

# Briefing, PFR five-year implementation plan

*From: Community Recreation for All and Toronto Women's City Alliance*

## **Who we are:**

Community Recreation for All (CRfA) is a group of youth workers, community workers, researchers and community residents working to improve access to recreation in Toronto. Toronto Women's City Alliance (TWCA) is a diverse group of women working to ensure political commitment to addressing and removing barriers that many women face in accessing essential services.

Over the past three years, both CRfA and TWCA have heard about community recreation and access to space from hundreds of Toronto residents through workshops, surveys and direct outreach. We've also received extensive input from youth workers, community workers and parents.

## Executive Summary

There are many positive things in Parks, Forestry and Recreation's (PFR) five-year implementation plan. We are particularly pleased with the emphasis on data collection and the expansion of Priority Centres. In addition, the city-wide youth leadership program for 50 percent of grade 9 students is a step in the right direction. Overall, however, we have many urgent concerns, which we hope the Community Development and Recreation (CDRC) committee will address at their June 26th meeting ([please see a list of concrete actions CDRC can take later in this document on each of these points](#)). Our concerns fall into three categories:

- **Lack of information.** CDRC does not have the information they need to approve this plan. There are several reports pending from PFR that apply directly to the five-year implementation plan. In addition, while the implementation plan allows for the addition of 17 new Priority Centres, there is no baseline—or reference to defining a baseline—for what will go on in these centres.

- **Youth and communities need action now.** Toronto youth need and deserve action now. While we are pleased at the addition of a youth leadership program, it will only serve 50 percent of grade 9 students for a period of weeks or months at one moment in their development. We have heard over and over from youth and communities that what is needed is access to safe youth spaces, and it is needed **now**. The implementation plan includes no references to youth drop-ins or access to youth space. In fact, PFR states that they will submit a report with an inventory of youth programs and drop-ins *after* the implementation plan is approved. Youth have spoken clearly as to the need for space, and they should be presented with concrete action now. In addition, while the implementation plan mentions the need to improve the permitting process and the Welcome Policy application process, and to maximize the use of community centres, it does not build on the service plan—which also articulated these goals—by presenting a concrete and time-sensitive plan of action.

- **Resources.** When considering the question of increasing access to recreation please note that PFR cut \$3.13 off their baseline programming budget in 2013, and returned a \$7.6 million surplus in 2012. All this while there are many programs with long waiting lists, children shut out of summer camps, youth shut out of spaces and programs, elders and adults who aren't able to access our centres and community groups scrambling for access to space. We ask that CDRC consider investing this 'surplus' into PFR's operating budget specifically to increase economic access, and that PFR never again be allowed to return a sizeable amount of resources allocated to communities as 'surplus.'

If we can sum up the outcomes we'd like to see, they would be:

- A) A culture of 'yes' at PFR that starts at the top, and is felt strongly at the grassroots;
- B) An implementation plan that sees all our community centres packed with diverse, inter-generational activity that reflects the needs, strengths, interests and dreams of surrounding communities from morning until night, seven days a week.

### **Action points:**

As communities need action now, we are asking for a small number of concrete actions that will increase access now and in the future, and lend substance to the city's stated commitment to access and equity. We are also asking for processes that allow CDRC and City Council to consider adequate information when making decisions about the future our community centres and recreation programs.

**1. Make sure City Council has the information it needs to consider this plan.** CDRC is being asked to approve the implementation plan *before* they receive numerous reports from PFR meant to inform its content. As a result, we ask that the committee move to create provisions to amend the implementation plan based on the forthcoming reports in fall 2013, specifically:

- An inventory of youth spaces and programs;
- A baseline definition of Priority Centre programming and access to space (see below for details);
- The state of the Welcome Policy;
- The impact of the new Welcome Policy structure on access to after-school programming;
- The impact of user fees on access to recreation;
- The possibility of introducing universality throughout the system.

**2. Define Priority Centre.** We unconditionally support the addition of new Priority Centres in the City of Toronto. We are concerned, however, that without mandating adequate baseline programming, capacity (in terms of number of people served) and access to space, the designation might not be as meaningful as it could be. We ask the committee to request a report to be delivered with reports referenced above in fall 2013 on minimum requirements for Priority Centre programming, capacity and hours, to be applied to all current and future Priority Centres.

Our recommendations for baseline programming in Priority Centre include:

- Free access to community space;
- Permanent, staffed youth drop-ins with evening and weekend hours;
- Open 7 days a week, from morning until late evening;
- Welcoming communal space with front-desk staff during opening hours, wifi, community boards;
- Full range of programming appropriate for the community including:
  - ⇒ Sports
  - ⇒ Fitness
  - ⇒ Arts
  - ⇒ Gender-inclusive programming
  - ⇒ Programming for differently abled community residents,

newcomers, LGBTQ people, elders, children, youth and adults

⇒ Range of summer camps

- Capacity to serve large numbers of people.

**3. Improve access to youth space now.** As there is a recognized crisis in terms of youth access to space in Toronto (1); as youth access to space is identified in the Roots of Violence Report and the youth equity framework as key, and as we feel youth spaces are essential to: skills building, mentorship, leadership, community building, making friends and feeling valued as a human being, we propose:

- The introduction of two centralized, full-time positions to connect youth to space, youth drop-ins and youth programming in 2013. These positions would be responsible for:

- Offering a centralized point of contact for youth and youth programs looking for space in community centres;
- Offering a centralized point of contact for youth, parents, schools and community agencies looking for appropriate youth drop-ins and programs;
- Finding free and barrier-free space for youth and youth programs in community centres, including those that do not have their own insurance;
- Outreach – door knocking, going to schools, being out in the community;
- Keeping an up-to-date inventory of PFR youth programs, drop-ins and potential spaces;
- Reporting to and collaborating with PFR's community advisory committee around setting criteria for space, indicators of success, etc.

- The introduction of new youth drop-ins, in summer 2013.

We ask the committee to request a report to be delivered on the implementation of two dedicated positions to connect youth to space and programs as outlined above.

We ask the committee to request a report from PFR on how to address the crisis in access to youth space and drop-in programming for **summer 2013** to be delivered in July 2013.

We ask the committee to request a report from PFR on best practices in youth drop-ins, suggesting a model for expansion to be delivered along with the inventory of youth drop-ins report in fall 2013.

**4. Demonstrate a commitment to access now by removing fees on leisure swim at indoor pools.** Communities have been waiting a long time to see concrete evidence of PFR's commitment to access. One important, concrete step PFR and City Council could take right now would be removing the fee on leisure swim in indoor pools, and expanding the time dedicated to leisure swim. While we are pleased at the introduction of the 'Swim to Survive' program, families and children will need a place to practice—and to enjoy—swimming throughout the year, and particularly during the fall, winter and spring.

We ask the committee to move to immediately remove the fees on leisure swim in indoor pools, and expand the hours dedicated to leisure swim where possible.

Additional concerns including:

**Access without fear.** City Council has moved to extend city services to everyone, regardless of immigration status. The implementation plan for our community centres should be accompanied by a plan to welcome all residents—regardless of immigration status—into our community centres.

We ask that the committee request a report on incorporating 'Access without fear' into the five-year implementation plan.

**Defining a data collection and training strategy.** We were very pleased to see data collection and equity emphasized in the implementation plan.

We'd like to see this accompanied by:

- A clear data collection strategy, including plans for sharing data with the community;
- Access to data disaggregated by gender and ethnicity;
- Anti-racism and anti-oppression training for all PFR staff including management, rec staff and maintenance staff.

**Avoiding a two-tier system.** Continued references to 'primary' programs raise concerns that PFR is moving towards a 'two-tier' system that will reinforce existing class inequalities in the city by restricting access to 'premium' city-run programming to people who can pay.

**Being realistic about the Welcome Policy.** The Welcome Policy subsidy program currently serves a fraction of those who are eligible. And those who do have access currently have to choose between enrolling their children in the After-School Recreation Care (ARC) program OR summer camp and/or programs. It costs \$422.22 to keep one child in the city's after school recreation care during the school year. That leaves parents with \$32.78 for the whole summer, which is not even enough for swimming lessons or one week of PFR's least expensive summer camp. Adding 17 Priority Centres will not lessen the need for the subsidy program. Our recommendation, along with the recommendation of other recreation policy researchers (2), continues to be to increase resources for the Welcome Policy, and return to a program-based allocation.

(1) Another Winter, Another Spring: Toronto youth speak out about access to space. 2011. Social Planning Council and Space Coalition. <http://spacecoalition.ca/wp-content/uploads/Youth-and-Space-Report-FINAL.pdf>

(2) Exercising Good Policy: Increasing Access to Recreation in Toronto's 2013 Budget. 2012. Wellesley Institute. [www.wellesleyinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Exercising-Good-Policy\\_Wellesley-Institute\\_2012.pdf](http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Exercising-Good-Policy_Wellesley-Institute_2012.pdf)