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March 16, 2009

## Recreation and Crime Prevention: We can do so much better

***“We are desperate for progressive people at City Hall. I live and work in an inner-city community that has a recreation centre that is closed on weekends, where we don’t have the capacity to keep our skating rink operating, and we can’t get help from the city to mow the grass in our parks so the kids can play in them. This just isn’t right. We could be doing so much better”.*** (inner-city community worker)

People who live and work in the inner city are frustrated with City Hall. With the exception of a handful of progressive city councilors, City Council and in particular the Mayor, can’t seem to see the forest for the trees. This lack of vision is becoming increasingly problematic for many reasons. Poor planning, insufficient revenue and the ‘nickel and diming’ of important programs are creating long lasting problems.

One such problem is the apparent lack of understanding of the connection between poverty, access to recreation, and the relationship with gangs and crime. And even when we hear some acknowledgement of a connection, City officials defend their lack of action and defer to the province as the level of government responsible for poverty issues.

But the City can do more to address poverty. Significant increases to recreation funding is one important role the City of Winnipeg can play in providing greater opportunities for poor kids, thereby deterring them from joining gangs.

Youth participation in gangs is a concern in urban centres across the country. Proposed solutions range from the very conservative knee jerk reactions that lead to ‘lock em up’ solutions, to those that tackle the root causes drawing children into gangs.

When it comes to prevention, the research is clear. Access to skill building recreational activities that develop self-esteem is one important factor that can protect kids from the lure of gangs. But we don’t really need the research to tell us this. All parents know that keeping their kids busy in sports and recreation keeps them out of trouble.

But many low-income families are not able to provide such opportunities for their kids. And that is why we need free and public recreation centres that are open when kids need them the most; local skating rinks that kids can actually skate on, swimming pools that are centrally located, and soccer pitches and playgrounds that are regularly mowed. Higher income neighbourhoods are fortunate because they are more able to draw on skilled volunteers to keep things running. For poor communities, this is a bigger challenge.



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## *FAST FACTS continued ...*

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In a research report for the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (2004), Dr. Mark Totten points to a broad body of research highlighting the importance of recreation as an important deterrent to gang participation. And in a report for the Province of Ontario he stresses that “taxpayers are better off with improved access to recreation for low-income families...for each dollar spent on quality programs, more than a dollar’s worth of benefits are generated”.

He recommends the elimination or substantial reduction of user fees; increasing capacity of recreation programs to meet the unique needs of New Canadians, ethno-racial minorities, Aboriginals, girls and young women; increasing outreach services to low-income families to promote recruitment into and maintaining participation in recreation programs; and guaranteeing stable funding for the recreation sector.

In a nutshell, we need to do more, not less. But the city of Winnipeg is doing less. The number of fee waivers was reduced by 30% from 2005 to 2007 and the number of hours of free programming at children/youth sites was reduced by 20%.

In the 2009 preliminary operating budget, the City of Winnipeg proposes a mystifying savings of \$400,000 in recreation ‘program efficiencies’ and there continues to be whispers of the closing of Sherbrook Pool – a facility of significant importance to inner-city kids. Budget 2009 also projects a reduction in funding of community centres by \$212,000.

The budget does show an increase for recreation centre coordination but the City can’t take credit for allocation. This is funding that comes to them from the Province, specifically for this purpose.

Policing is clearly the big winner in this year’s budget with increased funding of 6% (\$8.8 million) in 2009 with further increases of 3% in 2010 and again in 2011.

In contrast, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives 2009 Alternative Municipal Budget calls for an increase in spending on recreation by \$4.3 million and we show how this can be done with a shift in priorities and with new revenue generating initiatives.

Reduced access to recreation increases risk for low-income kids. The literature shows that youth participation in athletics has resulted in a decreased likelihood of risky behaviour and Totten points to a number of studies that show that individuals who participated in at least one extracurricular activity were less likely to drop out of high school and abuse substances. He also points to research showing that “young people who have higher participation rates in recreational activities typically display fewer criminal behaviours and children and youth who participate in structured sports have reduced rates of criminal arrest and antisocial behaviour.”

If we really want to reduce crime and gang activity among our youth, we need to invest in recreation. It is in the best interest of everyone to do so.

*Shauna MacKinnon is the director of Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – Manitoba.*



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