSP
- Targeted initiatives, communication, and supports for refugee and newcomer populations (anticipated 800–1,000 Syrian refugees to settle in the Hamilton area in 2016)
- Additional financial support for children to access programs and lessons
- Expanding minor sport program support to include local swim clubs
- Discounted passes for students
- More targeted initiatives and skills training for youth