



August 10, 2023

To: Minister Kang, Ministry of Municipal Affairs
From: Katie Fenn, CEO, BC Recreation and Parks Association
cc: Brian Bedford, Executive Director, Local Government Infrastructure and Finance

Dear Minister Kang,

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the annual budget consultations on behalf of BC Recreation and Parks Association (BCRPA), May 30, 2023 in Vancouver. I would like to share with you some additional information regarding the three concrete budget requests I brought forward on behalf of recreation and parks professionals in the province.

As you know, it is a critical time for investment in recreation and parks in British Columbia, as the public more than ever understands the value of recreation and parks in building resilient, vibrant, and economically sustainable communities. Community spaces and places connect us to our neighbours, allow us to welcome the world to our marquee events, help us attract and retain talent in our communities, and protect against the health impacts of climate change. Most importantly, they create a sense of belonging and equity in our communities. BCRPA is ideally positioned as the most effective and efficient network for delivering provincial-to-community impact in BC.

Who is BC Recreation and Parks Association

BCRPA has been the voice of recreation and parks for the province since 1958. BCRPA's mission is to build healthy and resilient communities across the 126 communities, 4,500 members and 3,000 fitness leaders that make up the provincial organization, representing 97% of the province from a municipal and regional perspective.

Our strategy is anchored by four pillars of society well-being:

1. Addressing the physical inactivity epidemic
2. Supporting climate change adaptation through community resilience
3. Reconciliation through relationships with Indigenous communities particularly through land stewardship and community development
4. Embedding Equity, Diversity and Inclusion as fundamental decision-making principles in space and facility design, and program implementation.

We are also active members of the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA), a powerful alliance of all provincial and territorial parks and recreation associations across Canada representing over 90% of Canadian Communities.

To do this work and continue to support communities, we prioritized key issues in the sector and submitted three budget requests:

Address the Aquatics Crisis (Investment: \$3M/year for three years)

Swimming is a fundamental life skill, particularly for a coastal province with many natural bodies of water, widely enjoyed for recreating.

Unfortunately, programming rates for aquatics are running at 30% of the pre-pandemic capacity (Vancouver statistic, May 2023) while demand is at an all-time high due to the cohort of children that did not have access to aquatic programming for more than two years during the pandemic. Investment now will reverse the trend of every increasing waitlists.

In our province, we have been working with the Ministry of Health and BC's Lifesaving Society to address this issue through a multi-factorial approach. This includes: recruitment and retention for aquatics staff; reducing the minimum age of lifeguards and instructors to 15 years; and piloting partnerships with schools and with recreation to provide aquatics training programs. All of these factors need provincial funding support.

Quebec has seen considerable success in recovery for aquatics with a \$5M provincial investment/year for 3 years. Ontario is reporting statistics to support recruitment and retention focused funding for lifeguards and aquatics instructors. Nationally, there is a joint federal budget request for \$15M to support recovery.

This investment in British Columbia will ensure equitable access to learning the fundamental life skill of swimming while also expanding support for employment opportunities in the aquatics field and creating innovative approaches to the inclusion of equity-deserving groups such as intergenerational and co-participation programs. At present the demands on the aquatic system are further increasing inequity, as those with socioeconomic means to navigate waitlist and registrations systems are the ones receiving service.

Transition to free recreation in British Columbia (Investment: 3-year scaled: \$1M/\$3M/\$8M)

We know from the research and as individuals that the two key protective factors to mental, physical, emotional, social well-being are being outside in green space and being physically active. We also know that we have an unsustainable health care model in Canada, and the shift to strategic investments in prevention are critical to the long-term viability of our universal system.

We have seen successful trials in direct "free recreation" through social prescribing and nature prescribing (eg. PaRx) programs. In these programs, in place of or as an augment to prescribing medication, clients are given access to free social recreation programs, and dosing of time spent in nature.

A phased programmatic approach to free recreation beginning with a target population of 14 to 25-year-olds who are not currently accessing traditional recreation programs would be an efficient and effective solution to the clinical and mental health crisis we are currently facing. This targeted proof of concept approach will also demonstrate long term viability of free recreation as an offset and cost

reduction strategy for the health care system. This model has been proven many times in numerous national and international jurisdictions.

Support for the National Recreation and Parks Infrastructure Database (Investment: \$500,000, one-time)

Recreation infrastructure is the backbone of many communities and the place where individuals and families gather to play sports and be active together in their communities. Recreation and sport infrastructure in BC is largely at an end-of-life cycle state. This is due to a large investment in post-war building for recreation facilities without a sustainable succession plan in place for these spaces. Further, pools and arenas are the number one emitters of carbon dioxide in most municipalities compared to all other public assets.

A data-informed approach to addressing infrastructure needs, greenhouse gas emission reduction targets, and future planning across the province requires a robust and visualized data set to guide decision making. This will further enable the ability to consider a provincial network of recreation facilities that benefits residents in a more equitable way across the province.

The Canadian Parks and Recreation Association has led the building of a national database, and we are about to enter the phase of provincial data input. A cohesive and organized approach to data input, cleaning, and analysis in the province will ensure the compilation of a complete data set that can be trusted to inform clear future decision making to address the infrastructure crisis.

This investment will support a systemized data entry and analysis approach by resourcing a provincial data engagement and analytic group. It will also ensure that the full set of municipal infrastructure assets across the province are entered consistently and efficiently; alongside, clear analytics and reporting.

The sport, recreation and parks infrastructure need in the province exceeds \$5 Billion. To equitably address the needs across the province while understanding current budget constraints we recommend the following immediate approach:

1. **\$500,000: Fund the provincial database on infrastructure.** As articulated above, good data is the cornerstone of enabling sustainable, equitable, and strategic decisions.
2. **\$1-2M: Fund a long-term strategic plan for recreation and sports infrastructure,** alongside establishing regional hubs to support long term spaces and places planning. This would align with world leading work out of Australia (Victoria State) and New Zealand where every local government build is done in consideration of a broader spaces and places network/plan. Reinforcing an infrastructure system that supports equitable access to sport and recreation development across the province.
3. **\$30M: Fund access upgrades across the province.** Building and facility access upgrades allow equitable enhancements province-wide. Many communities who are looking to do full upgrades or new builds would be looking for \$25M to start with. Whereas access upgrades could have impacts

even at the \$50,000/site investment. Whether this be physical (eg. ramps or soft surfaces), cultural (eg. welcoming art), or social access (eg. gender neutral washrooms) considerations.

4. **\$17M: Outdoors year-round.** There are many examples of success in BC where a covered outdoor space is a rink in the winter, and a community sport court/gathering/outdoor fires/festival/water play space the rest of the year. Similarly, warming huts with equipment storage or rentals in colder climates significantly increase participation in physical activity. Covering or enhancing already existing outdoor spaces to extend their use throughout the year is a very cost-effective way to increase access to recreation and sport space.

In reading this letter, I hope you can see how BCRPA has prioritized strategies that will strengthen communities, prevent injuries, improve mental and physical health, and build social and community connection. We are committed to ensuring recreation facilities , parks,and programming are available to British Columbians now and for future generations.

I appreciate your time in considering our requests and I would be happy to discuss the information above or share more about BCRPA's work. If you are available and interested in meeting, please reach out to me directly at kfenn@bcrpa.bc.ca.

Sincerely,



Katie Fenn, CEO
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