

Foundations for the Future



Building Critical
Infrastructure



Empowering
Participation



Supporting the
Workforce

PARKS AND RECREATION ONTARIO

2025 Ontario Pre-Budget Consultation

Submitted to the Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy,
Minister of Finance and the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs



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About Us

Parks and Recreation Ontario (PRO) is a non-profit association with over 7,000 members from across the province, including post-secondary students, municipal staff, community agencies, and independent operators. Collectively, our members provide parks and recreation services to over 85% of Ontario's population. PRO champions the health, social, economic, and environmental benefits of parks and recreation through evidence-based practices, advocacy, and collaborative cross-sectoral partnerships. Our work includes policy, research, education, training, and professional development opportunities, as well as our flagship quality standards program, [HIGH FIVE®](#). We envision a future for Ontario where every person has equitable access to vibrant communities, sustainable environments, and personal health.



Our members provide parks and recreation services to **over 85%** of Ontario's population.

Why PRO?

From municipal leaders to academic scholars, PRO's membership encompasses a far-reaching, dynamic, and interdisciplinary network of the province's top parks and recreation experts. Collectively, our members steer our advocacy priorities and budgetary recommendations. The recommendations outlined in this document represent a critical and informed response to the lived experiences, challenges, and opportunities voiced by over 7,000 PRO members from across the province. As one of the largest provincial organizations representing the interests of the parks and recreation sector, PRO is well positioned to guide the Province in making informed investments that will contribute to building strong communities that are healthier, more sustainable, and better equipped for Ontario's future.

Acknowledgements

Over the past year, the Province has demonstrated a sincere commitment to enhancing the parks and recreation sector in Ontario. PRO acknowledges, with gratitude, new provincial investments in 2024 that are positively impacting the sector and making a marked impact in the lives of Ontarians:



A \$200 million commitment over 3 years through the Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund to support communities and organizations in addressing recreation infrastructure gaps.



A \$17 million funding increase over three years and program expansion for Senior Active Living Centres to support program operators in enhancing the quality and quantity of recreation services and program to older adults. This year's program expansion will support the opening of up to 100 new Senior Active Living Centres, particularly benefiting areas of Ontario where program offerings are currently limited.

PRO acknowledges and is grateful for these investments, and other ongoing commitments to the sector, including funding through the **Inclusive Community Grant, Seniors Community Grant, and Ontario's After School Program.**

However, we know that there is more work to be done. With the support of the Province, the parks and recreation sector can be further enhanced to better meet the needs of Ontario's growing and changing population. PRO looks forward to collaborating with the Province to build a future Ontario that is healthier, more sustainable, and better connected.





Identifying the Cracks

Ontario has a strong tradition of providing quality parks and recreation opportunities for citizens across the province. However, there are cracks in the foundation that must be addressed to ensure a future where all Ontarians have access to physical activity, green space, and community.



Ontario's recreation spaces are aging and closing.



Recreation needs of Ontarians are changing.



Ontario's parks and recreation professionals are undervalued.

Our Solution

2025 Budget Recommendations

Communities are more than houses. As the Province continues to work towards building 1.5 million new homes, it is vitally important that recreation infrastructure is provided to ensure the health and well-being of all Ontarians. Arenas, pools, parks, playgrounds, cricket pitches – these spaces transform housing developments into complete communities. Ontarians deserve vibrant, desirable, and economically sustainable housing options, where they can live, work, and play close to home. **Investment in the parks and recreation sector is an investment in the future of public health, emergency management, environmental preservation, economic growth, and so much more.**

If implemented, our 2025 provincial budget recommendations will help kickstart economic growth, create rewarding career pathways, and most importantly, support healthy, liveable, and complete communities.

Investing in Critical Community Infrastructure

- » Implement an annual continuance of the *Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund* of \$1 billion annually for 10 years.
- » Increase the Inclusive Community Grants Program to \$3 million annually.
- » Repeal and replace current legislation to prioritize equitable access to parkland and recreation spaces.

Empowering Sport and Recreation Participation

- » Invest \$9 million per year to eliminate barriers to participation in sport and recreation programming.
- » Implement quality assurance measures for recreation and sport programming province wide.

Supporting Ontario's Future Workforce

- » Invest \$5 million to expand the Summer Experience Program with a focused stream to support the parks and recreation sector.
- » Support the development of a certificate program for early-career parks and recreation professionals.

Reading Note: Endnotes (references) are hyperlinked throughout the document.

Simply click on the end note number to open the reference link or view all reference links at the end of this document.



> Priority 1: Investing in Critical Community Infrastructure

The Current Situation

From 2007 to 2021, Ontario's estimated recreation infrastructure deficit has grown from \$5 billion¹ to \$9.5 billion². Ranking second only to roads, recreation facilities have the highest provincial infrastructure investment backlog³. Further, 58% of Ontario's recreation assets are 'not in a good state of repair'⁴. Most of Ontario's publicly owned recreation facilities were built between 1956 and 1980. Facilities of this era require significant capital renovations or replacement and are more expensive to operate, especially when compounded with inflation. One in three recreation facilities will require investment in the next decade⁵.

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Exacerbating the issue of aging infrastructure, options for potential revenue sources to support parks and recreation spaces are limited. Under current legislation, affordable and select attainable housing units are exempt from development charges, and developments that include this type of housing are subject to reduced community benefits charges and parkland dedication⁶.

Additionally, purpose-built rental units receive discounts on development charges of up to 25% for family-friendly units⁷. Reductions and exemptions to these charges mean that municipalities are responsible for providing parks and recreation services to a greater number of residents with fewer dollars⁸.

Today, modern-day recreation facilities cost millions of dollars to repair or build.

\$50M

Saugeen Shores Aquatic & Wellness Centre (new build)

\$144M

Kitchener Indoor Recreation Complex (new build)

\$11M

Elliot Lake Centennial Arena (Repair)

Our solution.

To address the infrastructure backlog and improve equitable access to parks and recreation in Ontario, we propose the following:

Implement an annual continuance of the Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund of \$1 billion annually.

The current funding allocation of \$200 million over three years to the Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund is insufficient in addressing the \$9.5 billion provincial infrastructure backlog. Modern day recreational facilities come at a significant cost. Continuing and expanding this fund will ensure that municipalities are supported in providing Ontarians with access to quality recreation infrastructure.

Increase the Inclusive Community Grants Program to \$3 million annually.

The *Inclusive Community Grants Program* helps communities create more accessible and inclusive built environments. However, the impact of this program would be much greater if funding was increased to \$3 million annually. Increasing this fund would support the Province in fulfilling the promise of *Ontario's Accessibility Action Plan*⁹.

Repeal and replace current legislation to prioritize equitable access to parkland and recreation spaces.

We recommend the re-implementation of development charges for all affordable and attainable housing developments, and amendments to legislation that clearly outline accessibility and multi-use recreation standards for Privately-Owned Publicly Accessible Spaces to ensure that municipalities can generate funds required to provide quality parks and recreation services in their growing communities.



Only 49% of adults¹⁰ and 39% of children and youth¹¹ in Canada meet recommended physical activity guidelines.



In the summer of 2024, flooding in Ontario cost \$940 million in damages¹². Parks are effective at absorbing excess stormwater¹³ and cooling local temperatures¹⁴.



Recreation centres are essential for housing social services such as emergency shelters¹⁵, blood drives¹⁶, vaccine clinics¹⁷, and more.



6 in 10 Canadians with disabilities encounter barriers when accessing public spaces¹⁸. Neighbourhoods with affordable housing have less access to parks, greenspace, and green canopies^{19 20 21}.

> Priority 2: Empowering Sport & Recreation Participation

The Current Situation

Ontario's population is changing rapidly. From July 2023 to July 2024, the province welcomed over 500,000 newcomers²². In addition to population growth, Ontario is also experiencing increased diversity. Almost 30% of Canadians between the ages of 15 and 24 are part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community²³.

Accompanying population growth and diversification, Ontario's economy is also changing. Although the economy is showing signs of growth and improvement, many Ontarians are still struggling with affordability, unemployment, and inadequate housing²⁴. A recent poll found that 81% of Ontarians are more concerned about paying for basic necessities, like groceries, rent, and their mortgage, than saving for retirement²⁵.

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Ontario offers countless recreation and sport opportunities. However, there are currently minimal provincial regulations to implement quality assurance measures. Improving affordability of sport and recreation programming will give more Ontarians the opportunity to participate. Ensuring that programming provides quality experiences will inspire Ontarians to maintain active lifestyles.

43% of Ontario's youth and parents cite the cost of programs and equipment as a barrier to participation²⁶.

Our solution.

To address lack of affordability and improve quality assurance of parks and recreation programming in Ontario, we propose the following:

Invest \$9 million per year to eliminate barriers to participation in sport and recreation programming.

The Province currently supports recreation and sport programming for children, through *Ontario's After School Program*, and for older adults, through *Senior Active Living Centres*. However, for Ontarians between the ages of 12 and 55, there is minimal provincial funding to support affordable sport and recreation programming. To improve sport and recreation affordability for Ontarians of all ages, we propose the establishment of an annual \$9 million merit-based fund, open to municipalities, Indigenous communities, and non-profit organizations that deliver sport and recreation programming. We also propose that a stream of this fund be geared towards equity-deserving groups, including newcomers and 2SLGBTQ+ populations.

Implement quality assurance measures for recreation and sport programming province wide.

The Province is already making significant investments in quality assurance measures through the recognition of HIGH FIVE® accredited organizations in *Ontario's After School Program*²⁷. However, HIGH FIVE® quality assurance measures are relevant to recreation programming across the lifespan. The Province could have an even greater impact if HIGH FIVE® quality assurance measures were implemented in other province-wide recreation programming initiatives like *Senior Active Living Centres* and the *Ontario Parks Discovery Programs*. PRO would be pleased to dialogue with the Ministry to discuss how embedding HIGH FIVE® quality assurance measures into these programs would improve the quality and evaluation protocols of recreation programming across Ontario.



In recent years there has been a concerning upward trend in 2SLGBTQ+²⁸ and newcomer-motivated hate crimes^{29, 30}.

For newcomers and 2SLGBTQ+ Ontarians, access to sport and recreation plays a significant role in mental health and overall well-being^{31, 32}.



Equity-deserving groups thrive in culturally responsive programming³³.



HIGH FIVE® is Canada's only comprehensive quality standard for recreation programming. HIGH FIVE®'s approach is built on a quality framework and consists of program assessments, awareness, policies/procedures and training/development.

97% of organizations believe HIGH FIVE® training helps to create an environment that supports healthy child development³⁴.

> Priority 3: Supporting Ontario's Future Workforce

The Current Situation

Ontario's arts, entertainment and recreation sector contributes \$5.6 billion to Canada's economy, employing over 165,000 people across the province³⁵. Despite significant economic contributions, the average wage in Ontario's arts, entertainment and recreation sector is \$20.49³⁶, which is significantly lower than the provincial average of \$28.10 and does not meet liveable wage standards in nearly all regions of Ontario³⁷. Without providing liveable wages, the parks and recreation sector risks a significant labour shortage by 2030³⁸.

The average wage in Ontario's arts, entertainment and recreation sector is \$20.49, which is significantly lower than the provincial average of \$28.10.

In a sector supported by part-time work and seasonal positions, many Ontarians use parks and recreation as a stepping stone during their high school or post-secondary years while they prepare for careers in different fields. In fact, youth (aged 15 to 24) account for nearly 30% of the sector's work force³⁹. However, the sector provides a variety of employment opportunities beyond summer jobs. The parks and recreation sector offers dynamic and fulfilling careers, yet for youth entering the workforce, there are limited professional development opportunities to support them in exploring these career paths.



— Youth (aged 15 to 24) account for nearly **30%** of the sector's work force.

Our solution.

To address staffing shortages and improve professional development opportunities for parks and recreation professionals in Ontario, we propose the following:

Invest \$5 million to expand the *Summer Experience Program* with a focused stream to support the parks and recreation sector.

Wage subsidies provide direct financial support to non-profit organizations, municipalities, and Indigenous communities who employ youth in the parks and recreation sector. Expanding the *Summer Experience Program* will enable local governments and organizations to provide adequate compensation, especially to youth facing barriers to employment.

Support the development of a certificate program for early-career parks and recreation professionals.

PRO's Parks and Recreation Management Certificate (PRMC) program⁴⁰ has been very successful in supporting middle-management parks and recreation professionals in advancing their professional knowledge and skills. However, no such program currently exists for early-career professionals. To support and retain young parks and recreation professionals, we propose a **\$250,000 investment in the development of a certificate program geared towards individuals in the first 5 years of their careers.** Developing this certificate program would help to address labour shortages and elevate the skills and knowledge of future leaders in the parks and recreation sector.



In 2024, there were over 480 unique postings on PRO's member job board, ranging from entry-level to senior leader positions.



When staffing shortages arise, recreation programs for youth with disabilities, are reduced or eliminated⁴¹.



Since 2017 over 320 Ontarians have benefited from completing the PRMC Program⁴² - designed for managers in the public, private, and non-profit parks and recreation sector who seek to develop skills in communication, strategic planning, and political acuity.


Conclusion

Parks and recreation is a multi-billion dollar sector in Ontario that supports economic sustainability, environmental preservation, and community health. Every Ontarian, from toddlers to older adults, have the opportunity to live active lifestyles because of the parks and recreation sector.

High-quality, accessible parks and recreation opportunities are integral to a well-functioning society; all people, neighbourhoods, and communities deserve equitable access to these experiences. Provided for the benefit of both individuals and communities, recreation is a public good, in the same way as education or healthcare. Investment in the parks and recreation sector is an investment in the future of public health, emergency management, environmental preservation, economic growth, and so much more.

Quality recreation services need to be available to all, sustainable, and supported at all levels of government. As the voice of over 7,000 parks and recreation professionals from across the province, PRO is well-positioned to work collaboratively with the Government of Ontario to ensure that all Ontarians can enjoy quality parks, recreation, and sport experiences.

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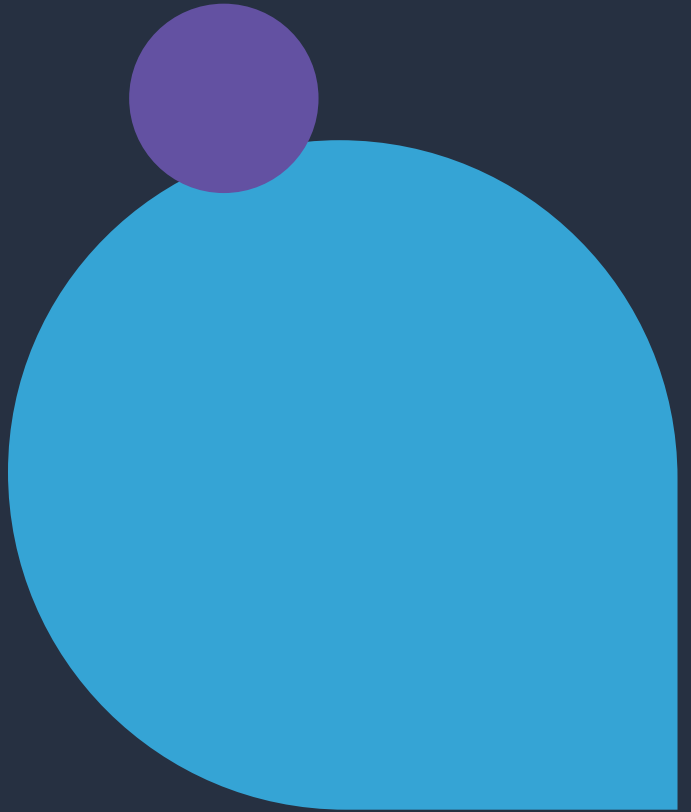
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