



# SPONTANEOUS RECREATION AND PARK AMENITY STUDY

For  
**CITY OF SPRUCE GROVE**

November 2012

Yates, Thorn & Associates Inc.  
Strategic Planning for Liveable  
Communities

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## Preface

This report was prepared by Yates, Thorn & Associates Inc.

We would like to extend our thanks to all who assisted with their ideas and views, especially the many community representatives who allowed us to interview them, the youth of the community who gave us their thoughts, and everyone who completed a survey or added comments or photos to the project websites.

The project commenced in March 2012. A draft version of the report was prepared in June 2012.

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We would also like to thank Justin Ellis, then of O2 Planning and Design, now with Stantec, for his assistance with the early stages of this project.

A series of working papers were prepared as part of this study and can be obtained from the client at the address noted above.

- Working Paper #1 – Literature Review
- Working Paper #2 - Review Of Background Documents
- Working Paper #3 – Defining Spontaneous Recreation And Park Amenities
- Working Paper #4 - Consultation Report
- Working Paper #5 – On-Line Survey Results – Other Municipalities

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## Executive Summary

Over the past decade, the City of Spruce Grove has invested to create an excellent facility base for sport, recreation and culture: the TLC, where Spruce Grove partners with both Stony Plain and Parkland County, the new Fuhr Sports Park and Destination Playground, upgrades to the Agrena, the Horizon Stage and an extensive trail system are examples of this progressive investment. And they are well used and play an important role in the lives and physical activity patterns of SG residents of all ages.

However outside of these structured activities, many other Spruce Grove residents are engaging in other recreation activities such as walking for pleasure, bicycling, picnicking, jogging/running, ice skating (not hockey), and tobogganing/sledding. Data indicates that these are very popular across Alberta.

The focus of this study is these other activities and the parks, trails and open spaces which are the primary locations where they occur. We refer to these activities as ‘spontaneous recreation’ which we define as having the following characteristics: *undertaken for enjoyment, occur or can occur with minimal organization, at any time, generally unstructured and unprogrammed, with rules and regulations that are self or group organized and adjudicated, and for which no fees are charged.*

They primarily occur in parks and within those parks, various amenities facilitate spontaneous recreation. Examples include: splash pads, water parks, skating pads/ponds, outdoor rinks, outdoor fitness equipment, community gardens.

It is important to understand or consider why spontaneous recreation is important:

- Moving away from structure – structure implies time, which for everyone is in short supply.
- Easy – activities like walking or biking are within the physical ability of almost everyone.
- Health ...and this easy physical activity is good for people’s personal health.
- Free – cost is a barrier for many families, yet spontaneous recreation is free.
- Nature deficit – the disconnection of children from nature is often noted nowadays...and our parks are full of nature.
- Childhood development – the social learning that children gain from ‘play’ is increasingly being recognized.
- Community – we meet our neighbours in the park.
- Livability – parks with people are vibrant and increase community livability.

Spontaneous recreation is also engaged in by all segments of the population: children, youth, young singles and couples, adults and families, and seniors.

Notwithstanding its importance, over the past 20 to 30 years, recreation activities have changed enormously, especially for children. Some of the barriers, which are both real and perceived, include the following:

- Safety concerns, such as danger from traffic and from strangers.
- The distribution of parks and parks with specific amenities can limit access
- Accessibility & inclusivity of parks can challenge those who are differently abled.
- Lack of time, and its corollary, ‘it is not interesting enough for me to prioritize it’.
- Lack of partners/other people
- Lack of amenities such as parks and open space, or their poor design or limited attractive amenities.
- Lack of critical mass – knowing that there are many other people at the park is reassuring for both users and carers of those users.

- Information about parks, programs and other factors.

And our review of the literature indicates that spontaneous recreation is growing in popularity and importance, due to concern for personal health, concern for the environment, and concern that 'childhood' is disappearing.

Spruce Grove has a good system of parks, trails and open spaces for spontaneous recreation although with a number of significant deficits. These gaps were clearly noted by the public who attended our focus groups:

- Spray Parks and Water Features – the one in Central Park is great, but somewhat outclassed by those recently developed in neighbouring municipalities.
- Natural features in parks – plastic playgrounds are ok, but why not add more natural features?
- Trails system is good, but needs to be completed, which includes the system of sidewalks.
- Washrooms in the major parks are essential for many if not all demographic groups.
- Sports should include an element focused on pick-up games, especially for the younger children.
- Winter activities must be provided for and this does bring its own challenges.
- Playgrounds need to be more adventurous if they are to attract older children and youth.
- Horticultural features are well liked, especially by older residents.
- Community gardens are another 'trend' which is coming back and SG needs a location for one (or more...eventually).
- Dog parks are important as they are for many people the only reason they are physically active.)

Participants also commented) on the importance of enhancing the broader environment for spontaneous recreation, such as by:

- Ensuring high maintenance levels.
- Engaging children so that they want to go to the park/outdoors.
- Developing programs and other ways of stimulating unstructured play for children.
- Addressing concerns regarding safety and perceptions of safety.
- Developing activities with slightly higher levels of risk so that they attract youth.
- Improving the transportation system so that it accesses major parks.
- Thinking of parks and park amenities as destinations and fostering more events in parks.
- Developing park based programming for children and staffing the parks in the same way as other recreation facilities.
- Improving communication and marketing.

A vision for spontaneous recreation in Spruce Grove was created, together with three key strategies. The implementation steps for each strategy were also developed and are noted on the following pages.



## The Vision, Strategies and Actions

### Vision

**SPONTANEOUS OUTDOOR RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES ARE THE CORNERSTONE OF AN ACTIVE, HEALTHY COMMUNITY AND AS SUCH THE CITY OF SPRUCE GROVES PARK AND OPEN SPACE SYSTEM WILL PROVIDE SPACE, AMENITIES AND PROGRAM OPPORTUNITIES TO ENCOURAGE SPONTANEOUS USE.**

### **Strategy #1 – Explore developing a menu of amenities in parks and open spaces to encourage spontaneous recreation**

#### **Element 1.1 – Complete the trail systems and add amenities such that it becomes as much linear park as trail**

- Complete the Spruce Grove trail systems as originally envisaged/planned
- Continue to enhance the overall transportation system as detailed in the recently adopted Transportation Master Plan
- Work with Stony Plain to link the two municipal trail systems
- Ensure that sidewalks are provided for residents to safely access the trail system, and to have safe walking routes within all Spruce Grove neighbourhoods
- Add amenities such as fitness equipment along the trails
- Review the materials on ‘Pathways to Play<sup>1</sup>’ and consider adding some of these innovative ideas to the Spruce Grove trail system

#### **Element 1.2 – Strengthen the attraction of the City’s major open space areas**

- Complete the development of Jubilee Park as currently planned
- Develop a City Centre Park concept linking Central Park to McLeod Avenue
- Focus community events on these two parks, with Jubilee Park serving summer events, and Central Park/Columbus Park serving winter events
- Ensure that both are accessible by the trail system and use community events as ‘bike and walk’ festivals
- Develop a spray park as a destination feature
- Develop a bigger, better toboggan/sledding hill

#### **Element 1.3 – Safeguard the existing undeveloped lands so that they serve Spruce Grove residents as natural parks**

- Protect the two ‘corners’ of the municipality – Atim Creek, Pioneer Forest – as natural parks, although allowing and encouraging community use, such as an off-leash dog area, toboggan hill, etc

#### **Element 1.4 – Strengthen the attraction of the City’s neighbourhood parks**

- Consider spontaneous recreation in all neighbourhood park design and operational planning

#### **Element 1.5 - Leverage existing amenities and non-contributing green space which have potential for greater spontaneous recreational use**

- Inventory the City’s non-contributing green space
- With appropriate safety considerations, allow winter skating on the storm water ponds

#### **Element 1.6 – Develop more natural play areas, as opposed to the current standard of ‘industrial/engineered structure’**

- Include in future park design RFPs a requirement that park planning and design include as wide a range of natural features as possible

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.americantrails.org/resources/kids/Playful-Pathways-families-kids.html>

**Element 1.7 – Use a ‘senior’s lens’ as well as a ‘children’s lens’ when assessing and developing amenities for spontaneous recreation**

- Work with the Spruce Grove Primary Care Network to ensure that planning for any seniors care residence or similar building includes in its planning a walking route that is matched to the residents’ capabilities

**Element 1.8 – Use public land, including but not specifically parkland, to establish more local food opportunities**

- Develop a strategy for identifying sites for community gardens and support the development of a community association to manage it
- Encourage the establishment of an outdoor farmers market in an appropriate location (McLeod Ave?) in Spruce Grove

**Strategy #2 – Enhance the social and community environment such that it better encourages, supports and facilitates spontaneous recreation**

**Element 2.1 - Enhance park maintenance standards as usage increases**

**Element 2.2 – Work with partner agencies to develop a staffed and programming approach to spontaneous recreation/play**

- Develop a free or low cost program called ‘play in the park’ and offer it at a variety of after-school venues and on Saturdays
- Train or hire trained staff to facilitate these play in the park programs
- Train volunteers to support these programs
- Coordinate pre-school play in the park programming with pre-schools and daycares

**Element 2.3 - Develop a communications/marketing/information campaign to communicate to the public, especially to parents, the importance of children, and adults, ‘getting outside’, and Council’s approaches to support this movement**

- Clearly identify what programs, services and amenities are already available in the region for spontaneous play
- Link to other programs which are growing in Canada
- Develop a webpage focused on this initiative, and promote the many emerging social media ways of communicating
- Produce collateral materials
- Work with other capital region municipalities and the University of Alberta to host a series of parent/adult workshops

**Element 2.4 – Address the issues of safety and risk**

- Initiate internal discussions, such as with the City’s Risk manager, regarding adding more challenge to children and youth outdoor recreation provision

**Element 2.5 - Seek partners for all these initiatives**

- Encourage sport organizations to reorient their community programming to reduce the competitive elements and encourage pick up and drop in games for both children and adults (link to CS4L)
- Work with local naturalist groups to develop simple programs for adults and seniors that get them outdoors and active, such as nature walks, bird-watching, etc
- Seek sponsorship for these program initiatives from local merchant organizations

**Strategy #3 - Ensure future growth of spontaneous amenities and opportunities is in line with overall community growth.**

**Element 3.1 – Establish a monitoring and tracking system for spontaneous recreation and use of parks, and ensure that usage and population growth are synchronized**

## Introduction

### Background

The City of Spruce Grove has a population of approximately 25,000 and is among the fastest growing communities in Canada.

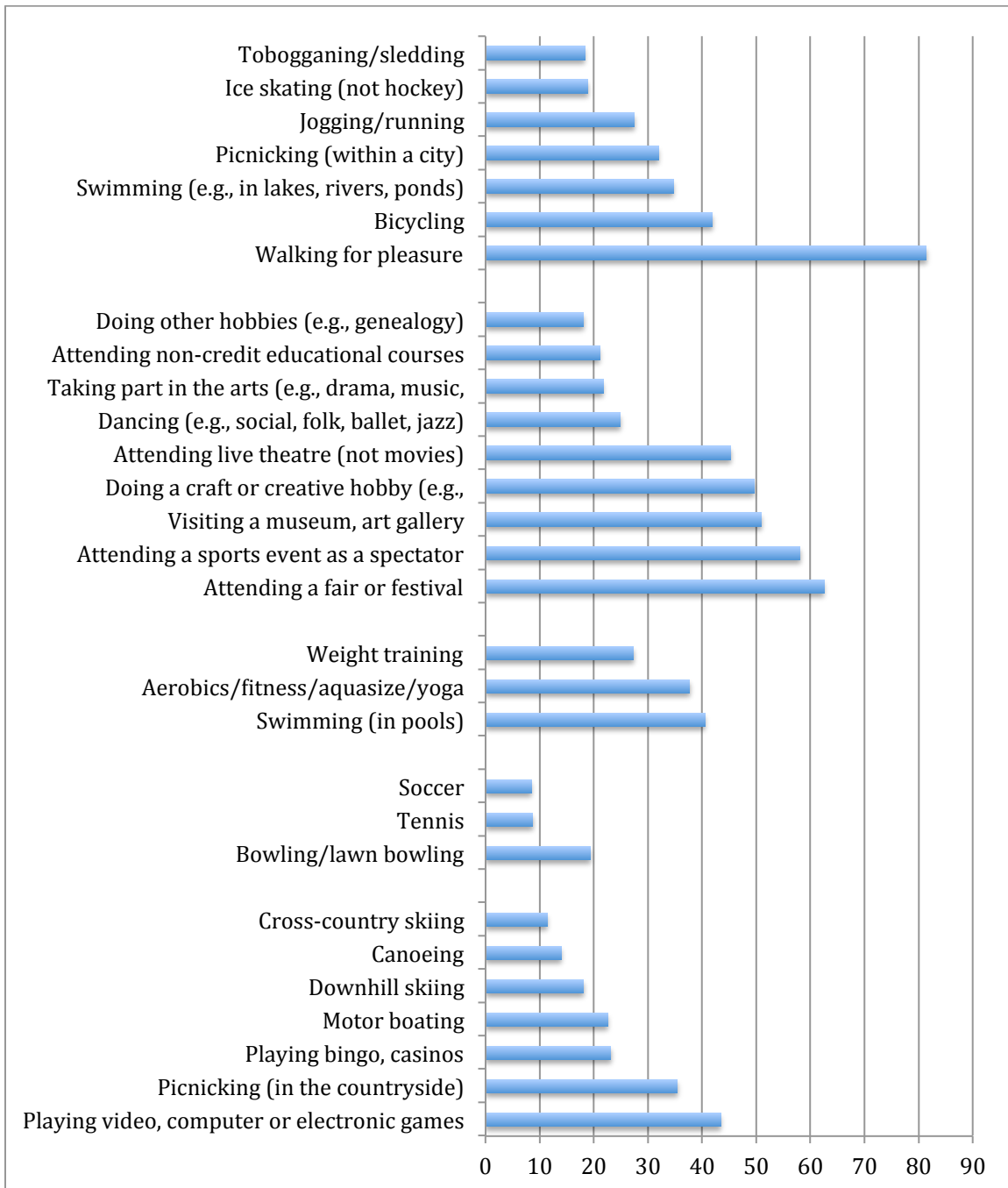
Over the past decade, the City has invested heavily to create an excellent facility base for sport, recreation and culture: the TLC, where Spruce Grove partners with both Stony Plain and Parkland County, the new Fuhr Sports Park and Destination Playground, upgrades to the Agrena, the Horizon Stage and an extensive trail system are examples of this progressive investment.

These investments have provided a facility base for various elements of the community recreation system:

- Structured team sports for children, youth and all ages – examples here are soccer, hockey and many other great sports that are available to Spruce Grove residents.
- Structured and unstructured indoor recreation for individuals – such as a workout at the gym or a swim in the pool.
- Structured indoor arts and cultural activities.
- Unstructured outdoor recreation – such as walking or biking for pleasure.



This matches well with what the public thinks of and does for 'recreation'. The following chart of data from the Alberta Recreation Survey shows the activities most frequently engaged in by Albertans (those which were engaged in by more than 10% of household members of participating households):



Obviously some of the activities are outside the generally accepted scope of municipal recreation (playing video games, bingo, casinos); and some are not possible within the geographic scope of the City (picnicking and swimming in the countryside, downhill skiing).

But clearly unstructured, spontaneous recreation activities such as walking for pleasure, bicycling, picnicking, jogging/running, ice skating (not hockey), and tobogganing/sledding are all high priorities with the public.

This study focuses on those activities.

## Municipal Context

The importance of spontaneous recreation and park amenities alluded to in various of the City's strategic planning documents:

### Spruce Grove Strategic Plan:

The City's Strategic Plan sets the stage for all other planning in the City. It lays out a mission and four key goals:

	Implications for Spontaneous Recreation and Park Amenities
Mission Statement - We are an active, safe and diverse family-oriented community that is well-run, well-maintained and well-respected.	Park amenities attract people making the parks safe, family oriented and full of healthy activity.
Goal Two: Economic Development - The City of Spruce Grove will promote the development of economic opportunities and attractions and the diversification of Spruce Grove's industrial and commercial tax base.	Park amenities are low cost and attract new families to the city.
Goal 3: Partnerships - The City of Spruce Grove will continue to seek partnerships that create opportunities for improved collaboration and enhancement of services, programs and facilities that benefit the community.	There are many organizations in the city which can be partners in stimulating recreation and enhancing use of parks – Scouts and Guides, Naturalists and Birders, Photography Clubs are examples.
Goal 4: Continuing to Enhance Services - The City of Spruce Grove will continue to improve and enhance its services, promoting improvements and efficiencies in delivering services to the community and in the internal operations of the City itself.	Enhancing spontaneous recreation offers opportunities to develop community life and reinforce a sense of 'neighbourhood' throughout the community.

### Municipal Development Plan

The Municipal Development Plan focuses more on land use decisions, and provides a legislative framework for a broad range of civic actions. It includes two goals focused on *Community Life* and a number of objectives that suggest roles and action regarding spontaneous recreation and park amenities. The two key goals are as follows:

- Goal 8 Spruce Grove has a strong civic culture and a high quality of life.
- Goal 9 Spruce Grove offers diverse cultural and recreational programs in first-class facilities.

	Implications for Spontaneous Recreation and Park Amenities
7.1 Volunteerism and Social Capital 7.1.1 Increase community and neighbourhood-level social capital.	Social capital is the sum of the networks that people experience in a community. Getting outside, meeting neighbours at the park, talking to and understanding others in the community...the park is a key amenity where social capital is built.
7.2 Health and Wellness 7.2.1 Promote public health and wellness through community design.	Ensuring a network of parks and trails that attract people to get outside and get active.

7.3 Safety and Protective Services 7.3.1 Continue to provide a safe community.	The best contributor to safety is lots of eyes and ears on the streets, and this is enhanced by people walking to and using the parks.
7.4 Culture and Heritage 7.4.1 Foster the development, enhancement, and preservation of cultural resources and opportunities and integrate these into the fabric of the community.	Heritage facilities such as the Lion's Log Cabin, re-purposed to support the range of spontaneous activities that occur in Central Park, and the Canada Day festivities that occur in Jubilee Park, are prime examples of the integration of culture and heritage into the park system.
7.5 Learning 7.5.1 Continue to promote and support both formal and informal learning opportunities through policy initiatives and partnerships.	There is increasing research that children's unstructured play is critical to their growth and development; parks are prime venues for play. The relationship between play, risk and the development of creativity is also a key area where research is indicating key symbiotic relationships.
7.6 Sports and Recreation 7.6.1 Foster a diverse range of active and passive sports and recreation options for people of all ages and stages of life.	Play amenities encourage spontaneous recreation for people in all ages and stages of life.
7.7 Preventative Social Programs 7.7.1 Identify and respond to social needs in the community.	Spontaneous recreation in parks is both affordable and accessible.

#### Regional Leisure Services Plan

The Leisure Services Plan also identifies several strategies which focus on spontaneous recreation and park amenities:

	Implications for Spontaneous Recreation and Park Amenities
Strategy #1 - Build a more comprehensive leisure system	Recognizing that there are many different focuses within the leisure system, and the needs of all must receive attention.
Strategy #5 - Place Particular Emphasis on Program Affordability	Continue to deliver recreation opportunities which are low cost or free.
Strategy #6 - Develop leisure programs that enhance the sustainability agenda of municipal councils	Link with other initiatives that link for instance 'children and nature' and generally 'get people outside' into the parks and open spaces.
Strategy #7 - Strengthen the Linkage with the Health System	Make sure that both new and existing programming builds better individual and community health.
Strategy #8 – Develop a Cultural Strategy for the Region	Enhance the cultural delivery system.
Strategy #10 – Move Toward Schools as Community Facilities	Closely link parks and open space, regardless of which public agency owns it.
Strategy #11 – Formalize Special Event Planning	Use the parks for special events, and use special events as a way of getting people into the parks.

## Process

The project started in March 2012, with focus groups and an online survey in April/May. The draft report was delivered at the end of June 2012 and the final plan presented to Council in fall 2012. The project consisted of five phases with specific activities as follows:

### **Phase 1 – Project Start-up and Preliminary Data Gathering**

- A discussion with the project manager focused on recent achievements, and current and emerging issues and opportunities.
- All relevant documents and files were reviewed and key issues highlighted.
- Data from the 2011 census was reviewed and key issues identified.
- A detailed community engagement plan was prepared to ensure that all engagement processes and opportunities were well publicized and that all opportunities for gathering input were capitalized upon.
- A survey of other Alberta municipalities (similar size and demographic profile) was conducted to identify how each jurisdiction is approaching spontaneous recreation and what amenities they provide or are planning to provide.
- A working paper on spontaneous play and recreation was prepared. The concept of 'spontaneous recreation for all ages' was outlined.

### **Phase 2: Existing Conditions Inventory**

- A spatially explicit inventory of park amenities within Spruce Grove and the surrounding region was prepared.

### **Phase 3: Community Needs and Expectations Assessment**

- An online survey was designed to acquire insight into spontaneous recreation activities, amenity use, community desires / needs, satisfaction and level of importance of existing amenities. The survey was promoted through the City and other community websites, social and traditional media.
- The community and stakeholders were invited to post to a dedicated website, pictures, videos and comments of the region's spontaneous park amenities – favorite amenities, amenities of concern, desirable amenities from other jurisdictions.
- A series of focus groups were hosted. Notes were kept of meetings, and published in a consolidated report.
- All results of the consultations were gathered into a working paper.

### **Phase 4: Capacity Review – Supply & Demand Assessment**

- The desires of the public were related to the capacity of the system to meet them, and gaps and issues identified and the results gathered into a working paper.

### **Phase 5 – Recommendations Report**

- Following discussion about the nature of the final report and a review of possible strategies and recommendations, the draft strategy was prepared.
- Following discussion with the City staff, minor adjustments were made to the strategy, which was then finalized.
- All documents were gathered into a set of binders, and electronic files provided to the Project Manager.

## What is Spontaneous Recreation?

The Leisure Services Master Plan, which was received by Spruce Grove Council in 2010, lays out the structure through which leisure services planning in Spruce Grove can occur.

It took a 'market place' approach whereby people with leisure needs meet with providers of leisure opportunities. The providers could be segmented by the sector in which they provide opportunities and the kind of organization that they are: public, private or not-for-profit (Figure 2).

However all market place models only deal effectively with monetized transactions. And in a world which is financially focused, this appears to be a large proportion of the recreation system – it includes public recreation programs and drop in yoga sessions and membership of hockey teams and golf clubs...and much more. This system is detailed in the Leisure Services Master Plan.

However there is a large segment of recreation that is not focused or dependent on structure, programming, money or organization. These are recreation activities that are not organized by a third party (e.g. sport organization, school, or municipal recreation department), are undertaken based on the user's schedule, and can occur without any, or with very little, pre-activity planning. Examples include walking for pleasure, taking the dog for a walk, going to the park with the family for a summer picnic, or meeting friends at the BMX jump track. The essence of these activities is that they occur with a high level of spontaneity and that there is no payment, either direct or indirect (such as paying an annual membership and then participating at no cost).

By a high level of spontaneity, we mean activities that:

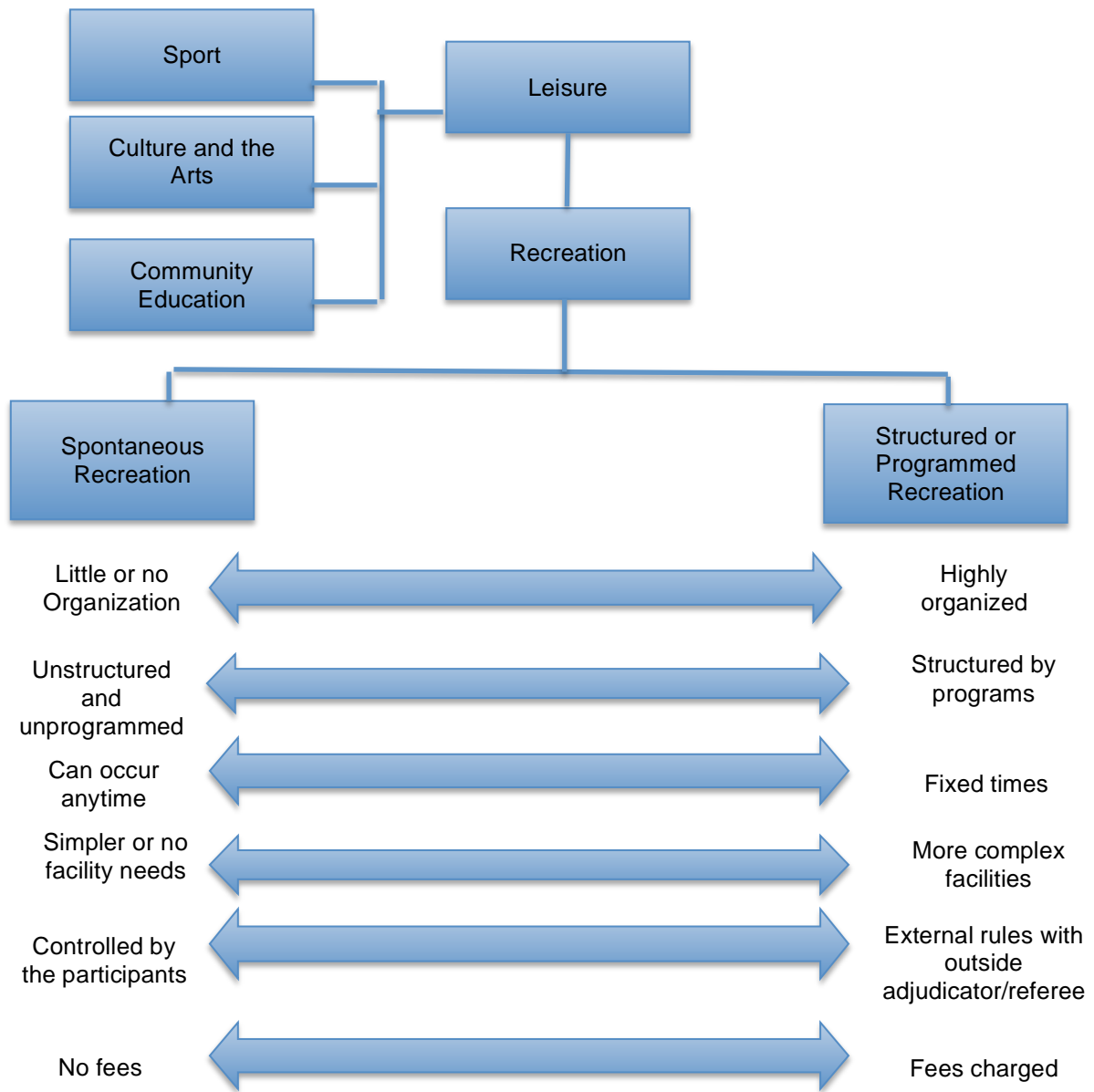
- Are totally or almost totally unstructured – “I can do it on my own, or with friends or family, or with people I meet by chance there...such as skating or tobogganing in the winter, or going to the park in the summer”.
- Can occur at any time of the day, week or year – “in the summer we call it going for a walk, in winter it is snowshoeing”.
- Can occur on the spur of the moment without any, or with very little, planning – “grab that baseball glove and let's go”.

Yet these are not hard and fast criteria. For instance there has been a marked trend toward recreation activities that are available all the time, such as drop in fitness or swimming, as opposed to those which have fixed timing such as group fitness classes which are every Wednesday and Friday from 6.00pm to 7.00pm.

With that proviso, it is possible to see spontaneous recreation as one end of a series of continuums. Every recreation activity will have a position on each of the continuums. The activities that we are concerned with are those that are predominantly towards the spontaneous end of the set of continuums. This can be diagrammed as follows:



Figure 1 - Defining Spontaneous Recreation



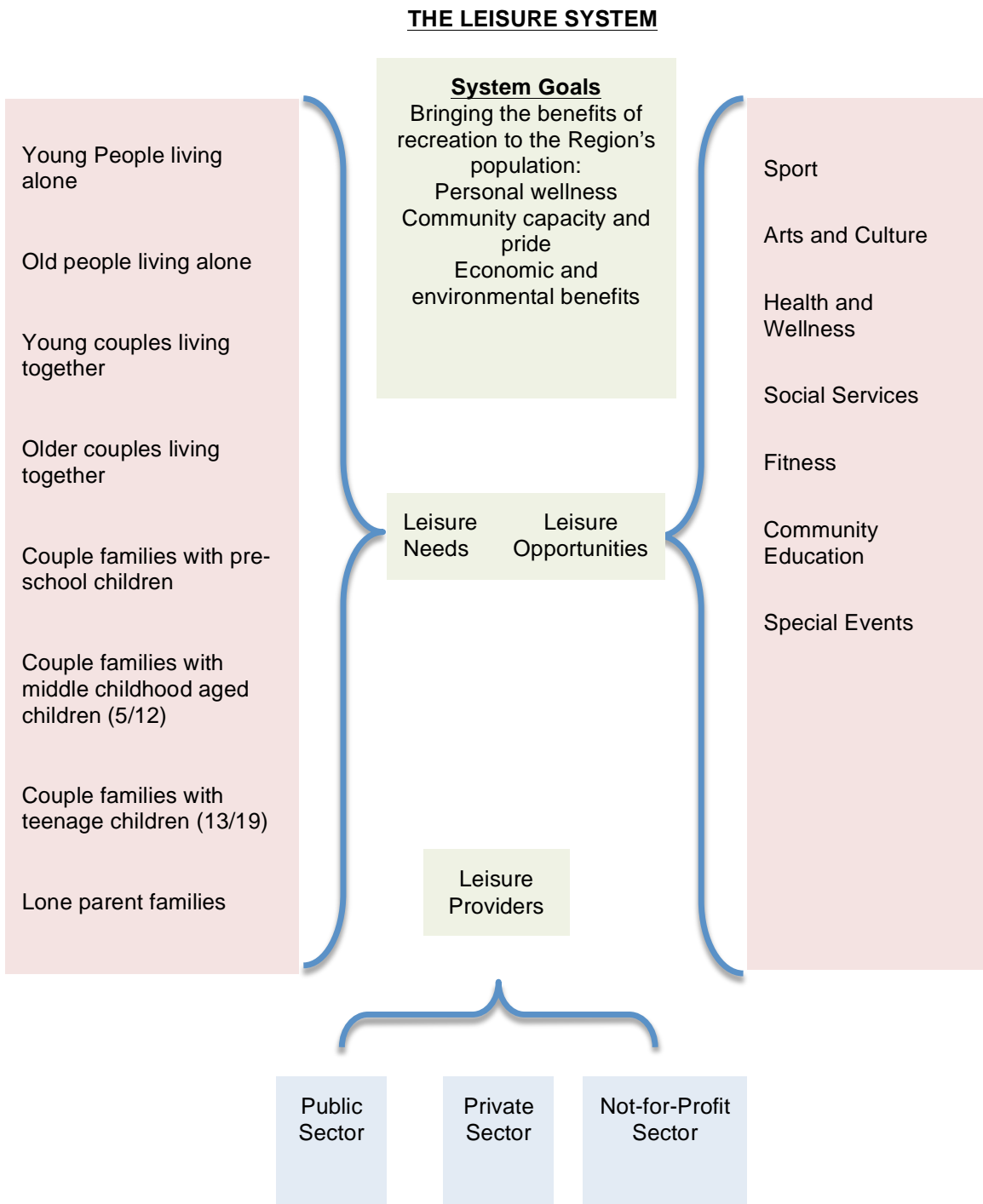
Definition of Spontaneous Recreation:

Recreation activities undertaken for enjoyment, which generally have the following characteristics: occur or can occur with minimal organization, at any time, generally unstructured and unprogrammed, with rules and regulations that are self or group organized and adjudicated, and for which no fees are charged. These can occur in facilities or in parks or municipal open space.

Definition of Spontaneous Recreation Park Amenities:

Any human built, adapted or natural feature that enables spontaneous recreation or enhances the experience of people participating in spontaneous recreation activities within a designated park, open space or pathway. Examples include: splash pads, water parks, skating pads/ponds, outdoor rinks, outdoor fitness equipment, community gardens.

Figure 2 - The Leisure System - From Leisure Services Master Plan



## Why Is Spontaneous Recreation Important And What Are Its Benefits?

There are many reasons why spontaneous recreation is important:

1. **MOVING AWAY FROM STRUCTURE** – recent trends are demonstrating a reduction in the demand for structured recreation activities such as team sports and increased demand for more personal and unstructured activities
2. **EASY** – Spontaneous recreation takes place any time, does not require any structure, rules, referees and does not need to be organized. As ‘free time’ in people’s lives is further constrained, due to a range of societal and economic factors, the value of that time gets proportionately greater. If a recreation activity requires a high degree of organization, it is becoming less likely to happen.
3. **HEALTH** – Our society is growing more aware of the physical and mental implications of sedentary lifestyles. A well planned system of active spontaneous recreation opportunities is fundamental to enabling citizens to be physically active and lead healthier lifestyles.
4. **FREE** - One of the major barriers to greater recreation participation is cost – spontaneous recreation has no or very limited costs.
5. **NATURE DEFICIT** – Connecting citizens to nature is fundamental to fostering environmental awareness and appreciation. Parks provide residents opportunities to recreate in natural environments, enabling a personal interaction with nature, and developing a sense of stewardship for nature. As one reviewed report noted:

*Concerns were raised from some interviewees about the impact of children’s use on rare or precious habitats or species, and there were also worries about straightforward ‘wear and tear’ and erosion. There are tensions between the goals of supporting biodiversity and of increasing children’s access to nature. However, at a deeper level, the two issues are intimately connected. Many, perhaps most, conservationists and wildlife enthusiasts first discovered their enthusiasm and concern for nature through their childhood experiences in natural environments. One key implication from the literature review is that the nature conservation movement should be at the forefront of action to reconnect children with nature, if they want their work to continue being supported by future generations.<sup>2</sup>*

6. **CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT** - Children’s creativity and emotional and social development is enhanced through the act of playing – they learn to get on with other children, to work out their own rules and deal with conflicts without the intervention of an adult (whether that adult is a parent or the soccer referee).
7. **COMMUNITY** - Community development is



<sup>2</sup> Sowing the Seeds - Reconnecting London's Children with Nature - London Sustainable Development Commission - November 201

fostered through the ‘accidental interactions’ that occur at the park or on the skating pond or wherever else that spontaneous recreation takes people of all ages. This helps build a more complete and sustainable community.

8. LIVABILITY - Spontaneous recreation amenities can also improve neighbourhood livability by transforming previously unusable or unattractive spaces into vibrant, engaging sites.

### Who Engages In Spontaneous Recreation?

Following an in-depth review of community demographics from the 2001 and 2006 census, the Leisure Services Master Plan identified eight demographic groups with distinct leisure profiles and needs. These groups are as follows (with the numbers adjusted to reflect the first output from the 2011 census<sup>3</sup>), together with some comment about the kind of spontaneous recreation that they likely engage in. There are of course, many more activities that could be noted - the examples given are purely descriptive. In addition, the nature of spontaneous recreation activities tends to blend park amenities with other amenities, both those in the park and those elsewhere, such as cafes or washrooms.

- Young People living alone
    - 950 households - Apartments and shared households
  - Young couples living together
    - 2,100 households - Apartments and new, affordable houses.
  - Old people living alone
    - 950 households - Apartments and their old family homes – some seniors housing and retirement complexes
  - Older couples living together
    - 1,400 households - Single family housing, some apartments
- This is the most connected group, with a belief that leisure is entertainment, a means to better fitness and personal looks, and a desire to link social and physical leisure.
  - Connection means always connected through phones and wi-fi. Spontaneity and connectivity are one and the same. Social and physical recreation blend – coffee is important. Modern technologies such as *meetup.com* make this an even easier connection.
  - Spontaneous activities include walking, running or cycling with friends, dropping into a boot camp session in the park, taking the dog for a walk, playing a game of tennis with a friend.
  - If still physically active, this is a slow moving group whose activities include walking close to home, sitting on benches provided along the walkway, using public washrooms. Adult exercise machines along a walkway will also be used.
  - A slightly more active subset may cultivate a community garden plot, play a round of pitch and putt or 9 hole short course golf.
  - They will enjoy floral displays and watching children play. Summer park activities which they can spectate, such as a band shell or outdoor theatre.
  - Like their younger age groups, they too will enjoy a coffee and snack.

<sup>3</sup> Demographic data is presented in a separate Working Paper.

- Couple families with pre-school children
    - 700 households, 1,200 children - Single family housing, some apartments
- The primary need for this demographic group is for child care, and some municipalities host preschool programming in municipal facilities in a park. Some jurisdictions are experimenting with Forest Preschools.
  - Parents in this age group are also very connected and parents meeting up in the park is common. Children's play equipment is a frequent destination, while other parents prefer to jog with the stroller.
  - There are many varieties of the basic 'children's playground': this would include various natural and 'industrial' play areas and splash parks, water parks and outdoor pools for summer, and sliding hills for winter.
  - Washrooms are also important for this age group, as are benches and picnic tables.
- Couple families with middle childhood aged children (5/12)
    - 1,650 households, 2,800 children - Single family housing
- In this slightly older age group, the need for preschools gives way to after-school programming, which can be provided in the park as easily as in the TLC.
  - It is also an age group which wants to play on their own, as opposed to being enrolled in a specific program. This unstructured play, which once was just about the only after-school recreation, is best facilitated in natural park areas, where children can connect with nature in the least restrictive mode possible given the specific age group.
  - This is particularly true of the older age groups (9 through 12 years), while the younger age group enjoy play equipment, water parks, etc.
  - Again, a washroom tends to be a key facility if this is to be turned into a program with a play facilitator.
- Couple families with teenage children (13/19)
    - 1,650 households, 2,800 children - Single family housing
- This is a more independent age group and is more than capable of making their own entertainment in the park.
  - Skate parks and BMX tracks serve this age group, as do individual basketball hoops on blacktop, and lacrosse boxes.
  - Many municipalities have experimented with youth parks: parks that accommodate skateboard, BMX elements, some seating, a climbing boulder, plug in for music player, etc
- Lone parent families
    - 900 households, 1,400 children (375 under 5, 1,025 5/19) - Variety of housing
- Any combination of the above.

Another approach to defining spontaneous recreation is to focus on the sectors that the Leisure Services Master Plan identified as being key elements of the recreation system. Some observations are as follows:

- Sport
  - Most sport would be classified as programmed recreation but providing amenities for pick up games is an important function of parks, especially at the neighbourhood level.
  - Spontaneous recreation can also be accommodated on school fields with a baseball diamond. An important distinction should be between sports fields and playfields, where the quality of the former is greater focusing on programmed sport, while playfields, typically at the elementary schools, remain focused on play.
  - Other sport facilities such as lacrosse boxes and basketball hoops are either suitable for programmed games or simply serve for pick up games.
- Arts and Culture
  - Outdoor performance areas in parks provide opportunities for special events such as Canada Day. They can also be used for smaller scale events – Sunday afternoon band concerts have a long history in public recreation, as has *Theatre in the Park* such as Hewrelak Park's *Shakespeare in the Park* series.
  - There is also potential for children's play structures to serve as public art – otherwise know as climbable sculpture. Sculpture gardens are also found in parks.
  - Some parks provide outdoor adult play tables (chess, table tennis) or large size chess games – whether this is sport or culture is questionable.
- Health and Wellness
  - See fitness below.
- Social Services
  - Little potential except as noted in other areas. If the key to much FCSS programming is affordability, then stimulating spontaneous park play for children and families would seem to be a high priority.
- Fitness
  - Outdoor fitness circuits are becoming common in many parks, serving a wide range of age groups and adding additional elements to a walking route.
- Community Education
  - A park nature house or similar would be a good venue for nature education walks, etc.
- Special Events
  - The potential for an outdoor event venue was noted under arts and culture.
- Enjoyment or personal fulfillment
  - Nature itself is a huge amenity in the parks, and offers opportunities for all ages, from natural play in childhood to birding in adulthood and more sedentary contemplation as one ages.

## What prevents people for engaging in spontaneous recreation?

Over the past 20 to 30 years, less than a generation, recreation activities have changed enormously, and in most cases, it has happened without us realizing it, and/or as an unintended consequence of a broader social or economic change. There are many books and reports that document these changes, but here, let us focus on the more immediate barriers:

- SAFETY CONCERNS – whether it is concern for the safety of one’s kids playing at the park or walking to school, or of oneself going for a jog in the evening, safety is a major factor. It has two major causes:
  - DANGER FROM TRAFFIC – crossing roads, busy highways, lack of crosswalks are often cited as factors that reduce participation or which channel participation into structured activities. Ironically, driving to the gym to exercise or to drop the kids at the park is indeed the ‘traffic’ which we are concerned about. Statistically these short trips, especially those which traffic engineers term as for the trip purpose of ‘chauffeur’, are the fastest growing trip and also one of the most polluting (less than 5kms, when the car engine has not fully warmed up).
  - DANGER FROM STRANGERS – even though statistically the crime rates are going down, the perception of danger from abduction or mugging is ever increasing due largely to increased media coverage.
- DISTRIBUTION – the geographical distribution of spontaneous recreation opportunities can prevent some residents from being able to access the amenity. This barrier varies by age.
- ACCESSIBILITY & INCLUSIVITY – Getting to the park can be a problem for many, although Spruce Grove’s trail system and adequate parking at destination parks make this less of an issue. Access is also a factor for those with health limitations. Better street design, sidewalks, curb cuts, new road signal technologies, etc, has increased this aspect of accessibility in past years.
- LACK OF TIME – this is always cited as the major barrier faced by almost everyone when they are asked why they are not more active...and the amount of leisure time has been decreasing as the average work week and average commuting time have both increased, and more women are in both part and full-time employment. However when people say ‘lack of time’ they also mean ‘it is not a high enough priority for me to allocate time’. Lack of time is something policy planners cannot easily address – but making spontaneous recreation more attractive by adding park amenities is within our mandate.
- LACK OF PARTNERS/OTHER PEOPLE – often the key to recreation is finding someone to do it with. Physical exercise and social experience are complimentary outcomes of the



activity. As noted above, communication technologies are changing this, such as Meetup.



**less than 1 mile away**  
in Spruce Grove, AB  
**158 Members**

### Spruce Grove Mommy Group

We are a group of mom's dad's in Spruce Grove and Stony Plain that love interacting with new people, getting out for walks and joining in new and fun activities. If this sounds like fun please join!

Moms, Moms of Toddlers & Infants, Babies, First Time Moms, Playgroup, New Mommies, New Moms, Getting Back into Shape after Pregnancy, New Mommies with New Babies for Friendship!

- LACK OF AMENITIES – There are two aspects:
  - LACK OF PARKS AND OPEN SPACE – most communities have a good supply of park and open space. Spruce Grove has recently undertaken a Parks and Open Space Study that has identified a plan to address any deficiencies. A recent study for CRPA, using a cross-Canada survey, looked at the issues of Children and Nature; the survey asked about barriers; lack of parks was not frequently noted.
  - DESIGN –quality of design of the park to meet the demands.
  - LACK OF AMENITIES IN PARKS – this is at the core of this study.
- LACK OF CRITICAL MASS – when every child walks to school or goes to the park to play, it is easy to follow suit. Issues of safety or even attractive amenities in the park, become lesser factors. But this lack of a critical mass of users is currently a barrier and rebuilding it is a key element of this study.
- INFORMATION – on the location, availability, supply and permitted uses.



## The Broader Context

It is always important when embarking on a study area that is innovative, to conduct a literature review to find out what other work has been undertaken, and to see where the topic has been commented on in recent analyses.

Three avenues were followed in this study:

- A resource search was undertaken using the Leisure Information Network (LIN), the online information and resource database now managed by the ARPA. Several terms were used to search for resources:
  - Spontaneous Park Amenities – one item found
  - Spontaneous – 12 items found
  - Park Amenities – 36 items found
- These items, which ranged from research studies to news articles, were then reviewed and if considered pertinent to the study, key points were abstracted from them.
- Secondly, all the papers, presentations and other documents from the National Recreation Summit were reviewed, and once again, key points abstracted where relevant.
- Thirdly, some of the more recent UK materials on Children's Play were reviewed; this seemed to be a relevant topic area and European park designs for children's play are known to be cutting edge.

We would stress that this is literature search is not at 'academic' levels. It is merely a sampling of articles and reports that will identify the main conceptual themes.



Some of the Swedish image databanks were also reviewed, given the similarity of climate between Sweden and Alberta.

The detailed information from each reviewed report are included in Working Paper #1. The key learning from the reports is as follows:

- The value of 'getting outside' is becoming increasingly well researched and is being embedded in government policies.
- There is recognition of its value for all ages, although it is most stressed for children:
  - Early childhood (Herrington)
  - Middle childhood years and youth (UK Play materials)
  - Adults and seniors (Alberta and Canada policy documents, age friendly reporting, etc)
- The linkage between children and nature has been publicized by Richard Louv in his book *Last Child in the Woods*, propelling this concept into good currency.
- While the ideas of children and nature and children, physical activity and the outdoors, are closely related, they are also separate, with the former stressing the environmental and ecological, almost human survival, themes. It speaks to children and the future of

childhood, while the 'get outside' movement is more focused on physical activity and its linkage with children's present, concerns re levels of obesity, etc.

- Many reports stress the linkage between lack of activity and obesity, and the potential of parks and park amenities to serve as one solution to that issue.
- The key importance of the 'after-school' time slot was noted in a number of studies (ARPA).
- The change of living habits from outdoors to indoors is also noted as one reason for an increasing disconnection between people and their communities – generally the role of electronics in people's lives – with the power of parks to connect people as a corollary.
- The disappearance of childhood itself was frequently noted:
  - The loss of outdoor time, the lost ability to 'range', the increasing prevalence of structured activities, hyper-parenting, etc.
  - The UK/European Play Movement is an attempt to address this, plus obesity, plus the disconnection of children and youth from society.
- All these factors are also reflections of changes in society, economy, technology that are also changing or will change the current recreational paradigm within which we all operate. Many of the NRS presentations (Balmer, Nelson) commented on the need for recreation to reinvent itself.
- Many of these presenters also noted that parks have also been significantly impacted by these changes, and need to be reinvented/revitalized back into people places. The historical dimension was also noted: parks were the locations for recreation, and were key elements in city planning, long before recreation facilities were invented (eg Central Park in New York).
- The key role parks, trails and open space play in community planning and design was also a consistent theme:
  - As a means of changing behaviors to support active living, reductions in GHGs, etc.
  - Countering the 'auto-dependency' that modern parenting patterns in children.
  - Building neighbourliness through the chance encounter at the park.
  - Building community spirit through events and other gatherings.
- The importance of 'critical mass' and the catch-22 of driving kids to school was noted (Glover).
- Innovation in park design was also noted – the need to move beyond the rather stale children's playgrounds to explore more innovative and often natural design elements:
  - The UK approaches to children's play structures.



- The importance of incorporating nature into park amenity design.
  - The revisiting of the adventure playground in Europe.
  - The rise of City Farms all across Europe – London now has 16 City Farms.
- 
- Other agencies in the UK are even more innovative. For instance, the Forestry Commission has released guidance on 'Dens, Fires And Rope Swings.'
  - The importance of proximity and ease of access was also noted in items such as 'loyalty' to local parks which also grows with age (Cohen). This stresses the need to maintain neighbourhood parks (even when it might be administratively desirable to sell them), and to ensure that trails blossom into linear activity strips, with amenities for all ages (Alberta Government, Moore and Cosco).
  - The importance of dogs who take their owners for a walk was also noted, with off-leash dog parks being key facilities. Innovation in both their design and management was noted in a short Vancouver Sun article.



## The Inventory of Park Amenities

### Spruce Grove Park Amenities

Spruce Grove has over 40 parks of various sizes and also manages the maintenance and booking for all the school fields in the city.

The major parks are listed in the following table:

MAJOR PARKS AND OPEN SPACES							
	<u>Play Equipment</u> age (yrs)	<u>Trail</u> length (m)	<u>Paving Pad</u> type	<u>Benches</u> qty	<u>Basketball Hoops</u> qty	<u>Picnic Table</u> qty	<u>Other</u> description
Central Park		223		6		6	Includes Brookwood Rink Spray park
Jubilee Park	2011			10	1	30	20 BBQ pits Cook shelter Gazebo Ornamental fountain and landscaping
Columbus Park Rotary Park				10			12 picnic sites + gazebo

Central Park has for many years been Spruce Grove's principal major park, serving both in both summer and winter as key attractions, with its spray park, skating oval and toboggan hill.

Jubilee Park has been developed over the past three years and will serve as the location for major events and festivals such as Canada Day. It has a number of features and amenities, with more which will be added as the park develops.

Columbus Park serves as the primary city centre park with benches, ornamental gardens and landscaping.

Other major open space areas and amenities include The Links golf course, which is right in the heart of the city, and Heritage Grove Park which has over 50 hectares of natural wooded area and nine different types of forest.

In addition, the city has a number of natural and semi-natural areas: Dog Creek, and several other undeveloped natural parks such as Atim Creek, Pioneer Forest and Cooks Tree Stand.

The city also owns land that is designated as a historic resource. This includes the Grain Elevator and several cemeteries and churchyards.

Spruce Grove also has a large number of playgrounds and neighbourhood parks.

MINOR PLAYGROUNDS AND NEIGHBORHOOD PARKS							
	<u>Play Equipment</u>	<u>Trail</u>	<u>Paving Pad</u>	<u>Benches</u>	<u>Basketball Hoops</u>	<u>Picnic Table</u>	<u>Other</u>
	age (yrs)	length (m)	type	qty	qty	qty	description
Beechmont Ave Park	8*			1			
Brookside Park	8*	125	asphalt				baseball backstop
Deer Park	8	13	conc.	2			80m of concrete curb
Greystone Park	8*	332	asphalt	4	1		wooden entry feature
Harvest Ridge Park	2	77		2		1	
Heatherglen Park	10	48	asphalt	2	2		
Landsdowne Park	10		asphalt	1	2	1	
Lindsay Park	5	307		2			
Longview Park	5	168		2		1	Bleachers soccer goal posts
McLeod Ave Park	15 to 20			4			wooden entry feature
Marlboro Park	15			2			
McKean Park	6	191	asphalt	1	1		
Millgrove-Miller Park	15	9					
New West District Park	0						
Spruce Village Way Park	2	297	conc.	2		1	
Wellington Park	15	74		1			
Westbend Park	10			1			
Westgrove Park	4					1	
Windermere Park	4	60		3			wooden entry feature
Woodside Park	20			1			
Linkside Court Park		83		2			wooden entry feature
Grove Meadow Drive Park			asphalt	1	2		
Westview Crescent Park	30	422	asphalt		1		wooden entry feature baseball backstop
Hilldowns Park		764		6		2	
Linksvie Court Greenspace		62		1			
Century Road Dog Park			gravel				
Marlboro Drive Dog Park				1			

Many of these have playgrounds and provide other amenities such as in-park trails, paved areas often with basketball hoops for pick up games, picnic tables and benches. Many have informal soccer goal posts or baseball backstops also allowing pick games in these sports.

There are also two off-leash dog parks which provide over 30 acres for dogs and their owners.

Many small parks have port-a-potties.

The City also maintains parks which can be termed sports parks, as follow:

OUTDOOR RECREATION FACILITIES							
	<u>Play Equipment</u> age (yrs)	<u>Trail</u> length (m)	<u>Paving Pad</u> type	<u>Benches</u> qty	<u>Basketball Hoops</u> qty	<u>Picnic Table</u> qty	<u>Other</u> description
Apenglen Park	15	163	conc.			1	Hockey Rink with 8 lights Bleachers Soccer Goals Port-a-Potty
Lakewood Sports Field		177					hockey rink plus 8 lights Port-a-Potty soccer goal posts
Henry Singer Park		67		5			baseball diamond with backstop softball diamond with backstop large bleachers small bleachers aluminum bleachers dugouts Tennis Courts (rubber) Tennis Courts (asphalt) 2 site buildings and 1 shed
Heatherglen Sports Field			asphalt				Small Soccer Goals Large Soccer Goals Bleachers Port-a-Potty
Fuhr Sports Park	2009			6		6	Stadium Rotary Playscape Splash park
Skateboard Park Fairway Park	2	680	asphalt	1	2	6	Port-a-Potty soccer goal posts

Fuhr Sports Park is located adjacent to the TLC, and is designed to serve as a venue for major sport events, as does Henry Singer Sports Park.

Several of the parks, while largely neighbourhood oriented, also serve as sports parks, with sports fields, and boarded outdoor hockey rinks.

The City's skateboard park also is regarded as a sports park.

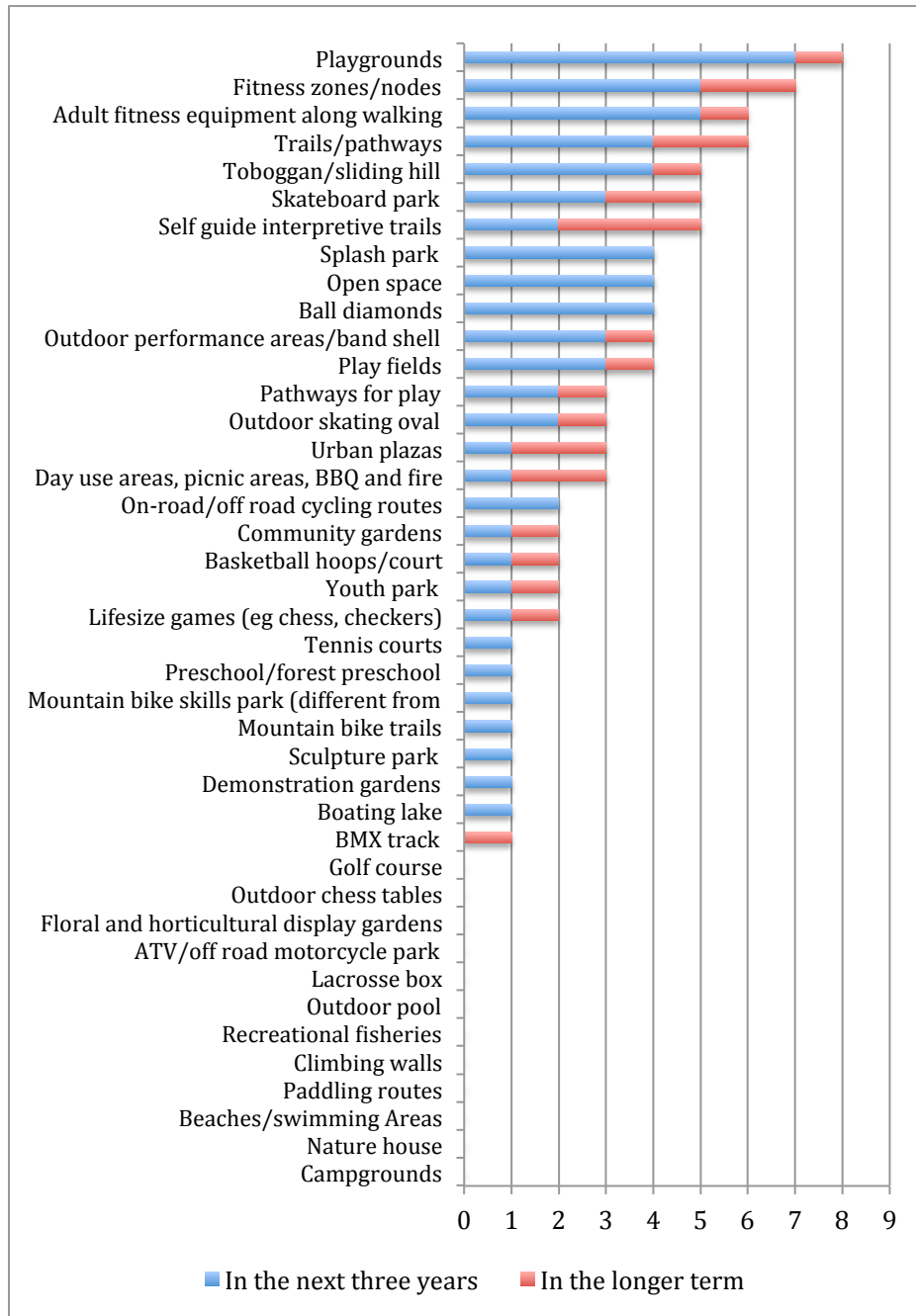
The school sites also serve primarily as sports parks, although many of the elementary schools also have playgrounds which are generally funded by the school PTAs.

SCHOOL SITES							
	<u>Play Equipment</u> age (yrs)	<u>Trail</u> length (m)	<u>Paving Pad</u> type	<u>Benches</u> qty	<u>Basketball Hoops</u> qty	<u>Picnic Table</u> qty	<u>Other</u> description
St. Thomas School			asphalt	5	6	6	Bleacher football/soccer combo posts Port-a-Potty vollyball posts
St. Joseph's School	9			2			Soccer Goals Port-a-Potty
St. Margarite School	8	42.5	asphalt	9	4	5	Basball Diamond with CL backstop Port-a-Potty football/soccer combo posts
Brookwood School		382	asphalt	8	1	2	football goal posts
Woodhaven School		92	asphalt	9	3		new ball diamond dugouts asphalt path around dugouts shale track (7.5mW x 374mL) soccer goal posts beach volleyball courts clubhouse (equipment trailer)
Sp. Grove Composite High			asphalt	2	6	1	asphalt track (10mWx431mL) shale ball diamond football goal posts shotput/discus pitch equipment/team trailer concrete clubhouse
Greystone School				2	3	1	light standards tennis courts soccer goals w/ nets junior soccer goals Port-a-Potty Baseball Diamond with cl Backstop bleachers
Broxton Park School		430	asphalt	10	3	2	8m wide shale running track combo football/soccer uprights soccer goals junior Port-a-Potty Baseball field with backstop
Living Waters School							soccer goals
Millgrove School			asphalt	5	2		Soccer Goals Baseball Diamond Backstop

## Regional Amenities

In terms of key park amenities in adjacent communities, the following points can be made:

- Edmonton provides a vast range of parks of different types, from their major destinations such as Hewrelek Park and Churchill Park, to an inventory of community and neighbourhood parks and trails in all communities.
- Many of the neighbouring cities have major water and spray parks which they have installed in recent years. Spruce Grove's Central Park spray park was once a destination but now families head for St Albert or Waberman.
- Parkland County has many more natural parks and these also serve Spruce Grove residents, being in many cases within an easy drive or even cycle.



A survey of other Alberta municipalities asked, among other things, their priorities for adding park amenities either in the next three years, or in the longer term. The responses are shown on the chart



## The Spontaneous Recreation/Park Amenity System

### A Systems Approach

The key element of this study is park amenities, and the underlying premise of the study is 'how can the parks be enhanced with additional amenities in order to attract more people to them?'

The Spruce Grove Parks and Open Space Master Plan<sup>4</sup> defines the functions of open space. We have reworked them slightly into three groupings:

- Environmental and Ecological Goals
  - permeability,
  - continuity,
  - protection of natural resources,
  - encouragement of biodiversity,
- People Oriented Goals
  - provision of places for recreation and sports,
  - provision of neighbourhood gathering places,
  - promotion of public health benefits through walking and other activity,
- City Planning Goals
  - creation and support of civic and cultural infrastructure,
  - enhancement of sense of place and identity, and
  - helping to shape patterns of development, and control unwanted growth.

The focus of this report is on those people oriented goals, and in fulfilling those goals the park system reflects the structure of the overall leisure system noted:

- Serving groups with leisure needs.
- Providing venues for sectoral activities such as for sport or art and culture, or for enjoyment/personal fulfillment.
- Accommodating public, private and not-for-profit groups delivering leisure opportunities.
- Accommodating both spontaneous and programmed activities.

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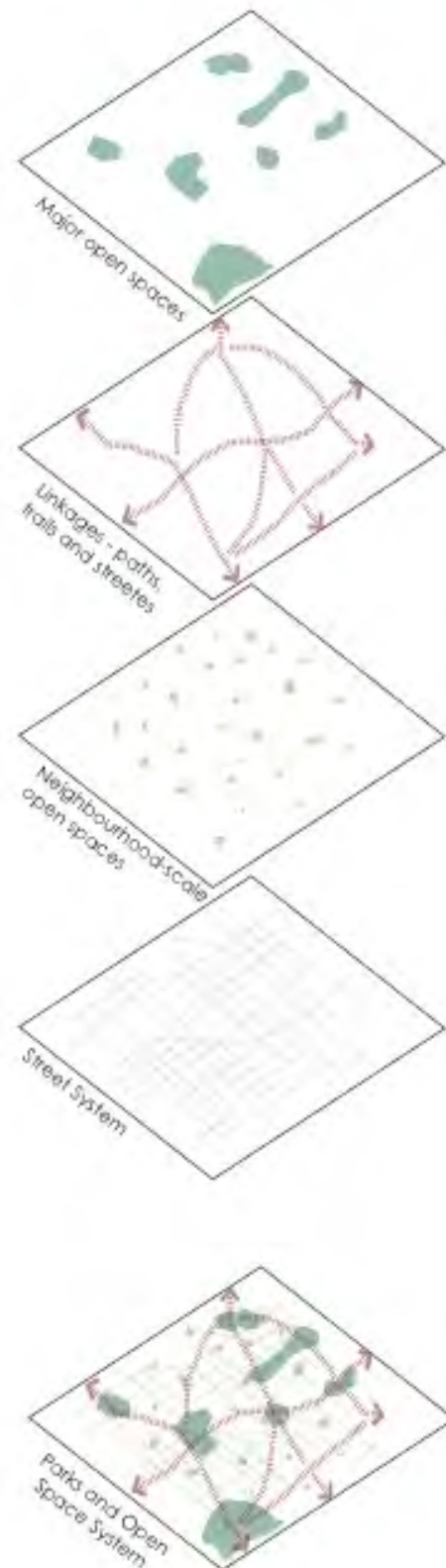
<sup>4</sup> [http://www.sprucegrove.org/Assets/pdf/plans/open\\_space/open\\_space\\_sec\\_1.pdf](http://www.sprucegrove.org/Assets/pdf/plans/open_space/open_space_sec_1.pdf)

The Master Plan defines the Parks and Open Space System as being comprised of several interrelated elements:

- Major open space nodes
- nodes are linked by paths, trails and streets
- a finer grain of neighbourhood-scale open spaces which is distributed throughout the city so that all residents have easy access
- the city is interconnected by a street system that is considered as another element of the public realm<sup>5</sup>.

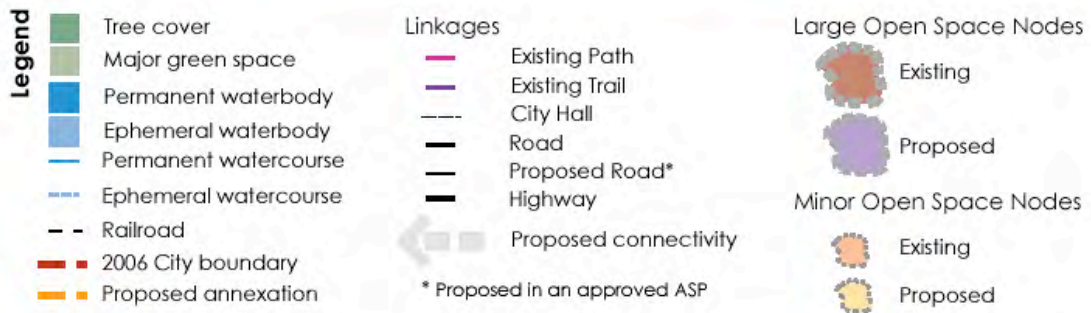
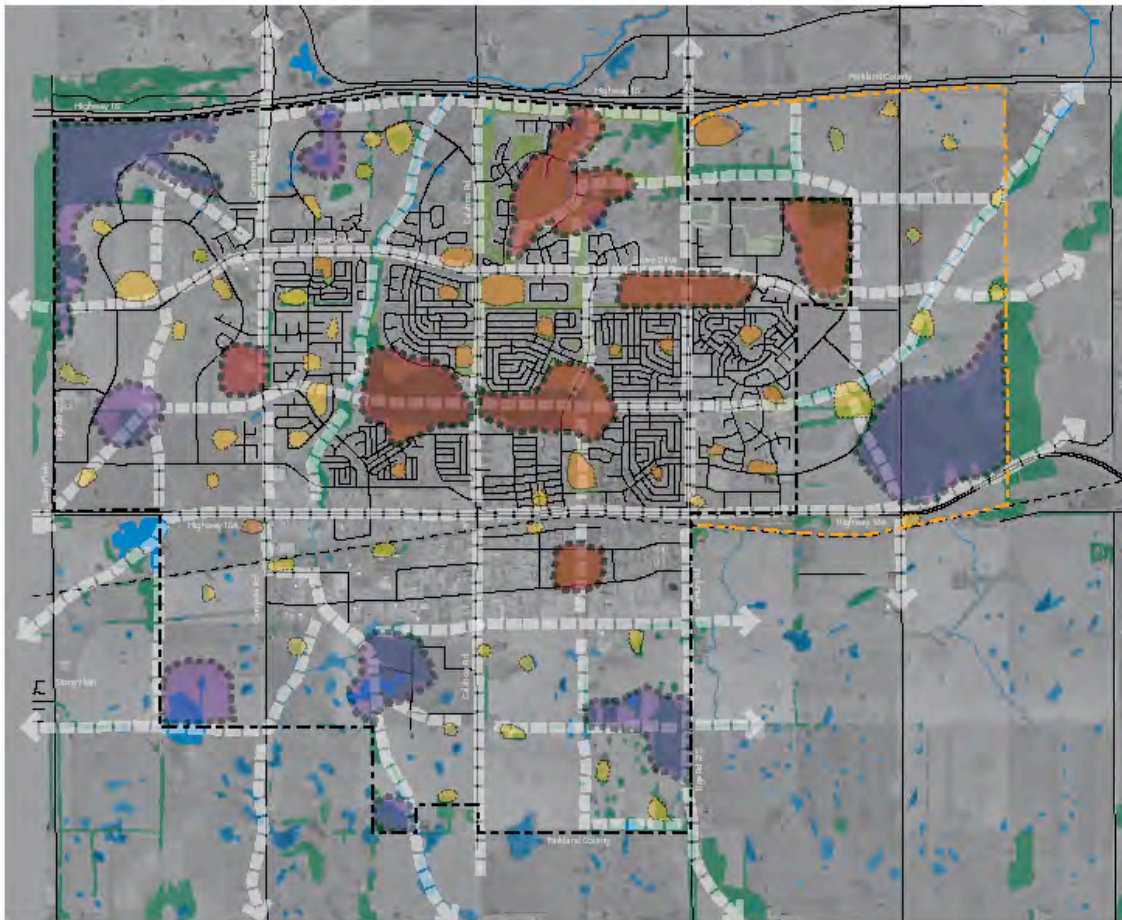
Together these create the Open Space System.

Each of these elements provides a lens through which we can ask the question “what amenities will attract people into the parks and open spaces, so that they can experience the benefits of recreation such as improving their personal health and building a sense of community through personal interaction?”



<sup>5</sup> These linkages are addressed in more detail in the Transportation Master Plan which was recently adopted by Council.

### Parks and Open Space System



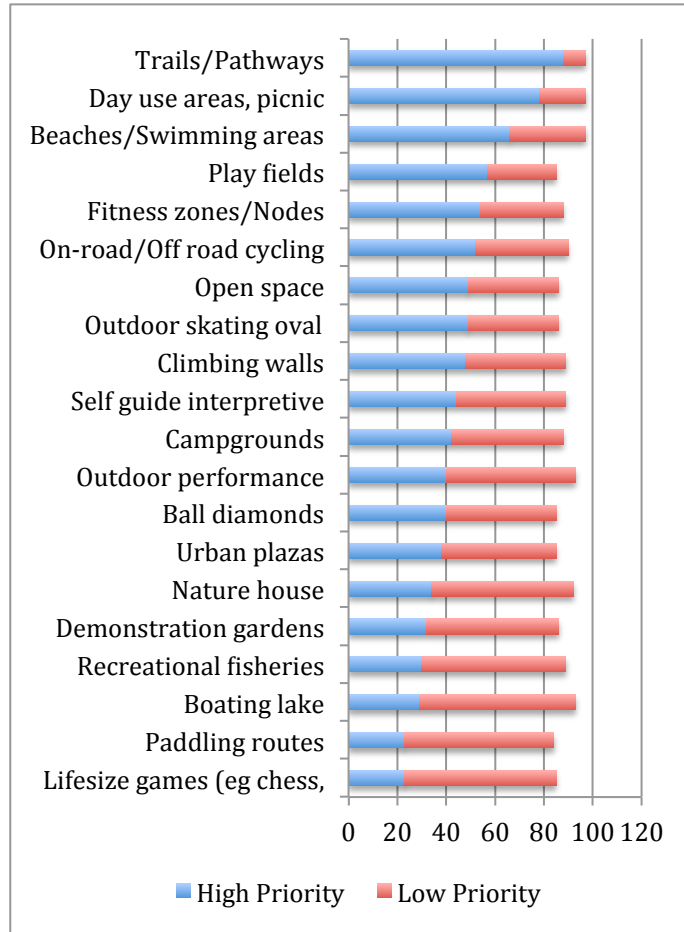
Source: Spruce Grove Parks and Open Space Master Plan

## System Elements

There are a range of system elements/park amenities that will stimulate spontaneous recreation; some serve all ages, some serve more limited age ranges. As part of the study, an online survey asked respondents the degree of 'need' for each of these sets of amenities. The amenities are listed below, together with the survey results:

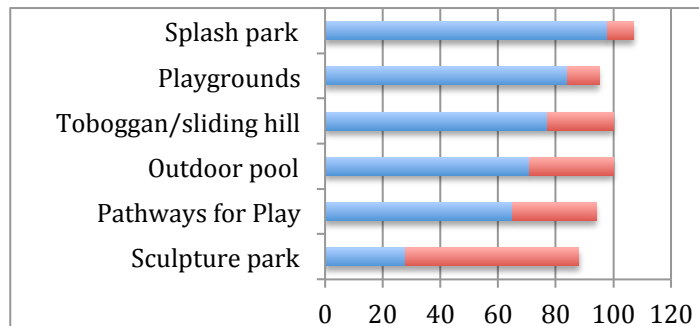
Some amenities can typically serve all ages and stages of life:

- Day use areas, picnic areas, BBQ and fire pits
- Boating lake
- Outdoor skating oval
- Lifesize games (eg chess, checkers)
- Play fields
- Ball diamonds
- Campgrounds
- Outdoor performance areas/band shell
- Nature house
- Beaches / Swimming Areas
- Boating Areas
- On-Road / Off Road Cycling Routes
- Trails / Pathways
- Self Guide Interpretive Trails
- Paddling Routes
- Urban Plazas
- Open Space
- Demonstration Gardens
- Fitness Zones / Nodes
- Climbing Walls
- Recreational fisheries



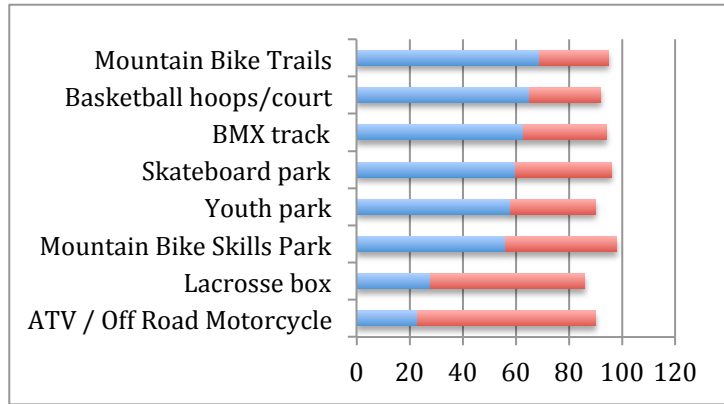
Some amenities will primarily serve primarily children and their families:

- Splash park
- Outdoor pool
- Playgrounds
- Toboggan/sliding hill
- Sculpture park
- Pathways for Play



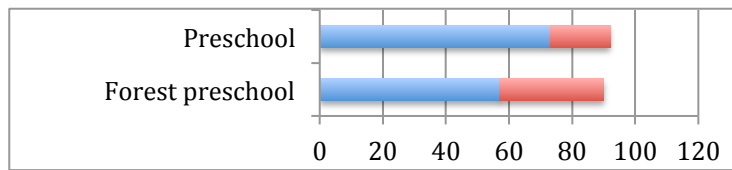
Some amenities will primarily serve youth aged 13 to 17 years:

- Skateboard park
- Youth park
- Lacrosse box
- Basketball hoops/court
- BMX track
- Mountain Bike Trails
- Mountain Bike Skills Park (different from BMX)
- ATV / Off Road Motorcycle Park



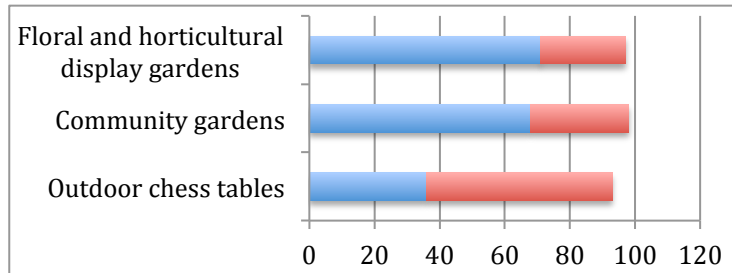
Some amenities will primarily serve preschoolers and their families:

- Preschool/Forest preschool



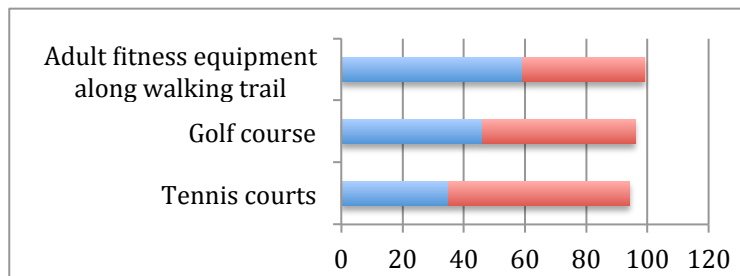
Some amenities will primarily serve seniors:

- Community gardens
- Floral and horticultural display gardens
- Outdoor chess tables



Some amenities will primarily serve adults:

- Tennis courts
- Golf course
- Adult fitness equipment along walking trail



There are at least three caveats:

- Firstly, none of these age categorizations is in any way absolute: children will play on or with the sculptures (if allowed) and youth play tennis as much as adults.
- Secondly, design can make amenities attractive to a greater range of age groups: a splash park with good seating will attract parents and grandparents more than one that doesn't.
- Thirdly, proximity of other services and amenities will also, like design, attract more people: a café or terrace with seating, or a recreation centre or library overlooking the park, will bring more people to the park. Of course, this may not be an appropriate strategy for every park – such proximities would be inappropriate for wild nature parks, for instance.



## Gaps and Needs - What the Public Told Us

The public was consulted through a series of focus groups and through an online survey. They were also encouraged to add comments to an interactive online map and to upload photos to a Facebook page. Their comments, summarized as follows, highlight the gaps in the system and the needs for additional policies and infrastructure development:

### Comments on Park Amenities

#### Spray Parks and Water Features

For Spruce Grove residents, like most people, water has a special quality and is associated with fun and play through to relaxation and reflection. The spray park in Central Park is a great favourite, but is generally thought to be a little outdated, and gets very crowded. Spruce Grove residents see water parks as a destination and go to St Albert, Beaumont or Wabernun for a day trip. Spruce Grove was felt to need one or two new spray or water parks, although other 'water features' in parks would also be welcomed. All water parks should be on the trail system so that residents can get there without driving.



#### Natural Features in Parks

There was widespread support for more natural parks and playgrounds. There were two trains of thought here. Firstly that natural areas such as Heritage Woods were thought to be in short supply in Spruce Grove, and that the areas that are still undeveloped, such as Atim Creek and Pioneer Forest, should be protected; this also applies to creeks, which should be daylighted where possible, such as where they flow through parks or as part of the design for new development areas. Secondly, children's play areas should be more natural – less purchased, plastic play structures, and more trees to climb, hills to roll down, large rocks to scale and streams to paddle in. These more natural areas, both large and small, would expand recreation for all ages: adults and seniors who like to bird-watch, and children and youth who like to 'just play'.



#### Trails

Everyone agreed that Spruce Grove has an excellent trail system – most suggestions were for more trails and some slight adaptations to them to make them even better. People commented that the trail system was not complete and that some key sections were missing, both reducing use and putting users



at risk. They also commented that the Spruce Grove and Stony Plain trail systems should be joined up, which would vastly expand the trail use opportunities. Sidewalks were also judged to be important...on both sides of the road..even if it meant more people must shovel after winter snowfalls. Improvements along the trails could include training machines and locations for exercise, or for children's play, or even a small café or mobile food cart to make trail walking or running a more social experience.

### **Washrooms**

Washrooms were frequently noted, and their use is important to a wide range of demographic groups. A phased program to replace porta-potties with proper washrooms was seen as a good long term investment.

### **Sports**

An important part of spontaneous recreation is pick-up sport activities. It was felt that this was a neglected part of the recreation agenda, with sport being almost completely 'organized' and recreation focusing on indoor activities. Some sports lend themselves more to spontaneity than others – volleyball, both grass and beach, were noted. As well, there should be more opportunities for just throwing a ball around.

### **Winter Activities**

Participants had many suggestions for winter activities, and noted in particular the skating and outdoor activities which are available, such as at Central Park and the trail system. Suggestions included creating more outdoor skating opportunities, especially those that created the sense of bonhomie that is found at the Central Park Oval; a better, bigger, steeper toboggan hill; allowing skating on the Storm Water Ponds; setting cross-country ski tracks in Jubilee Park (or elsewhere).

### **Playgrounds**

Playgrounds in parks are key destinations for children and their parents and many comments were made about how to design them so that they are more widely used. The most frequent comment was that they need to be more adventurous and to stimulate more imaginative play – children of all ages get bored very quickly. The fact that most playgrounds are on school grounds also offers opportunities for those in City parks to be a little different and more imaginative. Better information about where playgrounds are designed for which age groups would also be helpful for younger parents.



### **Horticultural Features**

People like just walking in the parks, and both horticultural displays and water features were often noted as enhancing that experience.

### **Community Gardens**

There was broad support for the concept of creating a community garden (one or more) on municipal land such as parks (although other locations could also be used).

### **Dog Parks**

The current off-leash parks are well supported, and others are needed.



## Comments on Enhancing the Broader Environment for Spontaneous Recreation

### Maintenance Levels

It is important that parks be well-maintained. Poorly maintained parks are seldom well used by the public. There is a link between vandalism, park maintenance levels, and public perceptions of safety, and park use. In particular, if park maintenance levels do not allow for rapid cleanup on Monday mornings, or even over the weekend for such things as emptying garbage cans and cleaning up broken glass, then the public rapidly attaches negative names to particular places such as "Broken Glass Alley". It is important that this occurs year round, as physical activity in the winter is even more dependent on cleared trails, for instance, than is the case in summer.

### Engaging children so that they want to go to the park/outdoors

There has to be more done to get children to want to go to the park. This could be more promotion to youth and their parents, more support for those organizations that encourage outdoor activities...other approaches are needed. There is little point in providing more amenities if they are not going to be used.



### Unstructured Play

The degree to which children can engage in spontaneous recreation has diminished over the past three decades, although children, when left to their own devices, will still build tree-houses and generally 'just play'. Some municipalities are fostering this such as Edmonton's Green Shack program. The idea of children being able to 'just play in the park' was well received, although some parents expressed concerns re safety, how risk would be managed, etc.

### Safety and Perceptions of Safety

How to build a sense of comfort among parents so that they are prepared to allow their children more freedom to just go to the park and play? A variety of solutions were suggested: finding ways of finding friends: walk to school programs; volunteer paly facilitators, a modified Block Parent program, increasing the after school program inventory. All these approaches would build a greater sense of community.

### Youth Activities

Many of the ideas proposed included the goal of getting youth outdoors more. The key element was the degree of risk that was needed to engage youth, while staying within the municipal tolerance limits.

### Getting Around/Transportation

The trail system is critical to allowing people of all ages to access all the City's parks. This is especially so for youth who are too young to drive but independent enough to travel around alone or with friends. Making major parks destinations for the bus service would also improve park use.

### Destinations and Events

People need a reason to go to the park, and the creation and enhancement of parks as destinations, and as venues for events, were frequently noted.

Jubilee Park is clearly going to serve that purpose, and the provision of BBQ pits and a band-shell were seen as positive elements. Other elements could be added, or might fit better in a downtown park: farmers market, food trucks or café, more concerts, were examples that were noted.



### Staffing the Parks

The idea of there being a staff person, with a play facilitation/supervision role, especially in the after-school hours, was well received.

### Communication

Social media can assist in linking people with like interests, in order to get a critical mass of people to a particular park or event. More traditional media are also still very important – from community boards, to the local paper, to PSAs on local radio.

## Comments Re Specific Parks

### Jubilee Park

Jubilee Park was both well used and well liked.

### Other Parks

Woodside Park was noted as a perfect little neighborhood park.

### Comments on Financing

Comments were made in two directions: firstly the need for spontaneous recreation programming to be affordable, preferably free; secondly, suggestions for how such parks and programs could be financed, such as by the business community or through service group fundraising.



## Strategies and Recommendations

### Vision

**Spontaneous outdoor recreation opportunities are the cornerstone of an active, healthy community and as such the City of Spruce Groves park and open space system will provide space, amenities and program opportunities to encourage spontaneous use.**

**Strategy #1 – Explore developing a menu of amenities in parks and open spaces to encourage spontaneous recreation**

**Element 1.1 – Complete the trail systems and add amenities such that it becomes as much linear park as trail**

- **Complete the Spruce Grove trail systems as originally envisaged/planned**
- **Continue to enhance the overall transportation system as detailed in the recently adopted Transportation Master Plan**
- **Work with Stony Plain to link the two municipal trail systems**
- **Ensure that sidewalks are provided for residents to safely access the trail system, and to have safe walking routes within all Spruce Grove neighbourhoods**
- **Consider adding innovative amenities to the Spruce Grove trail system such as fitness equipment along the trails, or some of the amenities noted in ‘Pathways to Play’<sup>6</sup>.**

### Discussion

The greatest change in parks and open space planning over the past 30 years has been the growth of trails and linear park systems. The world is now walking, running, jogging and biking to a much greater degree than previously. In almost every recreation survey, enhancing trails is at or near the top of the list of priorities and needs. Spruce Grove is no exception, whether in the Parks and Open Space Master Plan or in this study.

Spruce Grove has developed an extensive trail system, but it is not fully complete. One element of the complete system is the link to Stony Plain which will immediately magnify the potential for trail use, both for spontaneous recreation purposes and for getting around generally (such as travel to school, work or the retail areas).

Even when complete, consideration should be given to how each neighbourhood will access the trail system. In many cases, especially in older neighbourhoods, a complete sidewalk system is not in place, requiring residents to walk in the road, often on streets which now experience significantly more traffic than when they were originally planned. The recently adopted Transportation Master Plan has laid out the overall policies for the municipality, and a review of the most critical areas where trail access is deficient needs to be undertaken and addressed so that there is as near universal access to the trail system as possible. Many municipalities use access standards; and the goal in Spruce Grove should be to ensure trail system access within 300m for 90% of residents (or as specified in the Transportation MP).

One of the more recent trends in trail design is to see them more as linear parklets joined by pathways than simply a continuous 2m strip of asphalt. This would see adding stations along

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.americantrails.org/resources/kids/Playful-Pathways-families-kids.html>

the trail with each station offering some attribute to a variety of ages. These might be adult fitness stations or children's play stations; some might be on the trail itself, while others might be 'parklets' adjacent to the trail. Spruce Grove's system is large enough that this is already starting to occur, as the trails wind through neighbourhood parks and along watercourses. However enhancing this aspect will attract more people to use the trail system, especially as families or intergenerational groups.

The initial focus should experiment with two concepts. Firstly, adding children's play to the trail system to encourage families to use the trail system should be explored. Secondly, the idea of creating an adult/seniors oriented fitness trail, by adding outdoor fitness equipment along the trails. This should be on a trail which allows the TLC to be the hub for this 'circuit training' idea, and also allowing the TLC change rooms to be used by participants, and for TLC staff to actively program the circuit as they do with their other facility amenities.



**Element 1.2 – Strengthen the attraction of the City’s major open space areas**

- **Complete the development of Jubilee Park as currently planned**
- **Develop a City Centre Park concept linking Central Park to McLeod Road**
- **Focus community events on these two parks, with Jubilee Park serving summer events, and Central Park/Columbus Park serving winter events**
- **Ensure that both are accessible by the trail system and use community events as ‘bike and walk’ festivals**
- **Develop a spray park as a destination feature**
- **Develop a bigger, better toboggan/sledding hill**

## Discussion

The Regional Leisure Services Plan identified as a key strategy a focus on special events; it noted that these were key community building activities and that Spruce Grove needed venues for these events to occur, both in the summer and the winter. The City has responded by developing Jubilee Park as a venue for summer events such as the Canada Day celebrations. Its location within the city is not central, but access is easy via the trail system (or will be once the development of those neighbourhoods is complete). This trail access will be critical since large events attract large crowds, and the parking capacity in that area is limited. Every effort should be made in the promotion of events to ensure that they are 100% bike and walk friendly.



Winter festivals are also important for ensuring that residents get outside in an active way year round. Jubilee is not a great winter venue, but Central Park certainly is, with the Log Cabin, the skating oval and the toboggan hill close by. Another venue is McLeod St itself and Columbus Park, which together provide a ‘City Centre’ experience which fits well with the festive seasons from late October to Family Day and Spring Break. The potential for closing to

vehicle traffic McLeod itself and the short section of King Street between McLeod and Central Park should be investigated.

Two park amenities stood out during the consultation process as being much sought after by participants. These were also highly rated in the survey, and were amenities which other communities had recently created or were planning to provide, indicating there is a wide popularity.

- A spray park – Spruce Grove residents of all ages love the Central Park spray park, but it is now dated, and there are bigger and better spray parks in other communities such as St Albert which Spruce Grove residents visit as an outing. Whether Spruce Grove needs just one new spray park or two (one on each side of the community) or whether the Central Park spray park should simply be enlarged, was a matter of some debate. We would suggest that a small study be done of the costs and benefits of the following options:
  - Replace Central Park spray park
  - Adding a second one in Jubilee Park
  - Adding one in the vicinity of the TLC.
- A bigger, steeper tobogganing hill – this should be constructed in a major open space area, either a community park such as South Central Sports Park, or in the natural park that will be developed at Atim Creek. If in an existing park, it can serve as a summer fun amenity as well, although it will retain its more natural aspects if created in Atim Creek.



The issue of washrooms and change-rooms in parks was excluded from the project's terms of reference, although their importance to all ages was frequently noted in the focus groups and online survey comments. A combined washroom/change-room facility is essential if people are to 'get outside', and should be included in the service standards for all major open spaces.

**Element 1.3 – Safeguard the existing undeveloped lands so that they serve Spruce Grove residents as natural parks**

- **Protect the two ‘corners’ of the municipality – Atim Creek, Pioneer Forest – as natural parks, although allowing and encouraging community use, such as an off-leash dog area, toboggan hill, etc**

Discussion

Natural parkland is valued highly by Spruce Grove residents, who are aware that it is in short supply. Many longer-time residents also noted that the areas that were once natural have been slowly swallowed up by development – clearly those lands were zoned for development, even if the residents thought of them as natural parkland preserve.

Heritage Woods is the main natural park and its location in the very centre of the built up area, and well accessed by the trail system means that it is well used by the public.

At the edges of the municipality, there are still natural areas undeveloped, and two of them area identified on the Parks and Open Space Master Plan for designation as parkland: these are Atim Creek in the north west, and Pioneer Forest in the south east.

While these areas are designated as natural parks, they do not have to be left ‘pristine’ – indeed, they already bear the marks and scars of human use! As natural parks, they offer potential for some of the activities that are highly prized by some residents, but which are not or cannot be developed in some of the more central and developed parks. This would include such activities as another off-leash dog area or a better, bigger, steeper toboggan hill for older children, youth and adults.



### Element 1.4 – Strengthen the attraction of the City’s neighbourhood parks

- **Consider spontaneous recreation in all neighbourhood park design and operational planning**

#### Discussion

In terms of encouraging spontaneous recreation, this neighbourhood scale amenity is critical, since most spontaneous recreation happens within a short walk of home.

The City has a large number of neighbourhood parks. Many are linked by the trail system. These parks also include playgrounds, small hills/mounds, and a set of park ‘furniture’ such as benches, picnic tables, trash cans, basketball hoops on a blacktop pad, and bike racks. Some are larger and more focused on active rather than passive activities. Several parks have a lacrosse box which is flooded in the winter to create an outdoor rink, while others offer opportunities for local youth sport, both pick up games and competitive play for younger children. These are locations where the distinction between a playfield (for play activities) and sportsfield (for sports activities) needs to be both clearly defined and recognized. Some neighbourhood parks include a port-potty, but none include a washroom.



In terms of defining ‘park standards’, the following should be borne in mind:

- Diversity should be encouraged – it is important that neighbourhood parks continue to be ‘unique’ and to reflect local desires and local input to the park design process should be encouraged. Other recommendations in this report address various aspects of this design process, such as encouraging natural playspace as opposed to always going with the ‘industrial/engineered’ structure.
- The focus of design should be on those who can only travel short distances – the young and the old (again, the specifics are addressed in other recommendations). At larger parks, which serve a wider neighbourhood such as those with winter boarded rinks, consideration should be given to washroom facilities, although this need not be part of the standard for neighbourhood parks.
- Sportsfields should wherever possible be located on school fields and in athletic parks – the definition of ‘playfield’ should be on play, where that includes pick-up games but does not include competitive play beyond about U8 soccer (mini-soccer) and its equivalents in other sports. In terms of the CS4L approach to sport development, this means the first two levels of *Active Start* and *FUNDamentals*.



**Element 1.5 - Leverage existing amenities and non-contributing green space which have potential for greater spontaneous recreational use**

- **Inventory the City's non-contributing green space**
- **With appropriate safety considerations, allow winter skating on the storm water ponds**

Discussion

Spontaneous recreation historically happened as much on undeveloped, spare or wild lands, as it did in parks; when today's adults were children, there was always a small woodlot or area of waste land that could be 'colonized' for camps, dens, hide and seek and other games of childhood.

Those lands still exist. It is good to see that youth have created their own very small bike park within the Heritage Woods Park, and rumour has it that there is a tree house somewhere (the author is sworn to silence on the location of this one!). However they are the exception rather than the rule.

The Parks and Open Space Master Plan established a hierarchy of lands, and the final category was termed 'non- contributing green space'. This is land that is in City ownership but is not used for any designated purpose. These lands, such as rights-of-way and easements, likely have some potential for park amenities that will encourage spontaneous recreation. These lands need to be inventoried, so that possible uses noted elsewhere in this report, such as community gardens, can be identified.

One category of non-contributing green space is the system of storm ponds which were noted by many people as places that would be great for winter skating. However this is currently not allowed in Spruce Grove, as is the case in other communities. But some municipalities have allowed skating, always with a clear set of guidelines to ensure safety.



**Element 1.6 – Develop more natural play areas, as opposed to the current standard of ‘industrial/engineered structure’**

- **Include in future park design RFPs a requirement that park planning and design include as wide a range of natural features as possible**

Discussion

Children do enjoy playing on the playgrounds that are in the parks. Many of them have experienced little else than some variant on the standard ‘plastic playground’. Over the past two decades, the companies that produce them and the lawyers that advise municipalities about risk management have both been keen, for different reasons, to standardize them.

Research over the past two decades has tended to move in a different direction. Unstructured play is now recognized as a key experience in enhancing creativity in children; and the value of being outside in nature adds to this experience.



The quality of the environment for children’s play contributes to their creative learning. Diversity is important; it gives children more to work with, stimulating their imaginations. The ‘plastic playground does do this to some extent: children are infinitely capable of re-imagining it as a space ship or pirate ship or castle. But natural surroundings do this just as well, if not better<sup>7</sup>.

Many municipalities are now requiring park design processes to include consultation with children and to include natural features such as boulders, streams and logs in the design. Of course they must still be certified as safe and adhere to CEPTED guidelines, but the results are always well accepted by the users of the playgrounds.



<sup>7</sup> There is a variety of research on some of these points – see [www.colorado.cye.ed.us](http://www.colorado.cye.ed.us)???

**Element 1.7 – Use a ‘senior’s lens’ as well as a ‘children’s lens’ when assessing and developing amenities for spontaneous recreation**

- **Work with the Spruce Grove Primary Care Network to ensure that planning for any seniors care residence or similar building includes in its planning a walking route that is matched to the residents’ capabilities**

## Discussion

We tend to think of spontaneous recreation as the domain of the young, but all ages enjoy this set of activities. As the local Primary Health Care Network keeps telling us, there is no better exercise for keeping seniors fit and in good trim than walking for pleasure.

However a different lens needs to be used when designing trails for seniors. Firstly the trail system needs to have a different set of support amenities: access to washrooms and benches for instance. Secondly the trail surface needs to be even – more flat and level than would be designed for other age groups. Thirdly trail length can be shorter, and should be located in relation to where seniors live, in particular those apartments with many seniors and care homes.

In fact, it would be wise to require care homes to design a short walking trail system with an accompanying set of outdoor amenities.



**Element 1.8 – Use public land, including but not specifically parkland, to establish more local food opportunities**

- **Develop a strategy for identifying sites for community gardens and support the development of a community association to manage it**
- **Encourage the establishment of an outdoor farmers market in an appropriate location (McLeod St?) in Spruce Grove**

Discussion

The local food movement is quickly gaining ground in our communities as more and more people discover the joy of fresh local food, not to mention the sustainability values that come with eating food grown locally.

The linkage with park amenities is two-fold:

- There is a growing interest in community garden plots as places to grow food. Many cities have established them recently although in some places they have been in existence for decades. Focus group participants noted a number of reasons why growing food in one's garden was a challenge: little topsoil before hitting Spruce Grove's thick clay subsoil; shade from neighbouring houses; small yards and a desire to use them for children's play or to encourage the urban tree canopy.



Facilitating community gardens is a role that can be played well by a purpose-formed not-for-profit association, as opposed to becoming a function of the municipality. Where the community garden should be located is also a challenge: it can certainly be in a park, although the semi-private nature of each garden plot<sup>8</sup> can be challenging for some park purists. Community gardens are better located on other public land, such as that identified in the Parks and Open Space Master Plan as non-contributing green space. Community gardens work well if developed in conjunction with schools, on school grounds, where they can serve an educational function; they can also fit well on right of ways such as under power lines; or they fit on land owned by not-for-profit groups such as churches, where they can also contribute some of their produce to the food bank.

They should not be allowed to be part of a developers' contribution of land for parks, even if the land is dedicated to a not-for-profit group as opposed to managed by the local resident's association; this would be too close to the community garden being marketed as an asset of the development.

- The second linkage with park amenity planning is the potential for a farmers' market. Park amenities are designed to build community and link to 'placemaking'<sup>9</sup> and public markets bring incredible values in this regard. In Spruce Grove, there is potential to locate a farmers' market in a number of locations, with McLeod St and Columbus Park offering perhaps the greatest opportunity.

<sup>8</sup> Community gardens have two variants: in one, each plot is used by one person/family to raise food for themselves; these are sometimes called 'allotments'. In the second, the community works together to raise food which is then shared.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.pps.org/category/blog-categories/public-markets-and-local-economies/>

**Strategy #2 – Enhance the social and community environment such that it better encourages, supports and facilitates spontaneous recreation**

**Element 2.1 - Enhance park maintenance standards as usage increases**

Discussion

Visitor experience is very dependent on the levels of maintenance and repair of the parks and trails. With very few exceptions, the public noted that the parks are well-maintained and the equipment kept in good repair as it ages.

However additional use, especially all-season use, will place strains on resources and it is essential that there is monitoring of both the standards and also the public's thoughts and attitudes. Standards will need to be adjusted and resources committed to take advantage of opportunities and to respond to specific circumstances.

It should also be noted that parks are more complex these days, both because of the additional amenities that are already installed, which require monitoring and maintenance, and the expectations of the public which are constantly increasing.



**Element 2.2 – Work with partner agencies to develop a staffed and programming approach to spontaneous recreation/play**

- **Develop a free or low cost program called ‘play in the park’ and offer it at a variety of after-school venues and on Saturdays**
- **Train or hire trained staff to facilitate these play in the park programs**
- **Train volunteers to support these programs**
- **Coordinate pre-school play in the park programming with pre-schools and daycares**

Discussion

The majority of research on the topic of enhancing children’s play recognizes that spontaneous, child-directed play has died out in most urban areas of North America and Europe due to the unintended consequences of social and economic changes. These include:

- Parents, especially mothers, who were the ‘facilitators of play’, are now in the workforce in those critical before and after school hours.
- Siblings, of whom there were usually one or two, have disappeared as family size has shrunk from 2.4 children to 1.3 children.
- Houses are generally larger and less dense than they used to be, and roads and parking areas occupy a much larger percentage of the urban land area.
- There are more cars, so children are driven everywhere, including ‘play dates’.
- There is more traffic so children biking and walking are less safe.
- The media has made everyone more wary of strangers, and ‘stranger-danger’.

Some or all of these challenges need to be overcome if children are going to use the park without their parents. This is not to say that parent engagement is to be discouraged – just that the hours that parents can accompany their children to the park are much more limited. The three essential elements that need to be created, with the first two creating the third, are as follows:

- Work with the other agencies that deliver recreation programming turn play into a program and offer it in the parks which have appropriate park amenities – the City, through FCSS, has initiated, in conjunction with the school districts, several after-school programs; they take place at schools but could also be run at parks. Many other partners, especially TLC, offer programming. It is also the case that parents understand and like the idea of ‘programs’ and will relate to the idea of registering and paying (a minimal amount) for their children to be supervised while playing in the park.
- Train staff or hire trained staff – there are many universities that train play workers and play facilitators; it is a separate but related discipline to recreation programming. However most of those universities are outside Canada (primarily Europe<sup>10</sup>), although the U of Alberta does offer some play courses. Spruce Grove needs to work with ARPA to identify and hire trained play facilitators. There is also a role to be played by volunteers – it is a ‘watching’ role...the idea is to ‘just let the kids play’; volunteers can also be trained in the appropriate roles to play vis-à-vis the children.
- Critical mass of children – this will occur once parents gain faith in the approach. It will happen when good staff provide a creative and fun environment for children.

The key times will be after-school, but it will also be possible to run programs during the day, linking with day homes, pre-schools and child care centres.

<sup>10</sup> See University of Gloucestershire - <http://www.glos.ac.uk/courses/undergraduate/ply/Pages/entry2012.aspx>

**Element 2.3 - Develop a communications/marketing/information campaign to communicate to the public, especially to parents, the importance of children, and adults, 'getting outside', and Council's approaches to support this movement**

- **Clearly identify what programs, services and amenities are already available in the region for spontaneous play**
- **Link to other programs which are growing in Canada**
- **Develop a webpage focused on this initiative, and promote the many emerging social media ways of communicating**
- **Produce collateral materials**
- **Work with other Gt. Edmonton municipalities and the University of Alberta to host a series of parent/adult workshops**

#### Discussion

Ensuring that the public is knowledgeable about the inventory of parks and their amenities, as well as supportive of Council's approach of enhancing park amenities as a way of stimulating spontaneous recreation, is critical to the success of the approach. There are several parallel themes that underpin this approach that will need to be tied together:

- The importance of 'getting outside' into the fresh air, year round...
- The importance of linking 'children and nature'
- The importance of reinventing children's unstructured play.



Luckily these are themes that were reinforced at the National Recreation Summit in November 2011, and are in the emerging National Recreation Agenda which is being formed into federal-provincial-territorial policy.

They are also themes that are being promoted in various jurisdictions across the Country<sup>11</sup>.

Spruce Grove, together with the other municipalities of the Greater Edmonton area, has a real opportunity to be a leader in this regard, perhaps in conjunction with ARPA. A communications strategy with social marketing, website and collateral materials are required.

Another partner will be the University of Alberta which, as noted previously, has developed a focus in this area. Hosting a series of regional workshops for parents and professionals may be a project that they would be interested in leading.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://eatwormsplay.com/>

**Element 2.4 – Address the issues of safety and risk**

- **Initiate internal discussions, such as with the City’s Risk manager, regarding adding more challenge to children and youth outdoor recreation provision**

## Discussion

The issue of risk and liability lurks behind much of the decision making in the area of children’s play and spontaneous recreation. However it is clear that children and young people are not being served well by removing all possible risk from their lives and environments. Learning to manage risk is one of the tasks of childhood and the safe passage to adulthood.

For instance issues such as the height of climbing structures or the steepness/length of a toboggan hill are ones about which the children and youth, and often their parents, are saying ‘safe but boring’.

Other barriers come from local and provincial policies; one example is the requirement for a fenced play area for a pre-school, even if the pre-school is immediately adjacent to a park. Again, this is an area where the Primary Care Network should be involved.

These will not be easy issues to address, and there needs to be an intensive discussion with the City’s Risk Manager about how issues are to be addressed.

This discussion should also include discussions of required maintenance levels, as it is likely that greater challenge in play equipment, for instance, can be accommodated if monitoring and maintenance levels are increased.





**Element 2.5 - Seek partners for all these initiatives**

- **Encourage sport organizations to reorient their community programming to reduce the competitive elements and encourage pick up and drop in games for both children and adults (link to CS4L)**
- **Work with local naturalist groups to develop simple programs for adults and seniors that get them outdoors and active, such as nature walks, bird-watching, etc**
- **Seek sponsorship for these program initiatives from local merchant organizations**

## Discussion

The City will need to engage its partners in recreation if spontaneous recreation is to be further developed. These partners and partnerships are clearly laid out in the RLSP and some of the key ones include:

The community sport organizations whose sport is played outdoors and in parks – these organizations need to be encouraged to develop pick up and drop in games for children and for all ages.

They will have to rethink some of their approaches and attitudes if the games are to be truly 'participant driven' – this means no umpires/referees, no leagues, just turn up and have fun. However this approach is embodied in the CS4L program (Community Sport for Life) that is now the foundation for all national sport organizations, with the foundation levels being about having fun (FUNdamentals); modified games are available in most of the major sports which are suited for spontaneous recreation.

Outdoor programming for adults such as nature walks and bird-watching are also potential partnership activities with local naturalist groups, and hiking/walking groups.

And a final idea for partnerships was suggested by a focus group participant: how about getting local merchants to sponsor Saturday programs for children, so that their parents can shop in peace. A great example of out-of-the-box thinking!



**Strategy 3 Ensure future growth of spontaneous amenities and opportunities is in line with overall community growth.****Element 3.1 – Establish a monitoring and tracking system for spontaneous recreation and use of parks, and ensure that usage and population growth are synchronized**

## Discussion

It is relatively easy to track the growth or decline in structured sport and recreation activities. There are a range of parameters which are kept either automatically by the facility and program registration systems at TLC (such as how many people swim in the pool every day), or by the sport groups (such as numbers of each age group registered to play).

Parks are by their very nature harder to track usage – no one registers to visit the park, nor does any agency keep numbers for pick-up games of shinney or skating on the ponds or at Central Park.

However if the City is going to invest in park amenities, as part of a policy direction to get more people living active healthy and happy lives, then some measurement system is necessary to ensure that the policy is successful, and to modify it to increase its success.

We would have a number of suggestions as to how this can be accomplished:

- Counters at various points on the trail system – this is the most used amenity and various trail counter systems are available.
- Contribute to the Alberta Recreation Survey that is done bi-annually, and buy an 'overcount' for Spruce Grove to give statistically valid data.
- Alternatively develop a Spruce Grove household survey to gather data about park use. Administer the same survey to a sample of households every year or every two years.
- Link to some of the national initiatives, such as the Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card, and work with communities across Canada or Alberta who might be interested in having parallel data.

Whichever approach is selected, it will then be possible to relate usage growth to population growth, and to ensure that park amenities of all types keep pace with development.