

Revisiting Public Recreation: and what to do about role creep?

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Across Canada public recreation is undergoing a slow but profound change that most seasoned administrators have observed since the 1990s. It was only a few decades ago that public recreation was the largest provider of recreation services in our country and now it pails in comparison to the behemoth of commercial leisure. On its own this shift is not particularly significant – the world changes, so what? But the problem for public recreation is one of definition and role within this changing world of commercial leisure dominance. *Revisiting Public Recreation* provides insights for public recreation agencies on two fronts: the first is to clearly recognize the type and scale of change affecting public recreation; and the second is to how to deal with the role creep that has stretched public resources to unsustainable levels.

The problem is that in its search for a new role public recreation has been driven to be all things to all people, hence the role-creep. Public recreation is coerced into building mega-leisure centers, elite sport involvement, varying levels of service often bending to a public demand reinforced by elected officials. To complicate matters there is no one stakeholder that is wrong or out of line. Rather it is a slow pressure of public recreation to bend to unsustainable levels.

There is the pressure to compete with Ninja Warrior gyms (the next gym craze), placate parents who demand elite facilities for their children and aggressive not-for-profits equally intent on carving out an identity in the new leisure landscape. Public recreation is told to be entrepreneurial so they enter into operating agreements that sometimes work and sometimes compromise their ability to achieve their mandate. Mostly, public recreation has tried to be everything to everyone and that is never a sustainable strategy over the long term. One could argue that public recreations' role creep into foreign places is a natural evolution of the sector but that only makes sense if you ignore the fact that public recreation is only one part of a much larger leisure delivery system.

How did we get here?

Recreation has always been a popular tool to address society's ills. On the other hand leisure is about creating identity or fashioning a lifestyle – this distinction becomes important. Recreation's role as a social fixer goes back centuries but a modern example is the Rational Leisure Movement of the Industrial Revolution. Upstanding citizens concerned with the drunkenness that came with 'free time' of newly arrived city dwellers demanded 'good rational and wholesome' leisure options to fill up free time

and cut down on bad behaviours. Today, rural communities sporting the local hotel and the rec-center understand this well. Recreation fixes social ills: lacking character building? Sign up for martial arts. Obesity? Get everyone moving. Working parents? Develop an afterschool program. The point is that recreation's role continues to be focused on addressing social problems. When economists raised fears of too much free time during the 1970s public recreation built recreation centers. Big destination leisure centers.

By the 1980s change was immanent. Following the success of the destination shopping mall as place that provided much more than access to hard goods, municipalities, the YMCA and others took a similar direction in recreation. It should not be a surprise that concurrent to the rise of Toronto's Eaton Centre, West Edmonton Mall, and others, we see mega-leisure-fitness centers emerging. The mall is where we went to fashion a lifestyle and we went to the rec-center to feel good about ourselves.

Think of modern day leisure as a combination of recreation activity and consumer consumption, in essence a lifestyle. Today, if you road bike, cross-fit, golf, ski, run, or hike you have likely spent thousands of dollars on gear, clothing, magazines, apps, training and even travel *to be that person*. Lifestyle is identity and today social media affords 'lifestyle' more status than ever and combined with tourism (also free time leisure) leisure is reported to be largest industry in the world. In 1991 Cor Westland provided a definition of leisure that captures the difference: leisure is the freedom to become the person you have the ability to be (leisure-identity-lifestyle) and freedom from the stress and oppression of everyday life (public recreation).

Public recreation is in difficult position but it can respond effectively by reflecting on what it does best and where it fits in this new evolving marketplace. There are many elements to the new recreation marketplace but listed below are some defining elements that help situate public recreation in today's world.

Competency Elevation

I first noticed the phenomena of competency elevation during the early 2000s and it has only increased. Competency elevation refers to the trend in adults and youth to achieve higher skill competency and outcomes: that means to go farther and faster, lower your score, get a personal trainer, move your child into elite soccer or hockey, make the provincials, replace grass with artificial turf to extend the season, hire professional coaches and trainers for the Club; communities demanding facilities to compete with the next one; increase in year-round single sport participation and the tournaments and camps to match; and so on. The commercial sector is more than happy to sell the next level skate, golf club, titanium mountain bike, wearable tech, underwear, carbon fiber hockey stick, and protein drink to provide that edge. Whether

competency elevation is not particularly 'good or bad.' That may be a topic for another day but what is clear is that competency elevation stresses 'public recreation' to keep up or risk irrelevancy.

Activity splitting

It boggles the mind to consider how many new sports the marriage of technology and commerce has produced over the past three decades. Consider the simple bicycle that has morphed into road/fitness/BMX/spin/mountain/downhill/cross-country/touring/cruising/urban/fatbikes/trails bikes and many those requiring specialized spaces. We find stand-alone specialized studios for Gladiator training, cross-fit, meditation, yoga, Pilates, barre yoga, spin cycling, escape games, and more. Much of our public recreation infrastructure was built in the 1980s and later facilities kept in-line with traditional models. Then consider how many new activities have emerged that do not fit the traditional model. Public recreation responded with skateparks, cricket pitches and so on but from those represent a fraction of the demand and supply is scarce. Activity splitting and competency elevation combine to demand flexibility from a fairly static public recreation infrastructure.

Functional equivalents

Functional equivalents refer to the way the marketplace continually adds more leisure and recreation options without necessarily taking any away. We end up with a mountain of recreation and leisure options but not much difference in the amount of money and time we have to dedicate to these pursuits. The marketplace for recreation and leisure has become unimaginably crowded as commercial and quasi not-for-profits has grown and public recreation nobly attempts to be all things to all people. Functional equivalents means that there appears to be increasing pressure to keep up with new developments or fads or risk losing out on the limited leisure dollars.

Demand and Supply

Back in the late 1990s I began speaking about the shift from expert to public decision-making in the public domain. We referred to it then as public consultation but today groups of interest working hand-in-hand with emboldened elected officials often drive agendas for public recreation. This has resulted in the subsequent drive for public recreation to be all things to all people while increasing exposure at every turn. Public recreation with its mass of bricks and mortar and social improvement mandate was never designed or intended to be a nimble player in the leisure delivery.

One of the ways public recreation has adapted is to take on an array of management and operation strategies including partnerships, outsourcing, and seed

and leave (provide land and capital for new facilities to external groups to build and operate large centers with the guarantee that they will never ask for operating dollars) to stretch itself. Many of these operating models leave municipalities exposed by giving up control and authority and ability to respond to basic recreation needs in key areas.

Where to from here?

Public recreation is *public* - recreation and it has a critical role in providing core level service to all. Not commercial, nor not-for-profit recreation is going to occupy this part of the delivery system. Let the private sector do what it does best, that is, to cater to new trends, higher price points, and elite pursuits. That does not mean that public recreation cannot partner with the private and not-for-profit groups when it fits – but public recreation needs to know its main purpose. What can public recreation agencies do?

Policy filters have been used by public agencies in many sectors to manage role creep. For example Parks Canada had an ecological integrity policy that required any new development to meet strict environmental criteria or it could not proceed. What if public recreation agencies developed *Core Services Policy filters*? Such a policy could guide and direct agencies and their elected officials toward maintaining a steadier course and a course that the agency decides. Public recreation could focus on services it provides well and compliment the broader system. It is simply not realistic today to ignore the enormous role that commercial leisure and not-for-profits play in the leisure delivery system. That does not mean public recreation should not facilitate other non-core aspects of the leisure delivery system it should always demonstrate leadership but it does not have to do it all.

A Core Services Policy does not guarantee strict adherence to the ideal, as no policy is fool proof. But it does set and send a message of where the agency fits in the broader spectrum of service and resident life. It allows administration and elected officials alike to send a clear message to citizens and potential partners. Developing a policy filter is not particularly easy and involves heavy lifting at the front end in determining what is and what is not core but once in place it has great potential to direct resources to places where there is greatest benefit.

Consider the option, that public recreation simply keeps trying to be all things to all people and as most of us know you end up doing nothing particularly well.

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