



The Impact of COVID-19 on the Recreation Sector

Summary of Our Observations To Date and Potential Planning Considerations for the Future

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Prepared by: The rcs Team

Abstract

Like every aspect of society, the recreation sector is going through an unprecedented time and we are all trying to project what the future will look like in the immediate term and beyond. Our team does not have answers, but we do have a unique perspective on the sector due to the number of jurisdictions that we work in and the ongoing volunteer roles held by a number of our team members. The last few months have also given our team a unique opportunity to engage with each other and discuss our various perspectives on the future of recreation. This paper coalesces a number of these thoughts and provides some value to the recreation sector as plan to re-open and re-engage.

The topics discussed in this resource include:

- Recreation and active living participation trends in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic (some we believe that may have a longer term legacy or influence).
- Key considerations that will guide re-opening planning (and early indications of how the recreation sector is addressing these considerations).
- Current challenges and opportunities facing recreation service providers.
- Potential impacts of COVID-19 on future facility planning and development.

Introduction

Recreation facilities are the hub of activity and connectedness in communities of all sizes – they are key contributors that drive quality of life on an individual and community level. Yet during these exceptional times many of the aspects we treasure and value about recreation services (the energy of a busy recreation centre pool or fitness centre, watching kids play hockey, meeting friends for a fitness class, etc.) are unavailable to us. To help “flatten the curve” and protect ourselves and our neighbours we have all been asked to avoid recreation facilities.

While these restrictions are absolutely necessary and follow the guidance of our public health authorities, they are causing other unfortunate impacts on the physical, mental and economic health of many individuals. Although the challenges faced by communities, individuals and the recreation sector are significant and the uncertainty regarding the months ahead further complicates matters, recreation services will be critical to the path forward for all communities.

More than ever, the recreation sector will need to be strategic and deliberate with how services are planned and delivered and how recreation experiences are re-introduced into communities. We believe there will be ways for the recreation sector to emerge from this pandemic stronger and more resilient than ever. However, like all sectors of our society, this recovery will need to be calculated and consider many different perspectives for that to occur. **Recognizing that the situation is fluid and new information on timelines and re-opening plans evolves on a weekly basis, this resource discusses a number of topics that we believe will be important for the recreation sector to consider in the months ahead.**



Leadership We've Seen in the Recreation Sector

Our team has been inspired and encouraged by the leadership shown by our provincial, territorial and national recreation and parks associations and would be remiss if we did not acknowledge their continued work to help navigate the sector through this unprecedented time. Specific ways in which we have seen this leadership in action include:

- Creating opportunities for dialogue and learning by organizing webinars on key topics such as re-launch planning, anticipated facility operations planning, etc.
- Fostering cross-sectoral relationships with public health and ensuring that parks and recreation are part of the discussion.
- Advocating for funding support and stimulus related to parks and recreation.
- Working with public health and senior government officials to develop re-opening guidelines and frameworks.

Changing Behaviours & Expectations

In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only forced service providers to think differently about recreation and parks, it has also imposed a new lifestyle on participants. This adjusted lifestyle is one that has reduced structured activities such as community sports, events and travel; but does include more quality time at home with family, more interaction between parents and children and more time participating in unstructured, outdoor activity. Research being conducted across the country (including current studies being undertaken at the University of Alberta, University of the Fraser Valley and University of Windsor) will shed further light on the impacts that COVID-19 measures have had on physical activity and wellness levels and could help inform future planning and decision making. Data from other countries provides some reason for concern as it suggests that physical activity levels have decreased, yet also indicates that individuals are starting to adjust and find new ways of remaining active while a number of recreational options remain limited or not available at all. In late March the World Health Organization published recommended guidance for physical activity during COVID-19 and identified a number of benefits for staying active.¹



The Impact of COVID-19 on Physical Activity Levels – Data from Australia

A recent study out of Australia (*Physical Activity during COVID-19 Lock-Down: Insights into Australians' Physical Activity and Fitness during the COVID-19 Lock-Down*) found that overall physical activity levels declined by 44%. The study also noted changes in how people are fulfilling their active living needs, with 25% reporting that they walk daily and 30% indicating that they had tried a home based workout.²

- 2 Australian Leisure Network. Retrieved from: <https://www.ausleisure.com.au/news/australians-physical-activity-declines-during-coronavirus-lockdown>

1 World Health Organization. Retrieved from: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/be-active-during-covid-19>

We have also noticed a shift in public messaging related to recreation and physical activity. During the initial weeks of the pandemic there was a clear and often reinforced message to stay home and avoid all non-essential activities outside the home. However, as the pandemic has entered its third month in Canada public health and elected government officials have increasingly made a point to include messaging during media briefings and on their social media feeds on the importance of exercise and physical activity.

The economic stress put on many families as a direct or indirect result of the COVID-19 pandemic will also present challenges and impact the activities that many families can afford to do. Affordability and inclusion are already top of mind for most public sector providers of recreation and the sector has made many advancements in maximizing inclusion and access through the establishment of subsidization programs, low or no cost offerings, partnership with community organizations and other sectors and a more in-depth understanding of societal barriers to participation. The recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 may result in increased demands on these mechanisms and require providers to place an even greater focus on ensuring inclusivity and access.



Potential Impacts of COVID-19 on the Ability to Pay for Recreation and Sport

59% of Canadians claim that their household's financial situation has been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 situation and 60% expressed concern about their ability to pay bills and loans.³

A recent (May 2020) survey conducted in the United States by the Aspen Institute's Project Play initiative found that 54% of organized sport parent's finances have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19.⁴

3 TransUnion Insights. Retrieved from: <https://www.transunion.ca/blog/covid-19-pandemic-financial-impact-on-canadian-consumer-week3>

4 Aspen Institute, Project Play. Retrieved from: <https://www.aspenprojectplay.org/coronavirus-and-youth-sports/reports/2020/5/12/survey-50-percent-of-parents-fear-kids-will-get-sick-by-returning-to-sports>

Flexibility and Creativity in Programming

The last few months has drastically altered how many individuals access active living opportunities. With recreation facilities closed and the interruption of team and group activities, many individuals have adapted their lifestyle to include more time using outdoor spaces such as parks, trails and sport fields. As indoor facilities are likely to remain closed (or only partially open with scaled down operations) for the immediate future, municipalities are not only encouraging the use of these spaces for “spontaneous” recreation but also exploring how to potentially program and animate these spaces once it is permissible to begin offering programming with the appropriate social distancing measures.

We have also been interested in observing how the fitness market has reacted to the pandemic. A recent Forbes article⁵ noted that the private fitness industry has seen a fundamental shift over the past two months and that providers with an existing online presence or capability to easily shift classes to virtual platforms have been able to survive (and in some cases thrive). A number of public sector fitness providers have also reacted to the current situation by offering online fitness resources. **Examples: The City of Calgary and City of Surrey have developed a variety of fitness videos for their recreation websites and promoted these resources via social media platforms.** While many individuals will be keen to return to their in-person fitness classes at recreation facilities, it is plausible that a legacy of COVID-19 could be a longer term demand for virtual fitness classes that are affordable and potentially included as part of a traditional facility membership.

Re-Opening Planning Considerations & Challenges

Most local recreation service providers are currently working closely with their government and public health officials to map out the phasing in of recreation services. This planning will require flexibility as timelines remain tentative and must be conducted in alignment with broader provincial guidelines. To state the obvious, there are numerous considerations and factors that must be taken into account for the re-opening of recreation facilities and it is also important to recognize that numerous opinions and perspectives exist with regards to acceptable levels of risk. The complexity of the situation has further magnified the crucial role of provincial and national recreation and parks associations in both advocating for the sector and acting as a conduit between local communities and senior levels of government.



Example: The Important Role of Recreation and Parks Sector Leadership in Helping to Inform Re-Opening Planning

In British Columbia, BCRPA was formally asked on May 1st to formulate a restart plan and guidelines for the recreation and parks sector. The ongoing work of BCRPA was formally acknowledged by Premier Horgan in his Restarting the Province address on May 6th.

What is clear from the initial re-opening plans announced by provincial governments over the past few weeks is that even as some community facilities and amenities are permitted to re-open there will be a number of restrictions and strict guidelines put in place to ensure public safety. These measures will be necessary to meet public health directives for hygiene and social distancing and also to provide assurance to recreation and parks users. The introduction of reduced carrying capacities for facilities and spaces will have impacts on facility and space use thereby impacting both social and financial return. These factors will require all recreation service providers to think creatively and identify

5 Forbes Online. April 29, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/yolarobert1/2020/04/29/is-the-online-fitness-boom-here-to-stay/#42e9c72e7080>

alternative ways to use and manage available space. This could include temporarily retrofitting arenas and other larger span spaces for fitness program uses, limiting the number of people in specific areas of a facility, adapting change room protocols and uses and short term changes to point of purchase and patron access points (e.g. pass scanning areas).

Potential Support for Parks and Recreation Infrastructure

On May 12th the federal government announced funding to support infrastructure upgrades and retrofits that will make public facilities more pandemic-resistant and encourage outdoor activities. While full details have yet to be released, this announcement reflects that senior levels of government are responding to calls from the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and other recreation, culture and sport organizations.

Once people are in facilities and spaces, there will also be a monitoring and education function for customer service staff to ensure policies and protocols are adhered to, further demonstrating that these important public spaces are safe. As facilities re-open do we simply respond to demand, or take a more proactive approach about prioritizing who most needs to use the spaces?

For municipalities and non-profit organizations that already administer public messaging campaigns to promote participation in and the benefits of recreation and parks activities, focus will need to shift in the short- and mid-term to assuring the public that recreation facilities and playgrounds are safe to visit. This messaging will be best delivered if it originates from credible sources. Jointly released statements from recreation and parks and public health leaders; consistency between communities within each province and territory; and even consistency across provincial and territorial borders will also be most effective in assuring the public.

Facility Re-Opening Planning Resources

The National Recreation and Parks Association's [*Path to Recovery Framework: Specific Guidance for Common Park and Recreation Spaces, Facilities and Programs*](#) has been identified as a leading resource to guide the re-opening and future operations of parks and recreation infrastructure.⁶

The [*Alberta Recreation and Parks Association*](#) and [*British Columbia Parks and Recreation Association*](#) have also hosted webinars and created sections on their websites with a number of links and resources that are available free of charge.

6 National Parks and Recreation Association, Path to Recovery Framework: Specific Guidance for Common Park and Recreation Spaces, Facilities and Programs. Retrieved from: <https://www.nrpa.org/our-work/Three-Pillars/health-wellness/coronavirus-disease-2019/path-to-recovery/specific-guidance-for-common-park-and-recreation-spaces-facilities-and-programs/>

Maintaining a Dialogue with Residents and Stakeholders

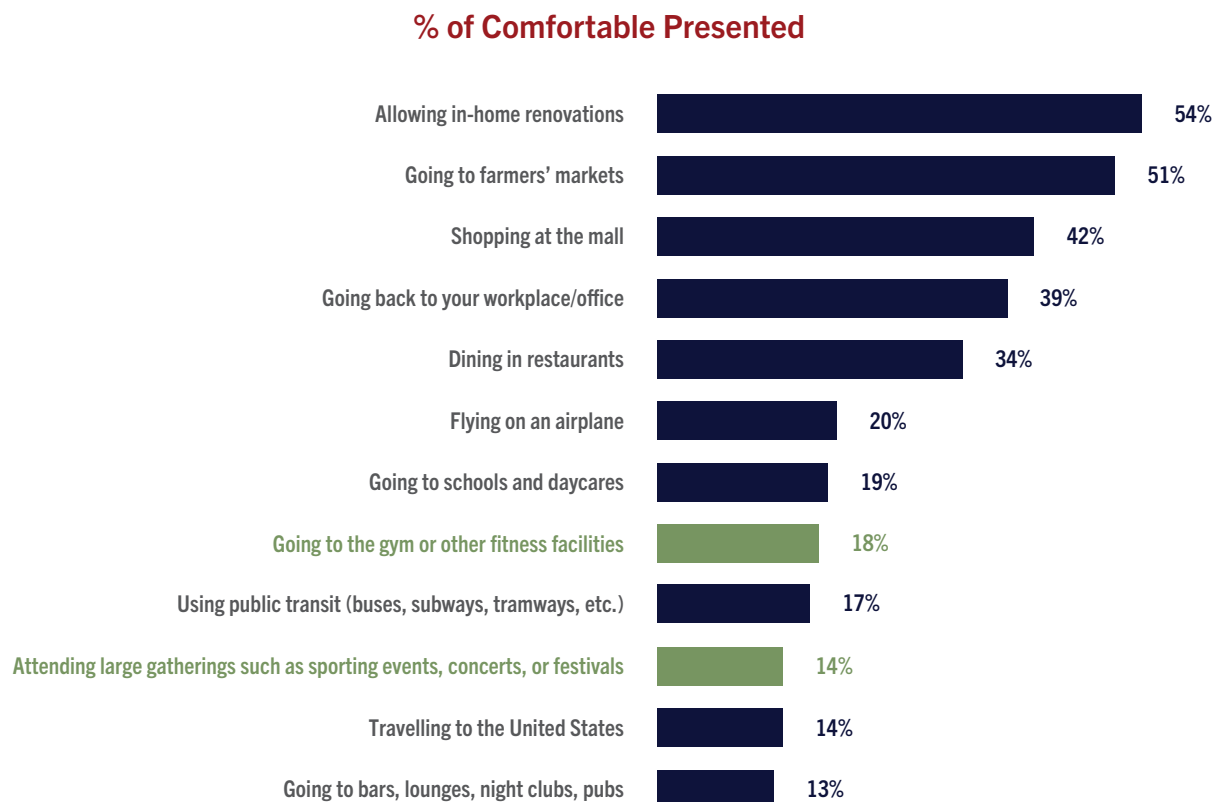
The majority of messaging coming from all levels of government since the pandemic began has been focused on public health measures, impacts, and more recently potential re-opening plans. While public COVID-19 related health messaging will continue to be prominent, gathering the thoughts and opinions of community members on topics related to parks and recreation (and other municipal services) is important and can be done if conducted in an appropriate tone, with clear purpose and is aimed at gathering meaningful information.

Understanding the viewpoints and needs of residents related to recreation and parks services will also be critical to helping plan both the immediate and longer term future. A recent (May 2020) Leger survey found that a large proportion of Canadians may be uncomfortable returning to normal life, including use of some recreational activities.



Finding from the Leger COVID-19 Tracking Survey (May 12, 2020)⁷

Once the governments lift the protective measures put in place to fight COVID-19, which of the following would you be comfortable doing...



⁷ Leger Weekly COVID-19 Pandemic Tracker (May 12, 2020). Retrieved from: <https://leger360.com/surveys/weekly-covid-19-pandemic-tracker-may-12-2020/>

The findings presented in the graph on the previous page suggest that while the overall ability to re-open facilities and offer programming will be guided by public health directives, resident viewpoints regarding levels of comfort and perceived safety will be equally important to consider. As such, recreation service providers will need to better understand the perspectives of facility and program users and the factors that will impact their participation willingness in the short term. It is also highly likely that these perspectives and attitudes will continually evolve as circumstances change. Creating (or re-establishing) a dialogue with the public through focused engagement will help provide the necessary information to guide start-up planning, the phasing-in of services and overall service delivery in the short term.

Looking further into the future, it will also be important for recreation service providers to understand how the COVID-19 situation has changed (perhaps permanently) overall values, perceived benefits and priorities related to recreation activities. For example...

- How has the closure of facilities impacted resident quality of life and wellness?
- How has the ongoing COVID-19 situation and related societal challenges impacted residents viewpoints on future capital projects and other initiatives?
- What new or adapted types of recreation activities have residents participated in during COVID-19? How might these recreation “discoveries” change short, medium and long term activity preferences?

Engaging the community on topics (such as the aforementioned examples) presents a unique opportunity to understand the value of recreation to residents during a time when access is severely restricted and many individuals have evaluated their own priorities. While public health messaging and engagement remains paramount, there is opportunity to raise these other subjects. We are aware of municipalities that have initiated this process by simply asking residents about the types of engagement in which they are willing to participate and how they would prefer to be engaged. Gathering input from citizens is good governance in times of both prosperity and challenge.

Capital Projects and Stimulus

Senior levels of government have signaled that future economic stimulus funding could be available to support new facility projects and COVID-19 recovery. In some cases the need for “shovel ready” facility projects has been explicitly stated. While the details for these potential grant programs may not yet be clear, the history of previous grant programs suggests that there will be high levels of competition for these funds and that preference will be given to projects that meet the following criteria:

- Have demonstrated community and stakeholder support.
- Are far enough along in their planning and design process to be developed relatively quickly (i.e. “shovel ready”).
- Demonstrate regional and/or cross-sectoral partnerships.
- Consider other challenges such as climate change and accessibility and inclusion.
- Are supported by sound justification (e.g. business case, feasibility study or referenced as a priority in a Master Plan).

We have seen many of our clients and staff beginning to collect relevant data on all the above issues in order to be ready when new capital funding requirements become clear.

The Design of Public Recreation Spaces

The design of new or enhanced recreation facilities and spaces will also be influenced by this crisis. Although climate change and physical activity and safety related design considerations will still be at play, designers and planners may also need to consider social distancing / spacing and crowd limitations. While some may consider these short term adjustments it is possible that they could become longer term factors. What is perhaps more likely as a legacy of the current situation (as previously discussed) are increased protocols pertaining to sanitization. These protocols will impact needs and design dynamics for storage and janitorial space as well as circulation space, change room and social spaces in facilities.

The Financial Impact on Municipalities

While the impacts of the COVID-19 situation are challenging all levels of government, municipalities face a challenge that is even more significant due to their limited revenue sources and funding mechanisms. In many jurisdictions the share of responsibility for service provision has also increasingly been “downloaded” onto municipal levels of government, further magnifying these challenges even prior to COVID-19. On April 23rd, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) released a series of recommendations to the federal government that are intended to further highlight the challenges being faced and present meaningful solutions that can help alleviate the critical situation. These recommendations include a request for immediate, short term funding support as well as systemic changes to funding models and formulas.

The necessary shutdown of recreation facilities is a significant contributor to the stress facing many municipalities. A recent briefing note released by the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association estimated that:⁸

- For each month community recreation facilities remain shuttered the combined cost to Canadian municipalities will be \$221M.
- When facilities resume operations, new disease deterrence procedures (hygiene, cleaning, social distancing) could raise Canadian facility operating costs by as much as \$226M annually.

More so than ever before, it will be important for municipalities to be strategic and efficient with available resources. Financial limitations will force municipalities to prioritize services and future capital spending. Specific to recreation, it is likely that recreation departments will be required to:

- Revisit previously identified capital project priorities.
- Ensure that clear rationale exists for both operational and capital expenditures (more so than ever before demonstrate alignment with resident needs, benefits, and strategic outcomes).
- Explore alternative approaches to service delivery that can lower costs (e.g. regional partnerships, contracted operations, reduced service level models).

Pandemic Readiness

One thing that all of us have learned is that the world is not immune to a pandemic. Being ready to respond to future public health situations will, and should be, at the back of all of our minds for the foreseeable future. From a recreation and parks perspective, the operating policies and protocols and the design considerations related to social distancing and hygiene will enhance readiness as will our shared experiences with COVID-19. Broader policies and ongoing collaboration with public health officials will be needed so that our collective response can be more coordinated, consistent and effective. Future strategic planning undertaken for recreation and parks services (e.g. master plans, department business plans, etc.) should include guidance on how to manage future situations if they arise.

8 Canadian Parks and Recreation Association. Briefing Note: Post-Pandemic Economic Stimulus: Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure. Retrieved from: <https://www.cpra.ca/covid19>

Closing Thoughts: Taking Risks

Public health directives both now and in the future will be based upon mitigating risk: risk to overall public health, risk to the capacities of our health care systems and risk to the other important aspects of Canadian life (economy, travel, diplomacy, etc.). Within the recreation and parks sector, we know that risk is not always a bad thing, especially when it comes to the development of children (risky play). However, the risk associated with COVID-19 is unique due to our limited understanding of the virus and the timing surrounding future interventions that will be available to manage it. The recreation and parks sector will need to be an active part of the creation of new guidelines and directives that set the stage for activity to occur in a manner that mitigates risk and strikes the appropriate balance between risk and the societal return provided by recreation and parks.

About rcs

RC Strategies+PERC is a Community Development firm specializing in parks, recreation, trails and leisure planning and brings extensive experience working with the not-for-profit sector, municipalities, regional districts and provincial governments across the Country. For more information or to contact one of our specialists, please visit our website - <http://www.rcstrategies.ca/>

