



# **Parks and Recreation Ontario 2024 Ontario Pre-Budget Consultation**

---

Submitted to The Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy, Minister of Finance and  
the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs  
January 2024

**Strengthening Ontario's Economy:**  
Infrastructure | Employment | Health & Wellbeing

# Summary of Recommendations

As the Province works 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. Parks and Recreation Ontario (PRO) looks forward to working with the Province to build a stronger Ontario together in 2024 and beyond. If implemented, our 2024 provincial budget recommendations will help kickstart economic growth, create rewarding jobs, and, most importantly, support healthy, livable and complete communities, complimenting the supply of new housing options for Ontario families.

## Recommendation 1:

### Investing in Critical Community Infrastructure

- ✓ Dedicated investment of \$1 billion annually for ten years to support renovation or replacement of existing community recreation facilities.
- ✓ Recreation facilities to be included in the definition of “community infrastructure” to benefit from future monies disbursed via the Ontario Infrastructure Bank.

## Recommendation 2:

### Creating Jobs for Young People

- ✓ A \$2 million commitment to support the retooling of the Ministry of Education’s Specialist High Skills Major sports program to encourage high school entry into the recreation sector.
- ✓ A \$5 million expansion to the Summer Experience Program with a focused stream to support the parks and recreation sector, a significant summer employer.

## Recommendation 3:

### Supporting the Health of Growing Neighbourhoods

- ✓ Establishment of a “Resilient Parks” funding program with an initial investment of \$500 million over 5 years to assist municipalities with critical parkland and green space development to ensure individual and community health and well-being.

# Introduction & Acknowledgements

A strong provincial economy can only be supported by vibrant communities where Ontarians can live, work, and play, and where businesses can thrive. The parks and recreation sector is well-positioned to assist the provincial government in rebuilding the economy through critical infrastructure projects and getting young Ontarians into the workforce.

Ontario municipalities alone spend over \$2.5 billion annually on delivering parks and recreation services. The average Ontario household spends over \$4,000 annually on recreation– that’s a \$22 billion dollar infusion into the provincial economy each year.<sup>i</sup>

Parks and recreation opportunities are a vital part of the solution to helping ensure the health and wellness of Ontarians and the communities in which we live. Through a recent values survey, Parks and Recreation Ontario (PRO) has determined that 97% of Ontarians believe parks, green spaces, and community recreation are very important to their quality of life.<sup>ii</sup> However, not all Ontarians currently have equitable access to parks and recreation opportunities. PRO aims to remove systemic barriers to access so individuals of all ages, abilities and backgrounds may participate.

PRO acknowledges, with gratitude, the Government for recent investments that are positively supporting our sector and are making a marked impact in the lives of Ontarians, including:

- An increase of **\$1.1 million to support Ontario’s After School Program** for the 2023/24 school year which enhances the well-being and development of children and acknowledges the importance of providing quality recreation opportunities.
- A **\$1.76 million commitment to fund the Swim to Survive and Swim to Survive Plus programs** for the 2023/24 school year to support basic swimming skills.
- Over **\$10 million to support improved community buildings and spaces** that provide opportunities for recreation through the Capital Grant program.
- Over **\$500,000 for the creation of accessible and inclusive environments**, such as enhancements to parks, trails, and community centres, through the Inclusive Community Grant program.
- **Lowering the minimum age requirement to be a lifeguard and aquatic instructor** from 16 to 15 years of age to help communities address staffing shortages and ensure pools and waterfronts across the province can be enjoyed safely.

These are critical investments and their importance to Ontarians cannot be overstated. PRO encourages regular and meaningful increases to funding programs and remains dedicated to collaborating with the Government to provide vital recreation opportunities for all.

## About Parks and Recreation Ontario

Parks and Recreation Ontario (PRO) is a non-profit association with over 6,500 members that delivers services to more than 85% of Ontario's population. We are devoted to advancing equitable access to quality parks and recreation services for all Ontarians. 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 and research, education, training and professional development opportunities, and 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.



## Recommendation 1: Investing in Critical Community Infrastructure

- ✓ Dedicated investment of \$1 billion annually for ten years to support renovation or replacement of existing community recreation facilities.
- ✓ Recreation facilities to be included in the definition of “community infrastructure” to benefit from future monies disbursed via the Ontario Infrastructure Bank.

Recreation infrastructure in Ontario is in a state of significant physical decline, with most publicly owned recreation facilities having been built between 1956 and 1980. Facilities of this era require significant capital renovations or replacement and are considerably more expensive to operate, particularly when compounded with the rising costs of inflation. One in three recreation facilities will require investment in the next decade.<sup>iii</sup>

In Ontario, recreation facilities include an estimated 1,332 community centres and nearly 2,000 other facilities such as those supporting indoor sport<sup>iv</sup>. These facilities serve as critical community infrastructure during times of crisis response, provide safe refuge (including to the unhoused) and offer essential services to support the health and wellbeing of Ontarians.

Since 2007, Ontario’s estimated recreation infrastructure deficit has grown from \$5 billion<sup>v</sup> to \$9.5 billion in 2021<sup>vi</sup>. Ranking second only to roads, recreation facilities have the highest provincial infrastructure backlog in terms of investment. Additionally, Ontario’s recreation infrastructure assets are ranked first for repair or replacement with 58% of assets identified as “not in a good state of repair”.<sup>vii</sup> Previous infrastructure cost-sharing funding programs **offered collaboratively by all levels of government**, such as the [Building Canada Fund](#) and the [Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program](#), have supported communities in successfully renewing or rebuilding critical community infrastructure in Ontario.

### Happening in Ontario: Forced arena closure in Elliott Lake



Centennial Arena - Elliott Lake

In September 2023, the City of Elliott Lake (pop. 11,000), closed its only arena, built in 1968, due to structural safety concerns. Currently, all arena users, including local minor and junior hockey teams, are travelling upwards of 45 minutes to the nearby towns of Massey, Blind River and Espanola to access recreation. Plans to build a new multi-million-dollar arena were shelved after the city could not secure the funding needed to mobilize the project. Today, Elliott Lake’s arena remains closed.

## Recommendation 2: Creating Jobs for Young People

- ✓ A \$2 million commitment to support the retooling of the Ministry of Education’s Specialist High Skills Major Sports program to encourage high school entry into the recreation sector.
- ✓ A \$5 million expansion to the Summer Experience Program with a focused stream to support the parks and recreation sector, a significant summer employer.

Staffing shortages in the parks and recreation sector have grown significantly. In addition, the pandemic deeply impacted the learner to employee pipeline that the sector had long relied on to staff programs and facilities.<sup>viii</sup> The job market is more competitive than ever before and encouraging employment among young workers is essential in moving forward and “re-stocking” the sector with a fulsome and capable workforce.

The parks and recreation sector is expected to have a significant labour shortage by 2030.<sup>ix</sup> Ontario data at the end of Q3 2023 demonstrated that job vacancies in the sector **increased by 18.6%** since 2022.<sup>x</sup> This increase is third in all occupation classifications and ranks higher than skilled trades, education, or health.

Since 2020, PRO has consistently received feedback from members and stakeholders outlining the challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff.<sup>xi</sup> This has resulted in fewer programs offerings and lost recreation opportunities. Solutions must be multi-pronged and address the full list of barriers to employment in the sector. These include:

- Province-wide collaboration with school boards to include recreation leadership programs as earned credit, to incentivize training and lower the financial barriers;
- Sector-specific, wage subsidy programs; and
- Low or no cost certification opportunities (example: [Province of Quebec funds training](#))

### Happening in Ontario: City forced to cancel swimming programs



Lowertown Pool - Ottawa

In 2022, a shortage of lifeguards forced the City of Ottawa to cancel hundreds of aquatics programs (11% of registered classes). A lifeguard shortage that forced the cancellation of many public swimming sessions seriously affected recreation options for residents. Additionally, during a September 2023 heat warning, Mayor Sutcliffe stated that he supported extending the beach season so residents could cool off but that shortages of lifeguards to maintain public safety was the biggest challenge in doing so.

## Recommendation 3: Supporting the Health of Growing Neighbourhoods

- ✓ Establishment of a “Resilient Parks” funding program with an initial investment of \$500 million over 5 years to assist municipalities with critical parkland and green space development to ensure individual and community health and well-being.

PRO strongly supports government action to address the Ontario housing crisis. However, under Bill 23, the *More Homes Built Faster Act (2022)*, municipalities are now responsible for providing services to a greater number of residents with fewer dollars per capita. Without a corresponding increase in revenue, this will result in a drop in service provision and fewer amenities, particularly for newly developed communities. This would shift the financial burden of growth directly to taxpayers, feeding into Ontario’s affordability crisis.

The pandemic highlighted a new appreciation for outdoor public spaces. Although parks have traditionally served as multipurpose spaces, the pandemic required an even further expansion of these uses and clearly defined their role as critical public health infrastructure.<sup>xii</sup> Without additional revenue, local governments are unable to fund parks and recreation projects that will serve growing communities and equity-deserving groups where recreational service and parkland gaps have long been identified. This will challenge equitable access to parks and recreation services across the province.

Housing supply cannot be built without appropriate planned and funded infrastructure. Ontario municipalities have estimated that additional funding of at least \$1 billion annually will be needed to address the shortfall from changes made to the Development Charges Act.<sup>xiii</sup> Under Bill 23, parkland dedication requirements have been significantly reduced, resulting in a 50% decrease in park space per household. This will have social, economic, environmental and health implications across the province. The creation of accessible green spaces contributes to overall well-being through access to opportunities for physical activity and positive mental health, making communities better places to live, work and play.

### Happening in Ontario: Parkland costs rise for municipalities



Spencer Smith Park - Burlington

Revised provincial policies have resulted in municipal revenue reductions and are creating significant financial gaps to fund vital parkland in communities. Reduced development and community benefit charges will result in \$36.6M (30%) of lost revenue to the City of Burlington. In the next decade, the City has forecasted that parkland dedication revenues will also decrease by approximately \$335M (66%).

# Conclusion

Ontario has a multi-billion-dollar parks and recreation sector that supports economic sustainability and healthy, active lifestyles for everyone from young children to seniors in every community across the province.

High quality, accessible parks and recreation opportunities are integral to a well-functioning society; all people 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.

Quality recreation services need to be available to all, sustainable, and supported at all levels of government, to enable lifelong participation. As a strong and diverse provincial association, Parks and Recreation Ontario is well-positioned to work collaboratively with the Government to ensure that all Ontarians can enjoy quality parks and recreation experiences.

## For more information, please contact:

Sarah Ane (she/her)

Director of Policy and Partnerships | Parks and Recreation Ontario

[sane@prontario.org](mailto:sane@prontario.org)

302-1 Concorde Gate, Toronto, ON M3C 3N6

[prontario.org](http://prontario.org)

---

<sup>i</sup> Statistics Canada. [Survey of Household Spending](#) (2021)

<sup>ii</sup> Parks and Recreation Ontario. [Municipal Council Orientation Toolkit: A Resource for Elected Officials](#) (2022).

<sup>iii</sup> [Canadian Infrastructure Report Card](#) (2019).

<sup>iv</sup> Financial Accountability Office of Ontario. [A Review of Ontario's Municipal Infrastructure and an Assessment of the State of Repair](#) (2021).

<sup>v</sup> Parks and Recreation Ontario, Ontario Recreation Facilities Association & Ontario Parks Association. [Investing in Healthy and Active Ontarians through Recreation and Parks Infrastructure](#) (2007).

<sup>vi</sup> Financial Accountability Office of Ontario. [A Review of Ontario's Municipal Infrastructure and an Assessment of the State of Repair](#) (2021).

<sup>vii</sup> Financial Accountability Office of Ontario. [A Review of Ontario's Municipal Infrastructure and an Assessment of the State of Repair](#) (2021).

<sup>viii</sup> Parks and Recreation Ontario. [Aquatics Wage Survey Report](#) (2023).

<sup>ix</sup> The Conference Board of Canada & The Canadian Tourism Research Institute. [Canada's Tourism Sector - Shortages to Resurface as Labour Markets Tighten](#) (2012).

<sup>x</sup> Government of Ontario. [Ontario Employment Report, July to September](#) (2023).

<sup>xi</sup> Parks and Recreation Ontario. [Camp Provision Survey](#) (2023).

<sup>xii</sup> National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health. [Canadian green spaces during COVID-19: Public health benefits and planning for resilience](#) (2022).

<sup>xiii</sup> Association of Municipalities Ontario. [Housing Backgrounder](#) (2023).