

Rooted in the Past, Reaching for the Future



Building
Infrastructure



Empowering
Participation



Transforming
Education

PARKS AND RECREATION ONTARIO

2026 Ontario Pre-Budget Submission

Submitted to the Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy
Minister of Finance

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.



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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 work with the Province to make strategic investments that will help build a happier, healthier, and more resilient Ontario.

Acknowledgements

Over the past year, the Province has demonstrated a significant commitment to enhancing the health and well-being of Ontarians through investments in the parks and recreation sector. PRO acknowledges, with gratitude, new provincial investments in 2025 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 \$60 million investment to create more camping opportunities at Ontario Parks, adding 300 new campsites and upgrading 800 campsites with electrical services.



A \$4.75 million commitment to rebuild Samuel de Champlain Provincial Park after severe storm damage forced its closure earlier this year, as well as the expansion of 19 protected areas, adding 8,600 hectares of land to Ontario's protected areas system.



A \$43.9 million investment over three years to continue the Province's After School Program, keeping more than 13,000 children and youth in underserved communities active and healthy. Three-year agreements will help create more stability for After School Program providers and participants.

PRO acknowledges these and other ongoing investments in the sector, including funding through **Senior Active Living Centres, Enhancing Access to Spaces for Everyone Grant, Seniors Community Grant, Inclusive Grassroot Recreation Program, Community Aboriginal Recreation Activator Program, Sport Pathway for Ontario Native Wellness Program, and various programs administered through the Ontario Trillium Fund that support parks and recreation projects.** However, we know that there is more work to be done. With the support of the Province, the parks and recreation sector can better meet the needs of Ontario's growing and changing population. PRO looks forward to collaborating with the Province to build a future that meets the needs of all Ontarians today and tomorrow.



Renewing Our Roots

Ontario's current stock of assets have connected multiple generations to life-enriching parks and recreation opportunities. However, parks and recreation facilities are not meant to service communities forever. For decades, the same education pathways have provided entry points into the parks and recreation sector. Yet, workforce trends and technological innovations are rapidly changing the ways Ontarians learn and work. While the roots of Ontario's parks and recreation sector remain strong, significant renewal is required to keep pace with our growing and changing communities.



Ontario's recreation spaces are aging and closing.



Recreation needs of Ontarians are changing.



Parks and recreation education requires transformation.

Our Solution

2026 Budget Recommendations

Parks and recreation programming and services has always been about more than exercise. Whether for the purposes of recreation, health, safety, connection, or all the above, parks and recreation facilities are central hubs, adaptable to the needs of the present moment. As the Province continues working towards building 1.5 million new homes, it is vitally important that corresponding investments are made in parks and recreation.

Investment in the parks and recreation sector is an investment in public health, emergency management, environmental preservation, economic growth, and so much more.

If implemented, our 2026 provincial budget recommendations will help kickstart economic growth, create education pathways that align with workforce trends, and most importantly, support healthy, liveable, and complete communities.

» **Building Infrastructure**

- » Implement an annual continuance of the Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund of \$1 billion annually for 10 years.
- » Increase the Community Emergency Preparedness Grant to \$220 million over 3 years, increasing individual grants to \$100,000, with a dedicated stream for parks and recreation.
- » Increase the Enhancing Access to Spaces for Everyone (EASE) Program to \$4.4 million annually, increasing individual grants to \$120,000.

» **Empowering Participation**

- » Invest an additional \$500,000 in the Inclusive Grassroots Recreation Program, to be administered by Parks and Recreation Ontario, improving affordability of recreation programming provided by municipalities, Indigenous communities, and local non-profits for equity-deserving children and youth.
- » Invest \$500,000 in quality assurance training measures for Senior Active Living Centre staff and volunteers, and Ontario Parks Discovery Rangers.

» **Transforming Education**

- » Conduct a comprehensive review and retooling of the Sports Specialist High Skills Major program to increase program uptake at the high school level.
- » Conduct a comprehensive review and update of the Recreation and Leisure Program Standard leading to an Ontario College Diploma.
- » Invest \$500,000 to support development of career discovery and early-career education pathways.

**This is only the start of our recommendations.
Read our Ministry Priorities to see PRO's vision
for the future of parks and recreation in Ontario!**

› Priority 1: Building Infrastructure

The Current Situation

Ontario's parks and recreation assets have served communities long past their expected lifespan. At least 44% of Ontario's recreation and culture assets were built a minimum of 25 years ago¹.



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The Financial Accountability Office of Ontario estimates that 58% of municipal buildings and facilities are 'not in a state of good repair'². Other reports indicate that 1 in 3 recreation facilities will require investment in the next decade³. In addition to challenges already highlighted, the accessibility of assets is also cause for concern.

Nearly 30% of pools and 20% of arenas in Ontario's rural municipalities are considered inaccessible⁴. Infrastructure gaps, including access to parks, greenspace, and green canopies, are particularly prevalent in lower income neighbourhoods and Indigenous communities^{5,6}.

With respect to infrastructure gaps, sport and recreation access are not the only consequences. When disaster strikes, parks and recreation facilities provide muster areas, reception centres, shelters, vaccination hubs, and more.

Research shows that communities with a higher prevalence of recreation facilities and other social infrastructure experience lower mortality rates during wide-spread emergencies⁷.



The introduction of the **Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund** represented a new era of infrastructure investment. However, the program was significantly oversubscribed with the Province receiving over 500 applications, representing \$1.1 billion in funding requests⁸. This means 82% of requested dollars were unable to be funded through the program.

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 for 10 years.

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, especially as Ontario continues to grow. Modern day recreation 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.

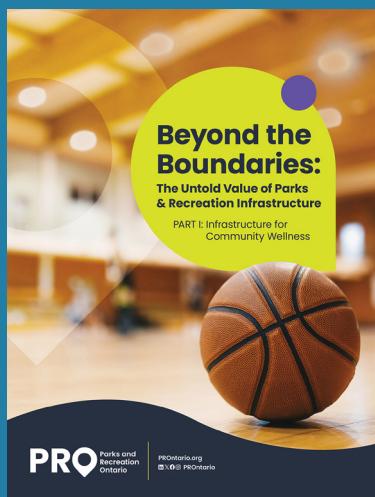
Increase the Community Emergency Preparedness Grant to \$220 million over 3 years, increasing individual grants to \$100,000, with a dedicated stream for parks and recreation.

Recreation facilities play a pivotal role during community emergencies. However, many recreation facilities are inadequately equipped to manage long-term emergencies. Expanding the Community Emergency Preparedness Grant, with a dedicated stream for parks and recreation will help more communities better prepare for all aspects of emergency management, including prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

Increase Enhancing Access to Spaces for Everyone (EASE) Grant to \$4.4 million annually, increasing individual grants to \$120,000.

The EASE program helps communities create more accessible and inclusive built environments. However, building accessible infrastructure is expensive. With a single accessible pool lift costing over \$20,000 dollars, municipalities need additional support to ensure facilities are up to date with contemporary accessibility standards.

Read our recent reports to learn more about how investment in parks and recreation infrastructure makes communities healthier, happier, safer, and more resilient.



› Priority 2: Empowering Participation

The Current Situation

The Inclusive Grassroots Recreation program represents a critical step in creating more equitable access to recreation and sport. However, gaps still exist. Many Ontarians are struggling to afford basic necessities⁹, let alone discretionary expenses.



43% of Ontario's youth and parents cite the cost of programming and equipment as a barrier to participation¹⁰.

Only 39% of children and youth in Canada meet recommended physical activity guidelines¹¹. For children and youth living in rural, remote, and northern communities, accessing quality recreation experiences can be even more challenging¹². Dispersed populations, lack of transportation, and limited facilities create barriers to accessing recreation¹³. Smaller municipalities are already stretched in their capacity to provide basic municipal services¹⁴. Where a child grows up in Ontario should not determine whether they have access to quality parks and recreation programming.

For Ontarians who have access to recreation programming, there are minimal provincial regulations implemented for quality assurance measures. Poor quality programming can have detrimental consequences for participant retention and future involvement in parks and recreation activities¹⁵. To ensure all Ontarians have recreation experiences that will inspire life-long participation, province-wide quality assurance measures must be implemented.

HIGH FIVE® is a research-based quality assurance framework trusted by hundreds of organizations in Ontario and recognized as the benchmark of excellence in parks and recreation. 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*.



2026 marks the 25th year of HIGH FIVE® – Canada's comprehensive quality standard for organizations that provide recreation and sport programs for children aged 4 to 12 and adults 55+.



Our solution.

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

Invest an additional \$500,000 in the Inclusive Grassroots Recreation Program, to be administered by Parks and Recreation Ontario, to improve recreation access and affordability in rural, remote, and northern communities.

Municipalities, Indigenous communities, and non-profits are the primary owners and operators of recreation assets in Ontario, particularly in rural, remote, and northern communities. However, there is currently limited support to help these entities provide affordable recreation opportunities to the millions of Ontarians they serve. Investing an additional \$500,000 in the Inclusive Grassroots Recreation program for rural, remote, and northern communities would help Ontario's primary providers of recreation experiences with the financial support necessary to deliver life-enriching programming to equity-deserving children and youth.

Invest \$500,000 in quality assurance training measures for Senior Active Living Centre staff and volunteers, and Ontario Parks Discovery Rangers.

To effectively reach, inspire, and activate communities, quality infrastructure must be matched with quality programming. Implementing HIGH FIVE® quality assurance measures in provincially administered programming, like Senior Active Living Centres and the Ontario Parks Discovery Program, is a unique opportunity for the Province to enhance the quality of parks and recreation experiences for thousands of Ontarians. PRO would be pleased to dialogue with the Ministry to discuss how an investment of \$500,000 in HIGH FIVE® quality assurance measures could transform parks and recreation programming for seniors, children, and youth across the province.



There are over **400** locations of Seniors Active Living Centres and **70+** provincial parks that offer Discovery Programs in Ontario. Implementing HIGH FIVE® quality assurance measures in these programs would ensure quality parks and recreation experiences for thousands of Ontarians every day!



› Priority 3: Transforming Education

The Current Situation

Provincial and national data indicates that our sector is growing. Since 2019, employment in the arts, entertainment, and recreation sector has risen by 9.4% and GDP has surpassed pre-pandemic rates by 18%¹⁶. Investments in infrastructure will create more jobs that must be filled by highly qualified staff. However, there are gaps in the current parks and recreation education landscape, preventing the sector from adequately preparing for new growth and development.

Young people are fundamental to the parks and recreation sector. Accounting for nearly 35% of the workforce, young people (aged 15 to 24) fill countless roles that are essential to the daily operation of parks and recreation facilities, services, and programming. Despite the fundamental role young people play, education opportunities in parks and recreation remain limited.



The Specialist High Skills Major Sports program is offered in less than 20% of high schools in Ontario¹⁷.

Further, the Sports Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) only exposes students to a small segment of the sector, rather than a broad perspective on the dynamic and exciting career paths available.

After high school, not all young graduates take the same route to finding a fulfilling career. We hear from our post-secondary and early-career members that there are many entry points into parks and recreation, including part-time work, seasonal jobs, career shifts, and more. Our sector is staffed by interdisciplinary teams with a broad range of professional backgrounds. We know that diversity is one of our sector's greatest strengths.

Parks and recreation is a specialized career path that requires a highly specific set of knowledge and skills.

Few other career paths require staff to simultaneously be well versed in facility operations, program design, public relations, emergency management, strategic planning, and everything in between. This is why a comprehensive professional development pathway is warranted for the sector, guaranteeing all parks and recreation professionals are adequately equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary for success at every stage of their careers.

Our solution.

To address the gaps in the parks and recreation education landscape and prepare the sector for new growth and development, we recommend the following:

Conduct a comprehensive review of and retooling of the Sports Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM).

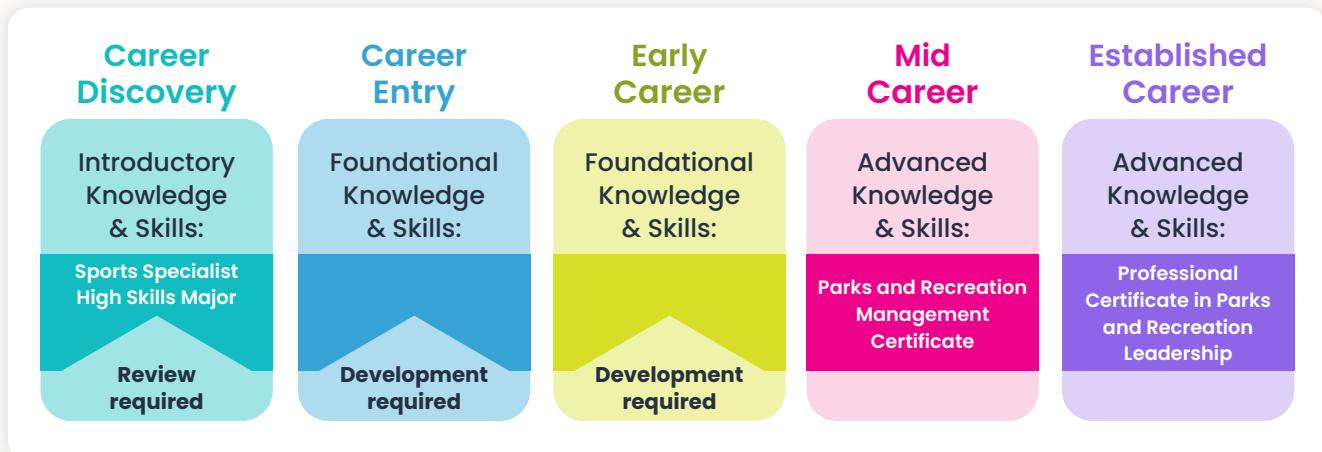
PRO recommends a comprehensive review and retooling of the Sports SHSM to better reflect current employment opportunities and trends in the parks and recreation sector. As part of the retooling, PRO suggests renaming the SHSM to 'Sport, Recreation and Parks,' and adding HIGH FIVE® *Principles of Healthy Child Development* – a nationally recognized certification for working with children – as a compulsory credit. Additionally, PRO recommends HIGH FIVE® *Principles of Healthy Aging* be included in the list of eligible electives.

Conduct a comprehensive review and update of the Recreation and Leisure Program Standard leading to an Ontario College Diploma.

PRO recommends a comprehensive review and update of the Recreation and Leisure Program Standard to better align with sector trends and demands. The current program standard was published in 2014. Since then, the landscape of parks and recreation and post-secondary education have undergone significant transformation. Updating this standard will ensure college graduates are well prepared to excel in Ontario's parks and recreation sector today, and in the future. PRO would be pleased to openly dialogue and collaborate with the Ministry as a key stakeholder in the redevelopment of the Recreation and Leisure Program Standard.

Invest \$500,000 to support development of career discovery and early-career education pathways.

PRO's Parks and Recreation Management Certificate and Professional Certificate in Parks and Recreation Leadership have been successful in supporting parks and recreation senior leaders in advancing their careers. However, no such program exists for individuals at the beginning or early career stages. To support and retain early career professionals, we propose a \$500,000 investment in the development of two certificate programs aimed toward (1) individuals seeking entry into the parks and recreation sector; and (2) individuals in the first 5 years of their careers.



Conclusion

Parks and recreation is a multi-billion dollar sector in Ontario that supports economic sustainability, environmental preservation, and community health. Every Ontarian can live healthy, active lifestyles and connect with their communities *because of* parks and recreation.

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 health-care. Investment in parks and recreation is an investment in public health, emergency management, environmental preservation, and so much more.

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

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Endnotes

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