

# ABORIGINAL RECREATION, LEISURE AND THE CITY OF CALGARY

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to understand the specific types of leisure and recreation opportunities that the City of Calgary can begin offering to Aboriginal Calgarians in order to counteract the many grave social and health issues facing the City's Aboriginal people. Through the use of community driven research, City of Calgary — Aboriginal Services' survey findings over a two-year period of time are used to make recommendations for specific physical education, physical activity, sport, recreation and, in particular, cultural activities, all of which can provide unique preventive strategies that are much more powerful and cost effective than reactive treatments.

Statistics Canada (2001b) notes that *leisure/recreation* can be divided into four types:

- Cognitive (e.g. reading, gaming, taking vocational courses, puzzling);
- Physical (e.g. competitive sports, fitness-training, walking);
- Social (e.g. visiting in person or on the phone);
- Passive (e.g. watching TV or listening to the radio).

Within the above categories, the first three are considered to be active and the fourth passive forms of leisure. Leisure or recreation, while considered to be the pursuit of any of the above, is often not recognized as potentially contributing to positive communal or societal advancement. Where, then, would Aboriginal concepts and manifestations of recreation and leisure fit? For example, where would hoop dancing fit, with its physical, spiritual, and community demands? What of the elements of creative expression? Similarly, beadwork has a physical dynamic, but it is essentially creative. "Arts," as they are perceived in the contemporary and traditional Aboriginal communities, do not seem to be well-captured in this and other mainstream frameworks (Statistics Canada, 2005).

The misunderstanding of Aboriginal "recreation" and "leisure" by non-Aboriginal individuals and organizations occurs when, for example, dancing and singing are seen as hobbies, culturally related activities, or occupation in some cases. This is not to say that people who pursue professional dance do not do so for some greater purpose; however, hoop dancing, pow wow dance, Métis jigging, pow wow singing and any other outward expression that one may see in Aboriginal communities have the by-product of fitness and skill building. In addition, in most cases there is also a huge spiritual component to the action, as well as a traditional handing down of ways of life, cultural

messaging and lessons about how to act, such as values and ethics. Dance tells the stories about how the world was made, and how we relate as humans to other animals. The Métis jig, for example, tells the history of the Métis people, and constantly reinforces the mixed blood of our ancestry. In the broom dance, the infinity symbol is continuously demonstrated in the steps. The fancy foot work has its origins in pow wow dance, and the square-dance patterns speak to the European influence.

## BACKGROUND

Throughout the months of June to December 2003, and subsequently the next year in 2004, the City of Calgary — Aboriginal Services conducted two community-wide consultations to determine the recreational and leisure needs of Aboriginal people in Calgary. The goal was to have access to community driven information, which might determine the types of recreation and leisure programs that could be developed by the City of Calgary, which reflect the desires of the urban Aboriginal communities. Surveys were available at a number of social events and gatherings, such as the urban pow wow in June, as well as the Christmas round dance in early December. Basic demographic information was requested, as well as specific information on peoples' preferred recreational and leisure activities. All surveys were confidential.

Calgary's Aboriginal population is the third largest among Canadian metropolitan centers, and has been growing at 2.5 times the rate of Calgary's total population (Barret, 2006). In 2001, the Aboriginal population was the third largest "minority" population in Calgary, after the Chinese and South Asian populations (Barret, 2006). It is estimated that the Aboriginal population of Calgary and Edmonton will grow by as much as 36% between 2001 and 2017 (Barret, 2006). According to the 2001 Canadian Census, within the City of Calgary 21,910 people claimed Aboriginal identity and of that total 10,155 responded as North American Indian, 10,575 responded as Métis, and 195 as Inuit (Statistics Canada, 2001a). Statistics Canada place the national median age of the Aboriginal population at 23 years and Calgary's Aboriginal median age at 25 years (Statistics Canada, 2001a).

Aboriginal people are also becoming more urban, moving into Canadian cities at a consistent rate. Aboriginal people living in urban areas number 320,000 or 45% of the total Aboriginal (First Nation, Métis and Inuit) population. Projections suggest that by the year 2016, there will be 455,000 Aboriginal peoples living in urban locations (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Much of Calgary's population growth is being driven by migration

from reserves to urban areas as Aboriginal people seek the greater social and economic opportunities available in the city. Consequently, on-reserve conditions are of significance; poor social, economic, and environmental conditions on reserve may result in an increased demand for urban services as people move to urban areas. Often, people leave their reserve with compromised physical, spiritual, and mental health that requires intervention by city health and social services. Aboriginal people also continue to face significant social and economic disadvantages. Although Aboriginal people account for only 2.3% of Calgary's total population, they comprise over 6% of the low-income population in many city neighborhoods (Barret, 2006).

Aboriginal communities also face increased health concerns that have a direct link to social and cultural deprivation. Social determinants of health can be understood as the social conditions in which people live and work. They are the economic and social conditions that influence the health of individuals, communities, and jurisdictions as a whole. They determine the extent to which a person possesses the physical, social, and personal resources to identify and achieve personal aspirations, satisfy needs, and cope with the environment. The resources include, but are not limited to, conditions for early childhood development; education, employment, and work; food security, health services, housing, income, and income distribution; social exclusion; the social safety net; and unemployment and job security (Raphael, 2004). Considering the health of Aboriginal communities nationally, unlike the overall AIDS epidemic where the annual number of new AIDS cases has leveled off, the number of AIDS cases among Aboriginal people has increased steadily over the last decade (Barret, 2006). Among Aboriginal people, the prevalence of diabetes is three times the national average, with complications seen more often and at an earlier age. Generally, suicide rates in First Nations and Inuit communities are three to five times greater than rates in the Canadian population (Barret, 2006).

Rates of diseases, including addictions and intentional injury are significantly higher for Aboriginal people, while life expectancy is significantly lower (Barret, 2006). At the same time, the death rate for injuries and poisonings among Aboriginal peoples was 2.9 times higher than the Canadian rate, the tuberculosis rate was 8 times higher, and the diabetes rate 3–5 times higher in 2000 (Barret, 2006). Although these figures include the on-reserve population, studies that have examined strictly the off-reserve population also report significantly higher rates of diabetes, depression and “poor” self-rated health (Barret, 2006). Of ongoing concern as well are issues of addic-

tions that plague both on and off-reserve peoples. Addictions often manifest themselves in higher rates of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in Aboriginal populations. There is also a growing concern about increased use of crystal methamphetamine among young Aboriginal peoples (Barret, 2006).

The Aboriginal population in Calgary as elsewhere is relatively young; however, the proportion of the population that is of working age is now stabilizing as Aboriginal population trends begin to mirror that of the rest of the city's population. In Calgary, 49% of the total Aboriginal population is under the age of 24 (Statistics Canada, 2001a). Of this group, 61% experience poverty as defined by the Federal low-income cut-off. It has also been suggested by the Métis Nation of Alberta that 40% of the Métis population in Alberta is under the age of 15, and the Conference Board of Canada (2001) predicts that the Aboriginal population across Canada will increase 52% by the year 2016. It is expected, however, that the largest growth in the Aboriginal population by 2017 will be among those aged 50 and over (Barret, 2006). This may have important impacts on the nature of services demanded by the Aboriginal population. There is a danger that such needs may be overlooked as the Aboriginal senior population will remain a small proportion of the burgeoning senior population over the next several decades.

One way to counter-act these trends is a commitment to enhanced lifestyles and active living opportunities, including physical education, physical activity, sport, recreation, and related cultural activity that offer preventive strategies that are much more powerful and cost effective than reactive treatment. Recreational strategies that provide personal development, such as mutual respect, honesty, teamwork, healthy work ethic, dealing with conflict, fair play, self-esteem, pride and confidence, provide opportunities for all ages and cultures to interact and develop respect for each other, resulting in leadership development and role modeling. Recreation and leisure provide opportunities for positive relationships and partnership building. Increased activity levels across a person's life span improves quality of life, enhances mental health, and reduces the incidence of osteoporosis, some types of cancer, and conditions such as heart disease, type II diabetes and obesity (Barret, 2006). By incorporating traditional Aboriginal values in recreation and leisure programming, opportunities for the family unit, including parents, to be involved in the development of children, youth and communities further enhances programs' success.

Dawson et al. (1998: 3) promote the advancement of recreation planning for Aboriginal people. Specifically, they state,

Most recent research into First Nations recreation and leisure has focused primarily on analyzing leisure pursuits from social, structural, and functional perspectives. This approach has generally emphasized the identification of preferred leisure activities or the role recreation plays in sustaining Aboriginal culture, as well as the contribution of recreation to enhancing the quality of life of Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

Further supporting the concept of Aboriginal recreation is the Maskwachees Declaration, developed in 2000 by the Federal-Provincial/Territorial Advisory Committee on Fitness and Recreation and created to address the pressing need for policy development in the area of Aboriginal recreation. The declaration states:

We, the delegates of the National Recreation Roundtable on Aboriginal/Indigenous Peoples, held in Maskwachees, February 2000, are deeply committed to improving the health, wellness, cultural survival and quality of life of Aboriginal/Indigenous Peoples, through physical activity, physical education, sport and recreation. We affirm that the holistic concepts of Aboriginal cultures, given by the Creator and taught by the Elders, promote balance through the integration of the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual growth of the individual. We recognize that many social issues including poverty; health concerns such as type II diabetes, heart disease, and fetal alcohol syndrome; rates of incarceration; substance abuse; harassment and racism; and a sedentary lifestyle have contributed to poor health and a low quality of life for many Aboriginal/Indigenous People.

Although the City of Calgary has not yet embraced the Declaration, the overwhelming demographics of the Aboriginal population residing in the City of Winnipeg created a critical mandate to adopt the essence and direction of the Declaration as the framework for all recreation and leisure activities developed in its city. Since 2000, the City of Winnipeg has committed to improving the health, wellness, cultural survival, and quality of life of Aboriginal/Indigenous Peoples, through physical activity, physical education, sport, and recreation. The surveys discussed in this paper helped the City of Calgary to understand the extent to which its recreation services are used and how they might be better utilized to combat social issues and thus promote preventative health strategies.

## DATA COLLECTION

In total, 71 surveys were completed. It must be noted that the information obtained may not be valid for all programming, but should be seen

as a snapshot of Calgary's Aboriginal communities. The City of Calgary — Aboriginal Services offer status-blind services. As such, the events where data were collected were most likely seen to be open to all Calgarians and therefore may have achieved a greater diversity of Aboriginal nation responses than in other cultural situations or events such as Métis week, where the majority of respondents would have been of Métis origin.

It is important to note that the questions that were asked prompted respondents to speak more about “issues,” which is why the results may not appear to have anything to do with “recreation,” as it is commonly defined. The respondents often viewed recreation as a solution to a problem — for example, gang involvement. In many informal conversations with respondents — especially with youth — recreation, sports, and leisure were seen as positive ways to avoid negative behaviours or as ways to re-direct Aboriginal youth from potentially unhealthy lifestyles.

Although community events where the information was collected were held across the city, the majority of respondents (71%) indicated that they lived in a northeast or southeast community. Twenty-eight percent were from either the southwest or northwest and one was from Airdrie, which is a 15 minute drive from the city limits. This also included 5 responses from Black Bear Crossing, which is an on-reserve housing unit which literally sits on the border of the SW outskirts of the City, and Tsuu T'ina Nation. Though the majority of responses were in the eastern areas of the city, no one community stood out as having a majority population demographic. In fact, for the most part each respondent appeared to live in a different community. Since 50% of the Aboriginal population live somewhere along the north to south east corridor, this finding suggests that recreation programming should be concentrated on the eastern side of Calgary, from the high north end, down to the southeastern tip, in a number of site locations, and close to transportation routes. Due to budget restrictions, over time, western locations could be considered, with one exception. Overall, Bowness was noted as a community with a substantial number of Aboriginal residents with culturally specific recreational needs. Bowness is an older community that is geographically closed off from other communities. In addition, transportation to the eastern sides of Calgary would unnecessarily disadvantage the population, forcing a two-hour travel time for basic recreation.

Cultural representation also indicated the changing Aboriginal diversity in Calgary: 21% of the respondents were Métis, 38% were of Cree origin, 23% were of Blackfoot origin, and 18% were from other Nations including eastern

and coastal groups. This will have implications for the types of programming developed. In particular, culturally based programming will have to account for the diversity of social-cultural norms and values of a multitude of urban Aboriginal groups. This would also be true of Elders' support for programming, community input, guest speakers, leaders, and instructors.

The majority of respondents were women at 65%, 35% were male. Two large age cohorts emerged with 32% of respondents between the ages of 12–16 and 47% between the ages of 20–35. The third age group, 35–50 had 13% of the respondents and the remaining 8% were over 50. Again, this speaks to the large numbers of Aboriginal youth living in Calgary and suggests that initial efforts should be strategically focused on recreational opportunities that promote healthy lifestyle and fitness opportunities for this population to become healthy leaders of the future.

The majority of respondents, 63%, were single. Of the remaining 37%, 33% were married or in common-law relationships and 4% were divorced. Based on qualitative information and stories that accompanied the survey results, participants' responses suggested that to begin with, program activities should built around group activities, teams, or other social outings that would bring people together for social and cultural companionship, as well as encouraging fitness and healthy lifestyle activities. When determining program options, it is important to note that over half, 52% of the respondents indicated their annual income is less than \$10,000; 11% were between \$10,000 to \$20,000; and 14% were between \$20,000 to \$30,000. Keeping in mind that some responses in the last category represented common-law and married couples, we can speculate that 77% of all respondents were living under the Low Income Cut-off Rate (LICO). As well, many of the respondents were under 24, in school, or in low paying jobs and thus it is unlikely that their financial situations will change greatly in the short term. As a result, programming needs to have low fees, free or no cost programming, cost sharing arrangements to lower attendance costs and needs to be considerate of high cost equipment needs that may deter people from participating. In addition, the inaccessibility of childcare and transportation to weekly events may become a barrier for participation.

## RECOMMENDED RECREATION AND LIFESTYLES PROGRAMS FOR THE CITY OF CALGARY

Five themes emerged from the participants' responses to the 2003–2004 survey. In no order of preference they were: Traditional Aboriginal cultural

activities, team sports, outdoor pursuits, individual fitness, and social opportunities. The most popular *traditional activities* included beading/Aboriginal crafts and traditional dancing, which included both pow wow and Métis jigging. Storytelling, singing, opportunities for cultural teachings by Elders, and Métis traditional games were also identified as preferential activities.

The most requested *team sports* included baseball and basketball, with volleyball and soccer, rugby and hockey following. Hiking, leisure walking and jogging/running were the most popular *outdoor pursuits* participants requested. Camping, fishing, and hunting, in both cultural and recreational frameworks were also mentioned. Mountain biking, snowboarding, and sledging followed. Swimming was the most popular request for those individuals pursuing *individual fitness*, with aerobics and weight training closely following. Martial arts and golfing were also mentioned.

*Socially*, participants reported enjoying a range of activities. Computer access and training courses, as well as access to video games in a social environment were the most requested activities. The formation of weekly coffee clubs for social get-togethers to read, talk, play pool, and tell stories were also mentioned. Lastly, community events where people could gather, such as pow wows and round dances, were seen as good leisure opportunities.

In the second year, the same survey was used to ensure consistency in the themes and questions. Similar to the 2003–2004 recommendations, the most popular classes were drumming and drum making. From a community perspective, the promotion and organization of cultural events such as pow wows, pipe ceremonies, and sweats were additional requests. A need for *new social events* for 2005 specifically tailored to Aboriginal children and youth were highlighted during this consultation. In particular, monthly children's events where parents could bring their children for a period of time were mentioned. Similar to park and play or stay and play, which are City programs that engage groups of children across the city for a couple of hours each month; storytelling, arts and crafts or social/recreational opportunities with a cultural basis were mentioned. Youth recreation activities, organized either on an annual scheduled or drop-in basis were mentioned. Also identified were activities such as pick-up basketball, youth recreation nights as well as cultural development opportunities such as dance, drumming/drum making or singing lessons.

An *Aboriginal youth centre where holistic programs could be developed and run* for Aboriginal youth, as well as creating a safe and friendly gathering place, was a new recommendation for 2005. Program recommendations in-

cluded a place for cultural events, including safe places for Aboriginal youth to gather for round dances, sober dances, access to internet, and job finding opportunities for Aboriginal youth. To provide some context, the need for a centre for the entire community had been a goal for Aboriginal Calgarians since early 2003, when a Steering committee of Aboriginal community members was struck after the Calgary Aboriginal Friendship Centre was permanently closed. After a long process of community involvement 88% of respondents had a strong desire to again establish a Calgary Aboriginal Friendship Centre. While this was accomplished in the summer of 2006, Aboriginal programming voids were created by the closure of the Calgary Aboriginal Friendship Centre, specifically in the areas of youth programming, housing supports and cultural/traditional programming.

Overall, participants appreciated the past round dances at the Friendship Centre, and highly recommended *regular round dances and other cultural/social events* at the City. Respondents equated round dances with:

- An opportunity to spend time with family and friends;
- The opportunity to meet new people from the Aboriginal communities;
- The opportunity to provide their children and teens with a cultural experience;
- The opportunity to attend a cultural community experience in the urban area.

Participants also appreciated the meal at round dances and the fact that there was no cost to attend. Some respondents suggested that Sunday night was not the best night for a round dance, and recommended instead either a Friday or Saturday night. Respondents also suggested that the proceeds from 50/50 draws be donated to an Aboriginal cause or be put towards programming for children and youth.

## OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

As the City of Calgary becomes more socially inclusive and culturally competent in delivering Aboriginal programming, additional resources will be required to pursue additional services. Although some of the recommendations may appear to mirror mainstream children's and youth opportunities currently available at City facilities, the bulk of the 2005 recommendations contain an Aboriginal cultural programming component that cannot be realized without the appropriate cultural knowledge and connections to Calgary's Aboriginal communities. Additional considerations mentioned by

respondents are that although they appreciate the programming efforts by the Municipality, transportation, both direct and indirect program costs and child care continue to be barriers to participation.

If the Municipality is to pursue some of the opportunities identified by participants, the following recommendations should be considered:

1. Attain funding for Aboriginal recreation program staff to develop and deliver year-round, culturally relevant programming;
2. Develop interim or long-term partnerships with existing Aboriginal agencies in Calgary to develop and deliver culturally relevant programming;
3. Secure passes or other subsidies for Aboriginal youth and families for whom financial barriers limit access to participation in culturally relevant programming.

## CONCLUSION

The City of Calgary has built a degree of trust and cultural/social inclusion with the urban Aboriginal communities over the past 2–3 years. Changes in the depth and scope of the recommendations from 2003–2004 clearly demonstrates that the urban Aboriginal population feels confident in attending social and cultural events at City facilities. This continuity should not be broken, but instead built upon for the future. Clearly, to counteract the many grave social and health issues facing our City's Aboriginal people, healthy lifestyles and active living, including physical education, physical activity, sport, recreation and related cultural activities, can provide unique preventive strategies that are much more powerful and cost effective than reactive treatments.

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## APPENDIX 1 – DECEMBER 12, 2004 – ROUNDDANCE AND CONSULTATION

<i>What kind of things do you do for fun?</i>	<i>What kind of events, programs should we plan?</i>	<i>What kind of recreational events interest you?</i>
I like to play jokes on my sister	Language, cultural events, fun-days, celebrations, food is a big part	Swimming, Basketball, Soccer
Swimming because it's good exercise and I love water	Men's budgeting program	Swimming, cultural dancing lessons and crafts
Hide and go seek!!	Cultural, like dance, jigging lessons, singing (vocal and drumming), beading	Swimming, sports (basketball, floor hockey, soccer, baseball)
Nature type things and church	A permanent and prominent place where Aboriginal youth and old can gather. A place for cultural events. Safe places for Aboriginal youth to gather for socials sober dances. Access to internet and job finding opportunities for Aboriginal youth. A place for Aboriginal by Aboriginal.	Painting and coloring, swimming
Sports	A Siksika Pow-wow	I used to come for swimming lessons but live too far away now.
Sports because lots of people are there.	Singing events	
I play basketball for fun Its fun because I see my friends, cousins and family	A phone number to phone when white police picks up Aboriginals so they don't suffer assaults by the police for minor infractions. We are not live punching bags.	
My mom and I used to come here every Tuesday. It was like a family thing.	Dancing lessons, art classes, and language classes. Pipe ceremonies	
	More, more, more sweats, sweats, and sweats. Help the Elders get the people out to the sweats. Help the Elders with firewood, rocks, and food. Transportation and advertising.	
	Costume making, dancing, singing, drums and rattles. Storytelling for kids	

<i>What kind of things do you do for fun?</i>	<i>What kind of events, programs should we plan?</i>	<i>What kind of recreational events interest you?</i>
	I like art.	
	Like to see more cultural events that would run more consistently through the year. Dance lessons, jigging, and fiddle lessons.	
	Culturally appropriate programs — storytelling, oral traditions of First Nations; drumming, singing. I'm waiting for the Friendship Center to open!!!	
<i>What kind of social activities interest you?</i>	<i>Why did you come to this round-dance?</i>	<i>Would you come to another round-dance?</i>
Swimming, basketball, hockey	To eat!!	YES — its good to sponsor our culture in every capacity
Pow-wows, hockey, sports, learning different languages, dances, camp-outs, to learn how to make dance outfits, talent shows, tutors for ages K-9	To enjoy quality time with my family and celebrate our Métis culture	YES — Because it's very nice to have something like this every year. Good food. If only they had mashed potatoes, gravy and stuffing !
Dancing, games, singing, party's, pow-wow, children's activities	To meet new people and see family too	Oh Yah!!!
Swimming and dance	To dance, to eat to see people dance	YES — How come I never hear about Native programs though?
Sports and singing. Learning and dancing and swimming	To enjoy and have family time together	YES — I enjoyed this round dance. Would be nice to go to more if they are closer — I live downtown.
Spiritual Healing -sobriety, sweats, Elder stories, big smokes, four directions teachings, children's safety, more cultural teaching, Native teaching in Aboriginal language. Bring back the tradition!!!	Because its fun and its my culture	NO — There should not be any politics discussed at a round dance. It's supposed to be a cultural celebration. The cultural site should not have been brought up.
	To learn and see people dance	It was fun about ten years ago. People were friendlier then. Transportation is also a problem.

<i>What kind of social activities interest you?</i>	<i>Why did you come to this round-dance?</i>	<i>Would you come to another round-dance?</i>
Pow wow dancing	Because I want to meet new people	YES — I would come to another.
	To meet new people, get together with old friends and see my cousin hoop dance.	I'd come back for group or family things. A woman's night out. Leisure activities.
	I came to this gathering because my mom made me. I am bored. I would come to another though.	YES — We run into friends here.
	I really liked the food and I am seeing lots of friends, old and new.	NO — Staff said my dad was pointing a laser in a little kid's eyes but he didn't. They said we had to leave.
	I came because I was invited by A. It's the round dances I come for. I practice my culture. I came for the singers. Sunday night isn't a good night for a round dance.	YES — Because it's our inherent right as Aboriginal people to enjoy our culture and to share our fun with other races.
	I came to the round dance for the food.	
The kids come here for the swimming. There is no sense of conflict or disharmony here.	I've only been here once before. My brother and sister come here a lot. We live out of town. We saw a flyer and I brought my little boy because I thought he would enjoy it.	
	I am from North Saskatchewan. I came for something to do and for the round dance. That's the music I was brought up with.	
	There are a lot of round dances and pow wows at this time. If you do a 50/50, the proceeds should go to help or contribute to something. i.e. homelessness	
	Round dance is the draw. Went to the round dance at Mount Royal College and got invited to this one.	

<i>What kind of social activities interest you?</i>	<i>Why did you come to this round-dance?</i>	<i>Would you come to another round-dance?</i>
	This round dance is good. It doesn't cost anything. We're thinking of coming here next weekend if there are passes available.	
	Round dance is good. Friday or Saturday would be better. Today is my first day here. I didn't know there was a water park	
	Came for the round dance. We use Village Square. Haven't gotten subsidies yet. Use it for birthday parties. We came because it's Native and there's free dinner. We wouldn't come if we had to pay.	
	Used to swim here. It's too far to come often and we can't afford it anymore.	