



# Addressing Access to Recreation in Elgin St. Thomas

Elgin St. Thomas Public Health

June 2017

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

Access to affordable recreation is an important indicator of quality of life in Elgin St. Thomas. This is because access to recreation is correlated with rates of physical activity in leisure time. Physical activity helps decrease chronic disease such as cancer, heart disease and type 2 diabetes, decrease stress and prolong independence in later adulthood\*. The 2015 Health Status Report indicates that only **30.7%** of Elgin St. Thomas residents are physically active in their leisure time, with 45% of the population not active at all\*. Access to recreation must be prioritized to reverse the trend of physical inactivity. Studies show that access to parks is positively associated with regular physical activity and that perceptions of park quality affect use\*. Having access to recreation and participating in recreational programs supports social inclusion, increases self-esteem and boosts physical and mental health\*. This in turn contributes to wellness and quality of life.

According to local demographic maps, there is a higher proportion of children and youth aged 0-19 that live in East Elgin (Bayham, Malahide and Aylmer) compared to other areas of Elgin County. Taken together with other data regarding access to recreation in rural communities, it is clear that from an equity lens, priority should be placed on the implementation of strategies for:

- a) Children and youth so that healthy active lifestyles can be adopted in childhood and beyond
- b) Individuals and families that live with low income in specific areas of Elgin St. Thomas

Access to recreation means being able to participate in structured or unstructured physical activity to improve health, develop a skill or build self-esteem\*. Where:

- unstructured physical activity includes but is not limited to how a community is designed, availability of parks, green spaces, and trails, and infrastructure to support walkable and bikeable communities; and
- structured physical activity includes sport and organized recreation programs

Having access means recreation is affordable, it is within your community and it is inclusive of different cultures, ages and ability levels\*.

There are strategies that can be implemented to decrease the financial, geographic and social barriers that currently exist. The suggested actions of this report provide evidence-informed specific examples of what municipalities, developers, public health, school boards and other community organizations can do to improve access to recreation.

Access to affordable recreation needs to be approached through an equity-informed and collaborative approach.

The suggested actions below are evidence-informed and have been applied to the local context.

*\*This is a brief summary of the Access to Recreation Report. References are available in the full version.*

Suggested Actions to Increase Access to Recreation	Target Group				
	Municipalities	Local Developers	Public Health	School Boards	Community Groups & Agencies
1.) In accordance with the Provincial Policy Statement (2014) and the Active Transportation Initiative (2012) municipalities in Elgin St. Thomas promote a healthy, active community by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) planning public streets, spaces and facilities to be safe, meet the needs of pedestrians, foster social interaction and facilitate active transportation and community connectivity;</li> <li>b) planning and providing for a full range of equitable distribution of publicly-accessible built and natural settings for recreation, including facilities, parklands, public spaces, open space areas, trails and linkages...</li> <li>c) Exploring land use planning initiatives and policy development such as mixed land use, higher density urban areas, and pedestrian and cyclist friendly streetscapes to promote/facilitate and increased quality of life and liveability within Elgin-St. Thomas and the local municipalities.</li> </ul>	✓				
2.) Develop naturalized play areas that connect children with nature, provide shade and increase opportunities for physical activity. Review school site plans to allow students the maximum amount of direct interaction with green/naturalized space. Recognize at a policy level the broad health benefits of green naturalized school/park grounds.	✓	✓		✓	
3.) Consider adopting a rural complete streets policy to promote all modes of transportation, including those for pedestrians and cyclists.	✓				
4.) Prioritize enhancements to the built environment in identified priority areas including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Northwest Talbot, Balaclava South, and Elm West areas of St. Thomas</li> <li>b) The Municipality of Bayham (particularly in and near Vienna and Port Burwell)</li> <li>c) The Township of Malahide (north of Springfield).</li> <li>d) The Municipality of West Elgin (near Rodney and West Lorne)</li> </ul>	✓				
5.) With the closure of four rural schools in Elgin County, municipalities and school boards could collaborate to establish a land transfer agreement for the continued public use of school playgrounds and expand the community use of schools that remain open.	✓			✓	
6.) Support the priority action areas of the Elgin St. Thomas Coalition to End Poverty including the development of an affordable rural transportation strategy that will increase access to recreation opportunities in Elgin St. Thomas, particularly for low-income and rural residents living in Elgin County.	✓				✓
7.) Prioritize walkability as a free, convenient and age-friendly opportunity for outdoor recreation	✓	✓			

Suggested Actions to Increase Access to Recreation	Target Group				
	Municipalities	Local Developers	Public Health	School Boards	Community Groups & Agencies
and physical activity. Explore opportunities with local developers to leverage their investment in creating new trails and sidewalks that increase walkability.					
8.) Continue to implement the Elgin St. Thomas Cycling Master Plan and align with the provincial cycling strategy that includes a cycling route between London and St. Thomas.	✓		✓		✓
9.) Leverage funding opportunities such as the federal gas tax program to enhance access to recreation and improve maintenance of existing recreational facilities.	✓				
10.) Invite Elgin St. Thomas Public Health staff to the table when developing or revising official plans to provide local data and a health perspective to planning.	✓				
11.) Facilitate collaboration between municipal staff, economic development & tourism, conservation authorities and other community partners to organize for Get Active Elgin strategy to increase opportunities for recreation that includes active transportation and trails.			✓		
12.) In partnership with parent councils and volunteers, explore models for Active and Safe Routes to Schools that are more streamlined and universal.			✓	✓	✓
13.) Promote existing local and new opportunities for walking and physical activity.	✓		✓		
14.) Work with school boards to encourage site plans that support healthy community design.	✓	✓	✓	✓	
15.) Expand the existing partnership with the Ontario Police College to increase public access to open/free swim for families at their indoor pool when not in use for police training and other scheduled swim lessons.	✓				✓
16.) Work collaboratively to ensure that physical activity programming is offered at new community hubs to address the needs of the local neighbourhood.	✓			✓	✓
17.) Churches, service clubs and other community leaders partner with the local municipality to offer age appropriate physical activity programming; particularly in East Elgin.	✓				✓
18.) Service providers including St. Thomas Elgin Social Service department assist their clients with accessing recreation subsidies such as Jumpstart.	✓				✓
19.) St Thomas and Elgin County branch libraries assist the public in accessing free or low cost recreation opportunities by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Sharing and distributing information available through the branches;</li> <li>b) Providing computers with internet access for residents to apply for recreation subsidies and to view online trail maps to identify locations to walk, hike and cycle</li> <li>c) Where feasible, providing space for activities to take place that are led by other groups, agencies or volunteers</li> </ul>	✓				
20.) Engage parents and caregivers in learning about the importance of outdoor play.			✓	✓	✓