Submission to Executive Policy Committee Meeting on Community Services
Meeting Date: March 15, 2024
Re: Pool Closures within the Preliminary 2024-2027 Budget
Prepared by: Karen Mackintosh, March 13, 2024

This submission opposes the City of Winnipeg's 2024-2027 Budget proposal to close Eldon Ross indoor pool, Happyland outdoor pool and Windsor Park outdoor pool without plans to build replacement facilities. The proposed pool closures will negatively affect recreational opportunities for neighbourhood residents and are contrary to the City's own poverty reduction, recreation and complete communities strategies. The City of Winnipeg should instead allocate resources to improve infrastructure and to expand services and pool hours, so that these important facilities can better meet community needs. Although some of the information below is specific to indoor pools, Eldon Ross and/or Brooklands, this submission provides evidence that supports the continued operation of all three pools.

The City of Winnipeg currently operates twelve indoor pools; Eldon Ross and seven other indoor municipal pools are in mature neighbourhoods. Eldon Ross at 1887 Pacific Avenue West is in the Brooklands neighbourhood in the northwest end of the Point Douglas ward. The nearest indoor pools, at Cindy Klassen Recreation Complex and Sergeant Tommy Prince Place, are approximately four kilometres away and not on direct transit routes. In its strategic plan Complete Communities 2.0, the City of Winnipeg has adopted policy to "maintain and improve the quality of open spaces and community facilities in Established Neighbourhoods to ensure the current and future recreational needs of residents are met." Closure of pools in mature neighbourhoods goes against this policy.

Recreation programming reduces social isolation, creates community connections and helps improve physical and mental health. The Winnipeg Recreation Strategy reports that swimming is the most popular indoor leisure activity of Winnipeggers and that aquatics are among the most highly valued and in-demand recreational activities. The City's 2021 public engagement survey found that indoor pools are in the top three priorities for investment in recreation facilities and among the most sought after recreational amenities. This is consistent with Statistics Canada's Survey Series on People and their Communities, which found that swimming is one of the most popular sports among Canadians and the most popular sport of Canadian women.

Low physical activity is a concern across Canada. Data from the Canadian Health Measures Survey shows that in 2019, 56.1 per cent of children ages five to 17 and 50.8 per cent of adults ages 18 to 79 were not meeting the Canadian physical activity guidelines for their age. The results were worse for girls and women, with 69.3 per cent and 53.6 per cent respectively not meeting their guidelines. The Winnipeg Recreation Strategy reports that $1 invested in physical activities results in $11 in savings in long-term health costs.

Data shows that lower income Canadians are less likely to be meeting physical activity guidelines. The 2009 report Winnipeg's Best Kept Secret: A Community Development Vision for Sherbrook Pool found that lower income communities often benefit the most from recreation but also face more barriers, including costs and a lack of neighbourhood facilities. According to the City of Winnipeg's most recent Neighbourhood Profile, 19.4 per cent of households in Brooklands are low income, compared to the city-wide rate of 15.9 per cent.

In its council-appoved 2024 to 2027 Poverty Reduction Strategy Implementation Plan, the City of Winnipeg commits to "develop diverse recreation and leisure programming that is tailored to meet the unique needs of each community to reflect diverse cultures to increase participation for low-income and equity groups." The City's 2019 Catalogue of Poverty Reduction Measures includes many positive examples of aquatic programming that benefit lower income residents of all ages, including the Swimming Counts program delivered through Winnipeg School Division, one-on-one swim lessons for people with disabilities, women-only swim times, grandma and grandpas group (seniors volunteer to swim with kids), loonie/toonie swims, discounted admission at non-prime hours, dedicated time for free pool admission for teens, and wading pools located throughout the city. Pools also provide cool spaces for residents during heat waves and other hot or extreme summer weather, phenomena that are becoming more common in Winnipeg.

Winnipeg at a Crossroads: Alternative Municipal Budget 2022 reports that recreation programming is underfunded in the City of Winnipeg with a 31.9 per cent decrease (per capita, inflation-adjusted) in recreation funding from 2008 to 2020 with the number of full time recreation staff decreasing from 356 to 273 over the same period. Currently, Eldon Ross has limited hours for free, public or lap swimming: four hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays and 4.5 hours on Saturdays for a total of 12.5 hours per week. This is significantly lower than hours of all of the other 11 indoor municipal pools, based on January to March 2024 pool schedules, ranging from 28 hours per week at Transcona (the next lowest) to 101 hours per week at Cindy Klassen with an average of 63 hours per week across all 12 indoor pools.

In its Recreation Strategy, the City has identified that its indoor pools, with an average age of 50 years, have infrastructure issues that include lack of accessibility in change rooms and other areas, maintenance backlogs, and single use sites (i.e., one pool only) that may not support multi-generational activities. The strategy reports that 75 per cent of indoor pools are in poor or very poor condition and require an investment of more than $277 million.

The City of Winnipeg's 2024-2027 Budget is also proposing closures of wading pools and a review of Sherbrook indoor pool in the Spence neighbourhood. Although the Budget states that it will modernize the City's aquatic and recreation facilities, the actual impact of closing pools and continued under-funding will be deterioration and decrease of existing recreational infrastructure and opportunities. This was recently the situation for inner-city residents with the four-year closure of Sherbook pool, from an abrupt closing in November 2012 following a city inspection to its reopening in January 2017 after much needed capital improvement were complete. Spray pads, the alternate to pools being proposed in this budget, do not provide the wide range of diverse and multi-generational recreational opportunities offered by pools.

The City of Winnipeg needs to invest in its existing facilities while planning additional facilities to meet the needs of a growing population. Closure of pools within the current budget proposal is a regressive recreation plan for Winnipeg residents.

Works cited

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About the Author

Karen Mackintosh is an economist and independent researcher. Karen has a Master of Arts in Economics from McGill University and 18 years of public policy experience, including work for the Province of Manitoba on poverty reduction, sustainable development and consumer protection. Karen swims at Sherbrook Pool and is a former board member of Friends of Sherbrook Pool.