

Economic Benefits of Rural Recreation and Leisure Services

Executive Summary

The Rural Recreation Association (RRA) works to facilitate planning, professional development, communication, and the sharing of resources between individuals and organizations involved in physical activity and recreation that serve Lanark, Leeds and Grenville and surrounding region.

A report on the economic benefits of rural recreation for rural communities was commissioned by the Rural Recreation Association to be used as a resource and tool for champions to communicate with individuals, organizations and decision makers about the 'grounded-in-research' economic benefits of recreation.

A Framework for Recreation in Canada 2015 - Pathways to Wellbeing, is a joint initiative of the Interprovincial Sport and Recreation Council and the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association has redefined recreation as "the experience that results from freely chosen participation in physical, social, intellectual, creative and spiritual pursuits that enhance individual and community wellbeing."

The Facts:

Almost 70% of Ontario's municipalities have a population of 10,000 people or less and local governments face growing pressure with respect to encouraging or maintaining quality of life, addressing social issues and ensuring recreation and leisure services and supports remain a fundamental service for all residents, businesses and visitors.

Just as infrastructure and taxes hold a competitive advantage for industrial development, quality of place and lifestyle amenities are competitive advantages to encourage local economic development.

Leisure activities, parks and green spaces are essential to our physical, intellectual social and spiritual wellbeing, to our quality of life, to the environment and our economic sustainability.

Intangible and indirect outcomes of recreation and parks are difficult to quantify using traditional economic performance measures. The challenge has always been to interpret how these services contribute to the public good.

Areas of Focus and Research Found

It was determined that the primary areas that are being directly impacted in the rural communities of Lanark, Leeds and Grenville include:

1. Capital Infrastructure

- a. Ontario's sport and recreation infrastructure is in a state of physical decline. The vast majority of publicly owned recreation facilities were built between 1956 and 1980, and are nearing the end of their useful life.
- b. One of the key ingredients to creating healthy active communities are well designed, safe, functional, inviting (recreation and sport) facilities, parks and trails.
- c. Beyond traditional infrastructure, successful economic development also requires social and cultural infrastructure, such as libraries, parks, post offices and community centres, to improve quality of life in rural communities.
- d. In most communities, primary attractions are sports tournaments, festivals, parks, and major recreation facilities operated by park and recreation departments.

2. Human Resource Capacity

- a. Good leadership in a community – leaders with the foresight to make the right decisions – is essential to successful economic development.

- b. Boundary lines that traditionally divide and diminish a community and people from government, corporations, social agencies, ethnic groups, unions, neighborhoods and so on are usually easier to cross in rural communities.
- c. Key partners for recreation include municipal departments and not-for-profit organizations at all levels, and the private sector.
- d. Decision makers need to understand that local government has an understanding of the benefits of ensuring facilitation and coordination of recreation services and fostering a high quality of life for its citizens.
- e. Parks and recreation are one of the few “businesses” in a community likely to bring in “new money”.

3. Programs/Services

- a. 55% of Ontarians rely a great deal on local government and community based, non-profit recreation.
- b. A full 93% of survey respondents agreed that recreation and parks play an important role in knitting communities together and enhancing quality of life.
- c. Government needs to do more to promote population health and healthy lifestyles and to reverse the trend of childhood obesity.
- d. Local government recreation and parks services receive a strong endorsement with more than eight out of ten households reporting use of these services.
- e. Sport can make us healthier; help put our children on a positive life course and equip them to meet future challenges; strengthen our communities by bringing people together and building trust and inclusion; foster economic development by building skills, attracting tourism, and making communities more attractive.

4. Outdoor Leisure Recreation

- a. Outdoor leisure recreation and open spaces are key ingredients to healthy communities, contribute to a high quality of life, and most importantly, attract and sustain businesses and families.

- b. Surveys by the province's Regional Tourism Ontario Region 9, the Great Waterway show 85% of visitors expect authentic experiences with history, nature, on-site, outdoors.
- c. Outdoor enthusiasts are no longer confined by traditional demographics or activity segments. They seek meaningful outdoor experiences in their backyards and in the backcountry.
- d. The other attraction is the low to no cost of using the outdoor amenities as recreation facilities. All people can make use of these natural benefits.
- e. Outdoor recreation is no longer a "nice to have," it is now a "must have" as leaders recognize the undeniable economic, social and health benefits of outdoor recreation.

Conclusion

All types of recreation require short and long term investment, either directly or through creative partnering and enhanced community engagement. Stronger partnerships and enhanced communication have been proven to align resources and generate cost savings.

Because population density will not support every community financing recreation facilities that can impact operational and capital budget demands, cooperative agreements between municipalities will continue to be an important strategy to provide maximum access and usage.

Lanark, Leeds and Grenville is a dynamic and prosperous place to live, work and play in harmony with the natural environment; comprised of open space, forests, lakes, rivers, parks and trails. The region's vibrant rural and urban communities, steeped in tradition and rich in history, with enhanced emphasis on recreation and leisure services, will continue to attract people, growth and economic development opportunities to the region.

Decision Makers are encouraged to review the document for more detailed information and research as well as a listing of good practices and direct quotes from locals related to the economic benefits of rural recreation and leisure services.