

# Understanding Community Investment in Recreation Spaces: Baseline Findings from Strathcona County Focus Groups

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## Executive Summary

To assess the potential impact of the Strathcona County Open Space and Recreation Facility Strategy (OSRFS), a two-year project is being conducted by researchers at the University of Alberta, in collaboration with community partners from Strathcona County Recreation, Parks and Culture. In the fall of 2011, the pre-test telephone survey was conducted with residents of Sherwood Park and Strathcona County. Focus groups were conducted as a follow up to the telephone surveys to try to gain a deeper understanding of community members' use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces. A total of five focus groups were held in November of 2011: two *Adult Regular User* groups, two *Adult Non-Regular User* groups, and one *Youth* group.

Thematic analysis of the focus group discussions revealed a number of major findings regarding the accessibility and use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces within the community. The following themes emerged and are described within this report:

- Satisfaction with indoor facilities and outdoor spaces
- Facilitators of the use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces
- Barriers to the use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces
- Suggested improvements to and maintenance of existing facilities and spaces and ideas for new facilities and spaces
- Suggested improvements to programming and communication
- Public transportation issues and suggested improvements

The report concludes with the overarching recommendations of ways in which access to indoor facilities and outdoor spaces could be improved for all Sherwood Park and Strathcona County residents.

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## Introduction

Researchers from the Centre for Health Promotion Studies, School of Public Health at the University of Alberta worked with community partners from Strathcona County, Recreation, Parks and Culture to explore the potential impact of the Strathcona County Open Spaces and Recreation Facility Strategy (OSRFS) on health and health equity. As part of this project, a two-year telephone survey (one pre-test and one post-test survey) is being conducted with community members in Strathcona County (case community) and results are being compared to the results of a survey conducted with community members in the Town of Stony Plain, City of Spruce Grove, and Parkland County (comparison community; referred to as Tri-Region). A pre-/post-test involves conducting the same survey at two points in time to the same group of participants; at baseline (the pre-test) and follow-up (post-test) of a particular event or intervention. For this project the pre-test was conducted in the fall of 2011, prior to the opening of revitalized facilities as part of the OSRFS, and the post-test will be conducted in the fall of 2013, after initial stages of revitalization have been completed.

In addition to the telephone surveys, focus groups were conducted with community members in November 2011 to gain a deeper understanding of the use of indoor recreation facilities and outdoor spaces within both Strathcona County and Tri-Region. A total of 5 focus groups were conducted within each community. This report summarizes the major findings from the focus groups conducted with Strathcona County residents about their use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces.

## Recruitment of Participants

A list of respondents to the telephone survey<sup>1</sup> who indicated willingness to be involved in future projects related to this study was collected as part of the telephone survey. Trained members of our research team contacted these individuals by telephone to recruit participants for the focus groups (approximately 5-8 weeks after they had participated in the survey). Potential participants were called up to a total of 3 times, at which point 'no-answers' were removed from the list. The calling continued systematically until an appropriate number of participants was recruited for each of the five focus group sessions with Strathcona County residents. Our aim was to obtain a representative sample from the population, so tracking sheets were maintained during the recruitment process to track socio-demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, income level, and facility usage). During the

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<sup>1</sup>Nykiforuk, C.I.J., Berry, T., Vallianatos, H., & Nieuwendyk, L.M. (2011). Understanding Community Investment in Recreation Spaces: Strathcona County Baseline Survey Results (General). Edmonton, AB: School of Public Health, University of Alberta.

recruitment process, individuals were selectively recruited, as required, to try and obtain a representative sample.

Two focus groups were conducted with adult participants categorized as “*Regular Users*” (defined as those who personally use indoor recreation facilities and/or outdoor spaces one or more time(s) per week). Two additional focus groups were conducted with adult participants categorized as “*Non-Regular Users*” (defined as those who personally use public recreation facilities and/or outdoor spaces fewer than once per week). One focus group was also conducted with youth, aged 13-17; this group was comprised of both Regular and Non-Regular Users.

### Focus Group Attendance

Individuals who agreed to participate in one of the focus group sessions were contacted a few days before their scheduled session as a reminder. Messages were left for those who were not available at the time of our reminder calls, and voice mails were left at numbers with no answer. Table 1 displays the number of participants recruited for each focus group session and the number of participants who attended.

**Table 1. Focus Group Attendance**

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Number of Participants Recruited n</b>	<b>Number of Participants in Attendance n (%)</b>
Regular Users (Group A)	12	8 (67%)
Regular Users (Group B)	12	8 (67%)
Non-Regular Users (Group A)	10	3 (30%)
Non-Regular Users (Group B)	10	3 (30%)
Youth (Regular and Non-Regular Users)	6	4 (67%)

## Structure of Focus Groups

Focus groups took place in the Strathcona County Community Centre and Library. The focus group discussions were led by a member of the University of Alberta research team and student research assistants were present to take notes. Refreshments were provided to participants at each session. Focus group facilitators followed a semi-structured question guide to lead each session. The focus groups were scheduled to last a maximum of an hour and a half, and varied in duration (57 minutes on average). The focus group discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed.

## Analysis of Findings from Focus Group Discussions

Transcripts of focus group discussions were analyzed by the research team using a thematic analysis approach. A number of major themes emerged. The following section outlines the major findings from focus group discussions among (1) *Adult Regular Users*, (2) *Adult Non-Regular Users*, and (3) *Youth* who reside in Strathcona County.

## Adult Regular Users

### Demographic Information

The following figures display demographic information about the *Adult Regular User* focus group participants, including age, gender, family income, as well as area of the community where they reside.

Figure 1 Age of *Adult Regular User* Focus Group Participants

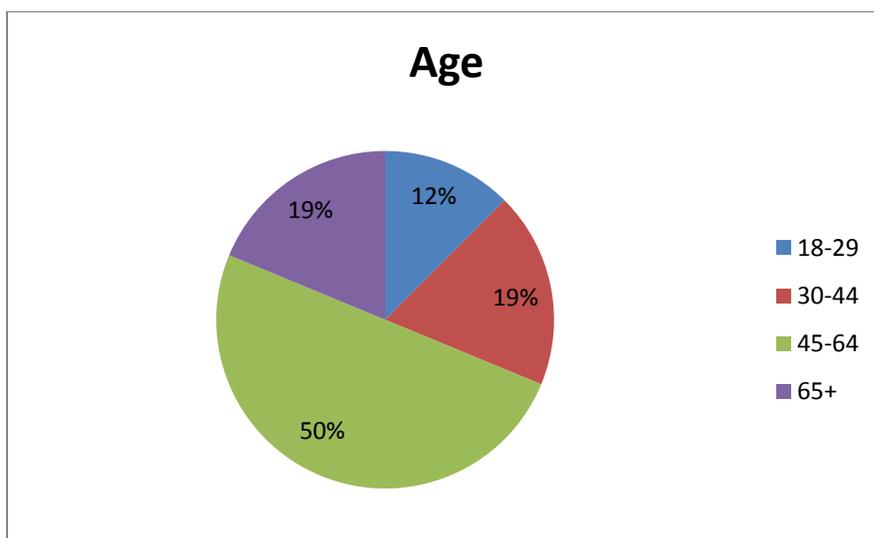


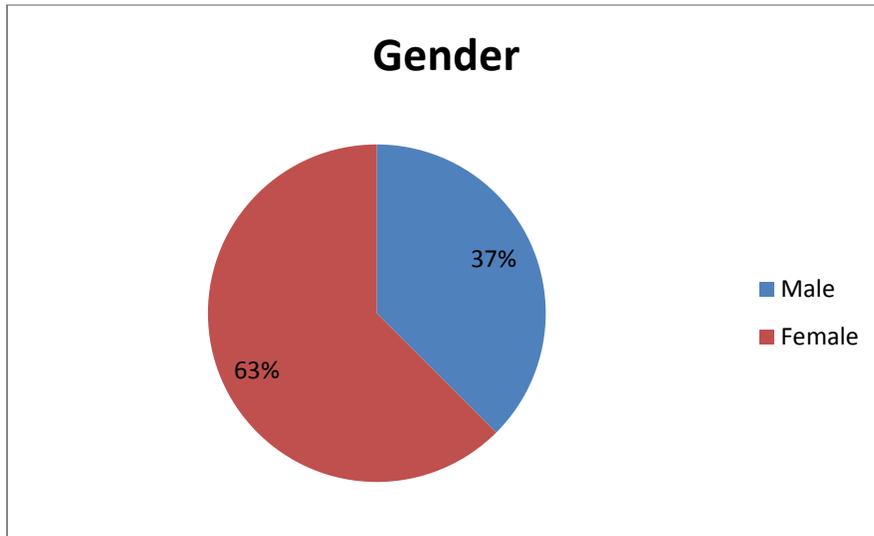
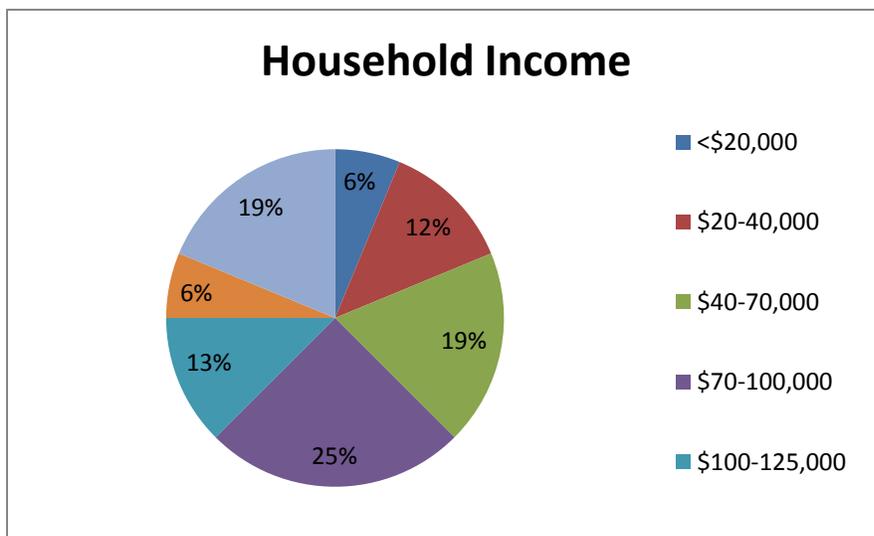
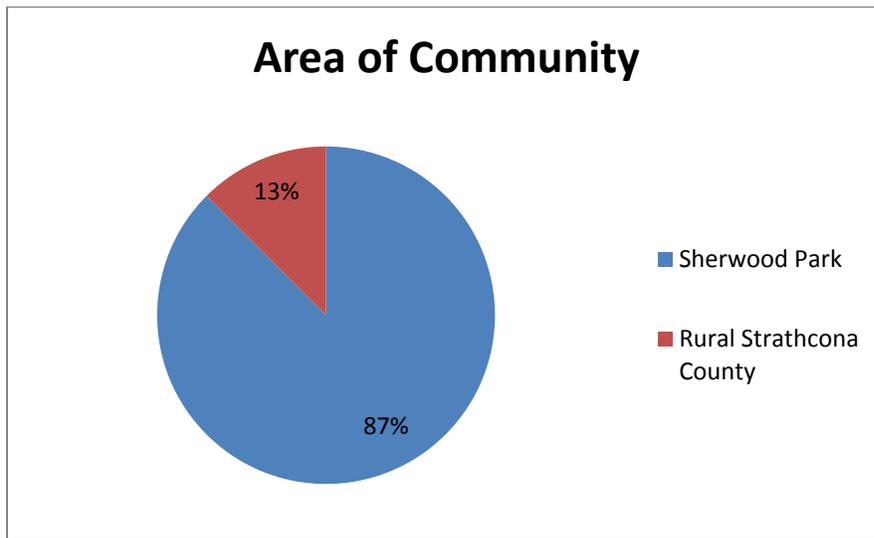
Figure 2 Gender of *Adult Regular User* Focus Group ParticipantsFigure 3 Total Household Income of *Adult Regular User* Focus Group Participants

Figure 4 Area of Community Where *Adult Regular User* Focus Group Participants Reside



### Findings from Discussions with *Adult Regular Users*

To begin the conversation regarding the use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces within the community, participants were asked the question: “what does being physically active mean to you?” Example responses to this question included:

“Getting out and doing exercise, makes you feel good. Makes you more alert.” (SCU 1 p.3)

“Well in my case it helps me keep my blood pressure in a good state, and it also helps, since I’m diabetic too, it also helps there, and makes me feel good, too.” (SCU 4 p.3)

“For me...there’s a social aspect and also a familial aspect, getting together with family and doing things that way or with friends. Just that kind of thing and that it’s good for you...” (SCU 4 p.3)

The focus groups continued by asking participants to discuss their use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces and share their insights into their opinions on the accessibility of these facilities and spaces within the community. The group’s discussions of these topics have been organized into 6 major themes, which are described below.

## **Theme: Satisfaction with Indoor Facilities and Outdoor Spaces**

One of the major themes to emerge through the focus group discussions was that Adult Regular Users were satisfied with the indoor facilities and outdoor spaces, as shown in this section.

### **Indoor Facilities**

Many focus group participants indicated that they were very satisfied with the indoor recreation facilities within Strathcona County. Participants mentioned that they were pleased with the facilities overall and also shared specific aspects of facilities that they were particularly happy with, including facility hours of operation and the multi-use nature of facilities. Examples of the opinions expressed by focus group participants regarding their satisfaction with indoor recreation facilities included the following:

“The nice thing about Millennium Place is you can have one kid in swimming and one kid’s in the hockey rink, playing team hockey.” (SCU 1, p.10)

“I think the Millennium Place hours are great” (SCU 4, p.37)

### **Outdoor Spaces**

In addition to indoor facilities, focus group participants indicated that they were pleased with the outdoor recreation spaces within the Strathcona County. Community members were satisfied with the walking and biking trails as well as with the cross country ski trails. Some of the thoughts shared by focus group participants included:

“I think the one thing we found when we moved here... [was that] I was quite surprised at the amount of walking trails, and sidewalks that really give [the] opportunity to walk or ride or bike.” (SCU 1, p.19)

“Those are excellent facilities and we’re lucky to have them so close, so proximity...keeps you cross country skiing and stuff.” (SCU 4, p.17)

## Theme: Facilitators of Use and Preferences

Focus group participants mentioned a number of factors that facilitated their use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces. Facilitators of indoor facility usage are described, followed by facilitators of use of outdoor spaces and general facilitators of the use of both indoor facilities and outdoor spaces within the community. Participant preferences regarding the use of facilities are also noted within this section.

### Indoor Facilities

The *Adult Regular User* focus group participants indicated that two factors facilitated their use of indoor facilities. The first facilitator of use was the reasonable cost. For example, participants mentioned that they get a lot out of their memberships for the cost. It was also indicated that the number of activities that were included in one pass at a recreation facility was positive and facilitates use. Examples of direct quotations from focus group participants regarding cost and value included:

“...everything is included, and I can pay my flat fee a month for my grandkids and they can take in everything. We can go twice a day, three times a day, and it was the best thing I’ve ever experienced.” (SCU 1 p.6)

“Well I think that facility [Millennium Place] is very affordable to most of us.” (SCU 1 p52)

“And I can get to GARC, which I can go there and play squash and I can go to Kinsmen and go to the pool and use it. I can go to Millennium...So I use all three facilities for under \$70 a month, and my family. I think that’s great.” (SCU 1 p.70)

Insight into preferences of community members was also gained through the discussions with *Adult Regular Users*. For example, one participant described how the quality of facilities influences the choice to use a facility:

“If the weight room at GARC was up to the standards of the one at Millennium Place I would go to GARC, simply because it’s closer to my house and if they were the same, I would choose the one closer to my house.” (SCU 4, p.59)

This statement suggests that members of the community prefer certain facilities to others based on the suitability to meet their needs.

## Outdoor Spaces

With respect to outdoor spaces, participants indicated that “no-fee” facilities or spaces promotes their use.

“[At] the Kinsmen, I was out there many, many times with my boys and there was never anyone there. There’s four beautiful tennis courts, they’re free to use...It’s absolutely amazing because the caliber of tennis that my boys are playing right now, I wouldn’t want to be paying a membership.” (SCU 4, p.51)

## General

*Adult Regular Users* indicated that their proximity to indoor facilities and outdoor spaces facilitates their use. Participants shared the following thoughts regarding accessibility to facilities and spaces:

“You know and this is the way we go to the playground and how it connects to the next playground...we can go to three different playgrounds on our special hike, and yeah, it’s proximity to my house.” (SCU 4, p.13)

“Well I’m at the golf course almost every day, and I use it because it’s close.” (SCU 4, p.46)

## Theme: Barriers to Use of Indoor Facilities and Outdoor Spaces

Focus group participants indicated a number of perceived barriers to the use of indoor facilities, specifically, as well as general barriers to the use of both indoor facilities and outdoor spaces. A description of these perceived barriers is provided in the section below.

### Indoor Facilities

Crowding was described as a key barrier to the use of indoor facilities. Focus group participants indicated that large numbers of people crowded in the facilities acted as a deterrent to their use. One participant shared the following:

“When I get to Millennium [Place] it’s so dang busy. That sends me away...” (SCU 1, p.49)

Congested parking lots were another indoor facility-related deterrent mentioned by focus group participants. Some thoughts shared by participants include:

“...right now I’m pulling out my hair because every morning when I go there, especially if I’m taking the kids for gym and swim, there’s barely any parking. So I’ll be glad when there is more parking.” (SCU 1, p.15)

“Parking is a bit of a problem at GARC, in wintertime” (SCU 4, p.20)

“I wish I knew what was the best time to go to Millennium and not wonder where I’m going to find a parking spot.” (SCU 4, p.38)

Focus group participants also mentioned a number of issues directly pertaining to pool facilities, including: inadequate capacities for swimming lessons; concerns about cleanliness of change rooms; unhappiness with the size of change rooms; and issues with the hours of operation of certain pool facilities. All of these issues shared by participants were raised during the discussion of barriers to facility use. Examples of some direct quotations regarding issues with pool facilities are:

“...Sherwood Park has grown, like tenfold, and there is still only one swimming pool that offers lessons.” (SCU A2, p.8)

“And because swimming is such a life skill...you would want all children to be able to have it.” (SCU A2, p.9)

“The one issue I have with GARC is the hot tub closes at 10 and everything else closes at 11.” (SCU A2, p.38)

“I find the hot tub at GARC is not as clean as it could be.” (SCU A2, p.26)

Finally, although a number of focus group participants indicated that the cost to use facilities was reasonable; a few participants indicated that the cost was too high for some families.

## **General**

General barriers to the use of both indoor facilities and outdoor spaces were also shared by focus group participants. One general barrier mentioned was further travel distances to facilities or spaces. A second barrier included personal health issues, such as mobility problems, that limit certain participants’ abilities to utilize indoor facilities and outdoor spaces. A third barrier was a perceived lack of time. Busy family and work schedules were examples of reasons provided by participants for their perceived lack of time to use facilities and spaces. The final general barrier mentioned by focus group participants was a lack of motivation to engage in activities at indoor

recreation facilities or outdoor spaces. One participant shared the following regarding personal motivation:

“...In the winter when it’s cold, once I get home I just don’t want to go out again. I’ll admit I just, I can be very lazy, so yeah it’s like nah I’m not going back out.” (SCU 4, p.31)

### **Theme: Suggestions for Maintenance, Improvements, and New Facilities and Spaces**

Discussions with *Adult Regular Users* about the barriers to accessing indoor and outdoor facilities were often followed by suggestions for maintenance of and improvements to existing facilities and spaces. Ideas for new facilities and spaces also emerged through the discussions with *Adult Regular Users*. The following section describes the suggestions provided by participants for indoor facilities and outdoor spaces.

#### **Indoor Facilities**

Although focus group participants expressed satisfaction with the indoor recreation facilities, some felt that there are inadequacies and some room for improvement. One issue that focus group participants shared was the lack of squash facilities within the community. As shared by one community member:

“I’m a squash player, there’s a lack of squash courts available here. I have to drive to Fort Saskatchewan to play squash, because you can’t get court times here.” (SCU 4, p.4)

According to those who participated in the focus groups, creating additional squash facilities would be of great benefit to the community. In addition to squash courts, some participants felt that there is a need for more facilities in general because of the increase in population size.

“But nobody would know that the population in Sherwood Park has grown that much, to use the facility that much...People are becoming more active, like they don’t have enough hockey rinks. They don’t have enough.” (SCU 1, p.46)

One participant also indicated that improving and expanding existing facilities would be of benefit to the community:

“...if they could expand on GARC, because GARC’s getting sort of pushed to the seams I think. There’s just no more room.” (SCU 4, p.59)

## Outdoor Spaces

Participants expressed satisfaction with outdoor spaces within the community, but also raised some important points regarding the maintenance of spaces and possibilities for new outdoor space development. Some maintenance issues included inadequate lighting and slippery sidewalks during the winter months. As shared by focus group participants:

“I’m not sure about the other [walking trails] in the Park, but definitely Glen Allen, they need better lighting.” (SCU 4, p.70)

“Yeah but the walks, outside are too slippery for seniors” (SCU 4, p.14)

In addition to comments regarding maintenance of outdoor spaces, focus group participants indicated that the community could benefit from additional outdoor spaces for recreation. Some examples provided are as follows:

“There’s not enough everything. Soccer, hockey, baseball, you name it there’s not [enough].” (SCU A1, p.46)

“Another thing that I think we could benefit from...as far as I know, there’s no dog park in Sherwood Park.” (SCU A2, p.76)

“Perhaps more outdoor rinks...in the newer neighborhoods...I don’t think an outdoor rink was built in the last 15 years, anywhere.” (SCU A2, p.70).

## Theme: Suggestions for Improving Programming and Communication at Indoor Facilities and Outdoor Spaces

*Adult Regular Users* also had suggestions for ways in which programming and communication could be improved. This section outlines the suggested improvements mentioned by focus group participants.

### Indoor Facilities

Focus group participants had a number of comments regarding class scheduling and fee structures at indoor facilities, and made suggestions for possible improvements. Some of these suggestions included:

“And opening up, I guess more choices and activities, and a little more flexible than the commitment for paying for 10 passes, or whatnot and then missing some.” (SCU 4, p.79).

“...just looking at the new guide that came out, the timings of the actual programs, are not really friendly for people who work full time...or have a young family.” (SCU 4, p.5)

“I think there should be more programming for people who are working in the evenings.” (SCU 4, p.10)

“The classes are full and I think that they should be having more variety, at times for working people, so you can get there.” (SCU 4, p.10)

Participants also had suggestions for the general fees associated with indoor facilities. Some suggestions included creating student prices for memberships and providing individuals with an incentive to use facilities, such as offering complimentary passes to members of the community. Focus group discussions raised the point that indoor facility entrance fees included many more activities than could be completed in one day. As suggested by one participant:

“It would be nice if Millennium offered the option, if you were coming in as a family, you’re going to, whether it be just a different coloured wrist band that you could use strictly one area.” (SCU 4, p.62).

Participants repeatedly indicated that it would be better if users were able to pay only for the activity that they planned to do on a single visit to an indoor facility. In addition, fees to use squash courts on top of regular membership costs were described as problematic.

“The racquetball courts at GARC...I have a membership and I have to pay to use the courts” (SCU 4, p.31)

“I can understand if I didn’t have a pass, but I have a membership and still have to pay, I think it’s \$13 an hour, just to use the court.” (SCU 4, p.32).

One suggestion would be to incorporate fees to use the squash facilities into overall membership costs.

A few participants shared that youth and teenagers are often at Millennium Place unsupervised. As shared by one participant:

“I find that when I am there in the evenings there’s, at Millennium, that big open area with all the tables, there’s kids down there causing trouble.” (SCU A2, p.67)

This leads to a recommendation of providing more youth and teen programming so that individuals of this age group could have the opportunity to engage in activities instead of causing a disturbance to other facility users due to a lack of appropriate supervision.

A final thought shared about programming at indoor facilities was that it would be beneficial to introduce community members to these facilities. Participants described how this may help to increase the comfort of community members as they familiarize themselves with facilities.

“I think that’s a great idea...introducing people to the facilities. Like when you walk into Millennium it can be overwhelming.” (SCU A2, p.88)

“You don’t know what to do, where to go...just [having] someone there to show you...where to go and what you can use....It can be overwhelming sometimes when you walk in there.” (SCU A2, p.88)

### **Outdoor Spaces**

Discussions about communication and programming relating to outdoor spaces were dominated by the idea that there is a lack of knowledge about what outdoor spaces are available within Strathcona County. For example:

“I don’t know if maybe I’m just ignorant...but I didn’t even know they had a wilderness centre” (SCU 4, p.101)

“Outdoor facilities for cross country skiing and snow shoeing...the County of Strathcona, do they have an area for that?” (SCU 1, p.78)

This apparent lack of knowledge about the outdoor recreation spaces available within the community suggests the need for increased communication and how community members are able to access these areas.

### **Theme: Public Transit**

One major topic that emerged during discussions with *Adult Regular User* focus group participants was that it is difficult to access public transportation to travel to indoor facilities and outdoor spaces within the community. One participant indicated the following:

“You can build all these facilities, but you know, they should be accessible to everybody, not just the person who can drive a car.” (SCU A1, p.62)

In addition, participants felt that one of the main difficulties with using public transportation to travel to recreation facilities and spaces is that public transit operating hours do not coincide with facility hours of operation. Specifically, certain facilities are open later than the hours of operation of the transit system, so those who rely on public transit cannot fully utilize the facilities.

## Adult Non-Regular Users

### Demographic Information

The following figures display demographic information about the *Adult Non-Regular User* focus group participants, including age, gender, family income, as well as area of the community where they reside.

Figure 1 Age of *Adult Non-Regular User* Focus Group Participants

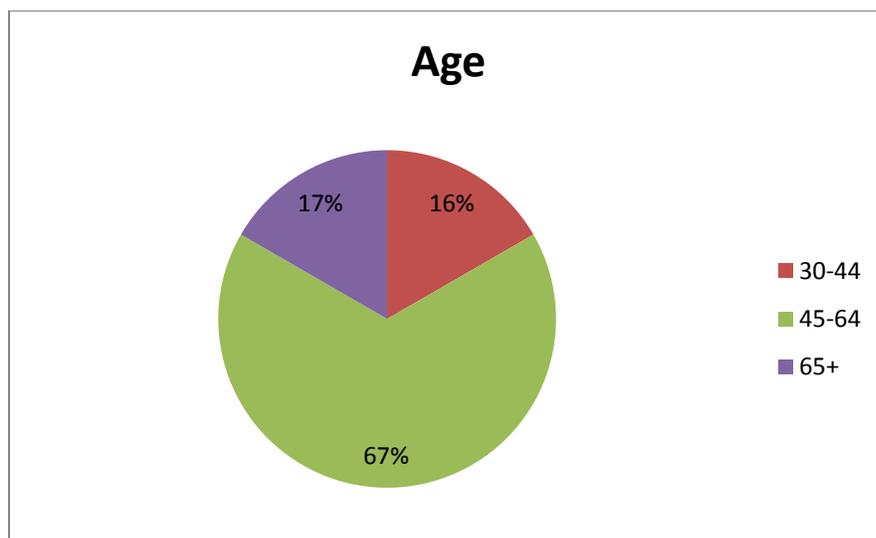


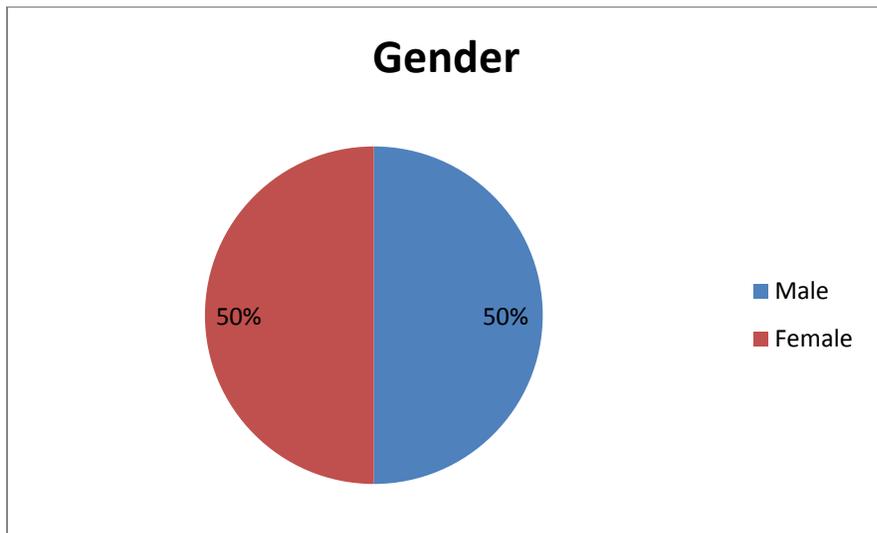
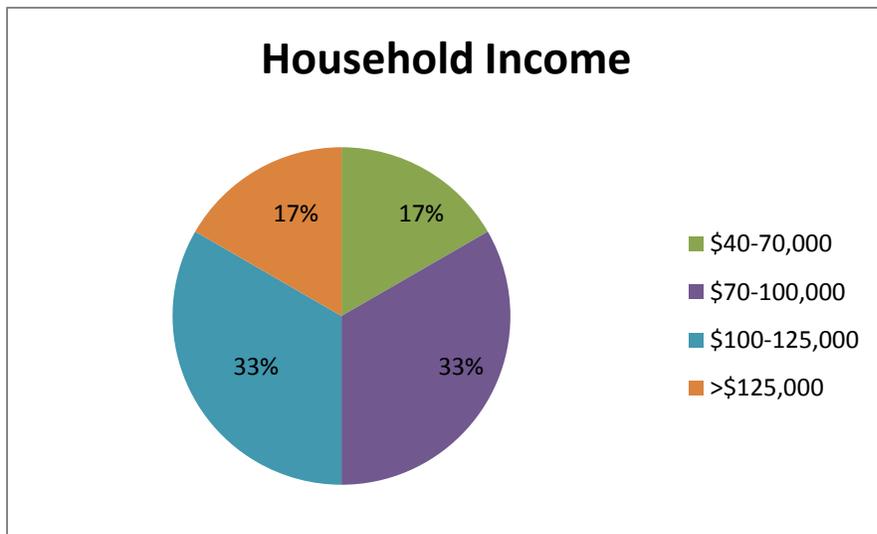
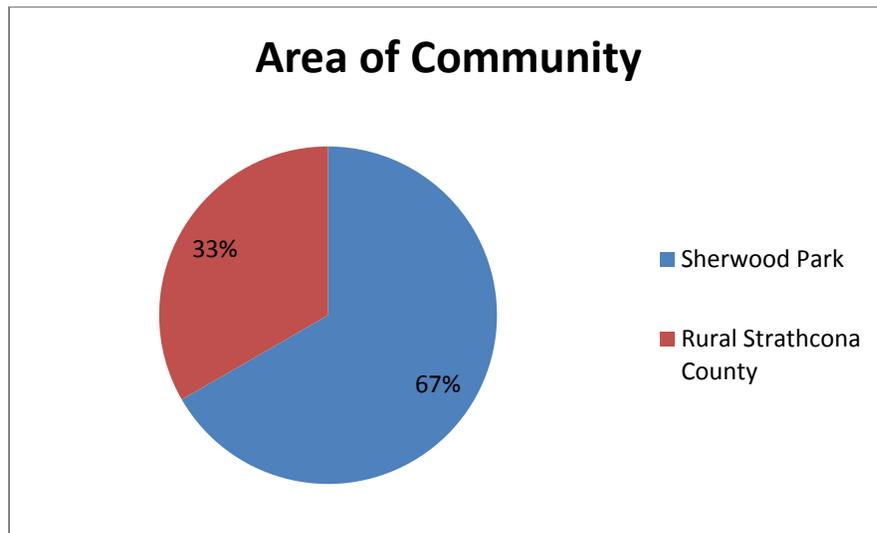
Figure 2 Gender of *Adult Non-Regular User* Focus Group ParticipantsFigure 3 Total Household Income of *Adult Non-Regular User* Focus Group Participants

Figure 4 Area of Community Where *Adult Non-Regular User* Focus Group Participants Reside



### Findings from Discussions with *Adult Non-Regular Users*

The focus group discussions with the *Adult Non-Regular User* groups shared a number of similarities with those conducted with the *Adult Regular User* groups, however, a number of other ideas and thoughts regarding the use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces were illuminated. As with the *Adult Regular User* groups, the focus group discussion with *Adult Non-Regular Users* began with asking participants “what does being physically active mean to you?”. Some of the examples provided by participants of what physical activity means to them included:

“Just being able to be mobile on a regular basis and not be sitting sedentary.” (SCNU 2, p.2)

“To me...it’s just to be healthy” (SCNU 5, p.3)

The ideas that emerged through discussions with *Adult Non-Regular Users* have been organized into 5 major themes, which are presented in the following section.

#### Theme: Satisfaction with Indoor Facilities and Outdoor Spaces

*Adult Non-Regular Users* indicated that they were satisfied with the indoor facilities and outdoor spaces available to them within Strathcona County and provided examples of why they were pleased with facilities. For example, one participant shared the following:

“I think the Kinsmen is great...I don’t care if it’s old. My granddaughter loves it, she takes her lessons there. I do my aquasizes.” (SCNU 5, p.40)

“Yeah, and aquasize, yeah and I’m quite comfortable with that because I’m really um, physically zero. And I felt quite comfortable with that, going in there and you can go at your own pace...” (SCNU 5, p.32)

### **Theme: Facilitators of Use and Preferences**

Focus group participants described a number of factors that facilitate the use of both indoor facilities and outdoor spaces. Social interaction was described as an important facilitator of using indoor facilities or outdoor spaces. Interestingly, participants shared that social interaction could be a potential motivator to their use of facilities and spaces in the future, as exemplified by the following quotation:

“But I do see myself, or I could see myself, if I was retired or semi-retired, using it like [Millennium Place] or something like that, to work out and then there could be a social component almost to it, as well, you know.” (SCNU 2, p.11)

Another facilitator included being motivated to be active by “health scares”. As shared by one participant:

“...You know the people I know who have got most physically fit, it usually had some, at my age anyways, had, had some sort of wake up call.” (SCNU 2, p.10)

Some participants mentioned that they prefer to use the private facilities within the community. Small classes, where instructors are able to tailor the exercises to each person, were mentioned as being the main benefit of going to private facilities.

“Like the exercise classes are smaller, which I know sometimes when I did come use the facilities, like you’d have 30 to 40 people, and I’m not a 30 to 40 people person” (SCNU 5, p.47)

A few participants revealed a preference to engage in physical activity in their own home. As stated by one participant:

“I can do all of my fitness without leaving my house, other than going for a walk outdoors, if that’s what we choose...So if I can make it easier for myself...I’m going to do it, so if I don’t have to take 15 minutes to drive somewhere then that’s 30 minutes all in, that’s going to be added to my workout process.” (SCNU 2, p.43)

This indicates that some individuals prefer to use facilities within the home as opposed to travelling to use facilities within the community to save time.

### **Theme: Barriers to Use of Indoor Facilities and Outdoor Spaces**

One of the themes that emerged through discussions with *Adult Non-Regular Users* was the factors that act as barriers to the use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces. General barriers to the use of both indoor facilities and outdoor spaces were also shared. The barriers shared by participants are described below.

#### **Indoor Facilities**

*Adult Non-Regular Users* revealed a number of barriers to accessing indoor recreation facilities, specifically. Crowding of facilities was mentioned as being a major barrier, and participants shared the following as examples:

“If I ever was to go swimming in the pool again, it ain’t going to be with a bunch of screaming little kids at the other end.” (SCNU 2, p.46)

“I find one of the things with Festival Place is it’s loud...noisy.” (SCNU 2, p.12)

Another barrier to the use of indoor facilities mentioned by *Adult Non-Regular Users* was feeling uncomfortable at facilities. As described by one participant:

“When Millennium was first built, I went there quite a bit initially, but then everyone in Edmonton discovered it, and you got all these muscle builders and the beautiful people there, and then that old guy like me just didn’t feel comfortable there.” (SCNU 2, p.44)

Participants also shared that feeling overwhelmed at facilities is a major deterrent to their use. In addition, participants indicated that uncertainty about the difficulty level of classes deters them from trying them.

“...I’m not comfortable going into a class where I’m not sure...how hard it’s going to be, and whether or not I’m going to suddenly have an asthma attack.” (SCNU 5, p.30)

“But I’m always worried, you know, you don’t know until you get into the class how hard it’s going to be.” (SCNU 5, p.32)

Other barriers mentioned by focus group participants included high costs to use indoor facilities and the timing and scheduling of classes. Some participants shared that classes and programs were not offered at times that worked with their schedules. For example, as shared by one participant:

“Yeah, I mean I couldn’t do anything that was anywhere between early, the mornings, or anything between like 3 and 7:30 forget it, because I’m driving somebody somewhere.”  
(SCNU, p.68)

### **Outdoor Spaces**

Winter weather conditions was the only barrier to the use of outdoor spaces, such as walking trails, mentioned by focus group participants. As shared by one participant:

“Walks are fine...but winter time I won’t do it. I quit doing that a couple of years ago, because of the ice.” (SCNU2, p.48)

### **General**

A number of general barriers to accessing indoor facilities and outdoor spaces were mentioned by focus group participants. Long travel distances to facilities were mentioned as one barrier. As stated by one participant:

“You know [Festival Place] is a long way for me, it’s 22 kilometers.” (SCNU 2, p.9)

Additionally, personal health issues were mentioned as being barriers to the use of facilities and spaces within the community. One participant shared the following regarding health issues as a barrier to the use of outdoor spaces:

“I don’t use the outdoor facilities because of allergies.” (SCNU 5 p.64)

Other health issues, such as asthma, were also shared by participants as examples of personal health issues that act as barriers to the use of both indoor facilities and outdoor spaces.

## **Theme: Suggestions for Improvements of Existing Facilities and Spaces**

### **Indoor Facilities**

The *Adult Non-Regular User* focus group participants shared their ideas for maintenance and improvements that could be made to existing facilities to improve their use.

For example, participants suggested that the use of community halls for recreation activities could be increased. As shared by one participant:

“I’d like to see them utilize the community halls outside, like I know we’re close to Colchester Hall...Nothing is ever offered there...Like even yoga, once a week or something, but nothing is offered. Like it’s not being used.” (SCNU 5, p.93)

Another suggestion provided by a focus group participant was to reserve one indoor recreation facility for use by adults only.

### **Outdoor Spaces**

Participants indicated a number of possible improvements that could be made to outdoor spaces to increase access to and use of these areas. Examples included: more defined areas for toddlers and young children in pre-existing playgrounds, more lighting on walking and biking trails, more benches and garbage cans, as well as improvements made to the marking of outdoor spaces and trails.

One interesting suggestion emerged during discussions with the *Adult Non-Regular User* groups regarding possible uses of local lakes as community skating rinks in the winter months.

“And it’s really weird cause you go out there there’s two, five – ten acres lakes and they’re, they just, you know they’d be great community skating rinks” (SCNU 2, p.16)

### **Theme: Suggestions for Improving Programming and Communication at Indoor Facilities and Outdoor Spaces**

Participants provided many suggestions for improvements that could be made to programming at indoor facilities and outdoor spaces that would help to increase access by community members. One suggestion was to provide orientations at the indoor recreation facilities to increase the comfort of community members. Another suggestion would be to increase communication regarding programming to ensure that individuals are able to sign up for classes that they will feel comfortable in. This would also help to increase participants’ comfort levels in classes. One major point that emerged through discussions with the *Adult Non-Regular User* groups was that increasing the selection of times that fitness classes are offered at facilities would be one of the most important improvements that could be made to programming in order to increase access by community members. As described by one participant:

“I would like to see earlier classes, [because] they always seem to be like at 7 at night, I like them like where you can go right from work, cause I have a habit if I go home first, I’m not leaving.” (SCNU 5, p.90)

Our focus group discussions with *Adult Non-Regular Users* revealed that there is a general lack of knowledge about what is available at indoor facilities and outdoor spaces within the community. Participants did not have a clear understanding of programming at facilities, what outdoor spaces were available for use within their communities, or the costs to use facilities. One recommendation would be to increase the amount of information provided to community members in order to improve their general knowledge and understanding of what is available to them at both indoor facilities and outdoor spaces. Possible suggestions for modes of informing community members about opportunities include newspaper, television, and radio advertisements.

## Youth

### Demographic Information

Four *Youth* participants were involved in the focus group. They were all female and ranged in age from 13 to 15. Two participants resided in Sherwood Park, and the other two were from Strathcona County.

### Findings from Discussion with Youth

The focus group with youth (aged 13-17) was structured in a similar way to those conducted with the adult groups. The discussion revealed some interesting findings regarding perceptions about accessibility and use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces within the community. The focus group began by asking participants what physical activity means to them. Some responses included:

“Just being healthy and being able to do basic activities” (SCY, p.1)

“Doing physical activity without having, without it being a requirement of school” (SCY, p.3)

As with the analysis of both adult focus groups, a number of themes emerged from the discussion with Strathcona County youth. These themes are presented in the following section, along with direct quotations shared by participants.

### **Theme: Facilitators of Use of Indoor Facilities and Outdoor Spaces**

One facilitator of use for indoor facilities and outdoor spaces for the *Youth* focus group participants was proximity to the facility or space. Participants indicated that indoor facilities and outdoor spaces that are within walking distance from their homes were particularly convenient, which facilitated access (as many of these participants relied on their parents for transportation to more distant facilities). Another facilitator of use was reasonable costs to use facilities and spaces. Motivation and social interaction were also mentioned as being facilitative. As shared by one participant:

“Sometimes the motivation thing, like it’s better when you go with a friend.” (p.15)

### **Theme: Barriers to the use of Indoor Facilities and Outdoor Spaces**

As with both the *Adult Regular User* and *Adult Non-Regular User* focus groups, the discussions with youth revealed a number of major barriers to their use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces. These barriers to access included transportation-related issues, as well as barriers specific to the use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces, and are described in the section below.

#### **Transportation**

Difficulty with transportation to and from indoor facilities and outdoor spaces was mentioned by *Youth* focus group participants as being the main barrier to their use. Inadequate options for bus transportation to and from facilities and spaces were mentioned as being one of the major difficulties for youth in accessing these areas in Strathcona County. The need to ask family members for rides and the distances to facilities and spaces were described as related challenges for youth. The following quotations exemplify some of the points raised by youth regarding transportation issues as barriers to accessing indoor facilities and outdoor spaces within the community:

“Yeah, like if you take the bus to go to Millennium or something, you’re only there for like an hour and a half, you have to wait for a while for a bus to show up, cause the busses only run like every 2 [or] 3 hours.” (p.4)

“Yeah I have to get a ride every time I want to go somewhere...and we’re also like half an hour away.” (p.5)

“I have motivation, it’s just sometimes like my parents are busy, so time to actually get out there and actually go to Millennium.” (p.14)

The cost of public transportation was also mentioned as a barrier to youth’s use of facilities and spaces in the community. For example, one participant shared the following:

“Well like if you don’t have a ride, or someone to drive you, and if you take the bus or something, and like at Millennium it’s \$6.50 or something like that. So it’s, like you pay 10 bucks just to get there, just to go there, and it’s another 4 bucks to get home.” (p.8)

### **Indoor Facilities**

In terms of barriers to the use of indoor facilities, discussions with youth revealed a few main factors that limit their accessibility. The first barrier mentioned was age restrictions for using facilities. For example, one participant noted:

“...To workout at Millennium you have to be 14 or something, and then your parents have to come with you.” (p.4)

Furthermore, *Youth* focus group participants indicated that there is a lack of appropriate programming for their age group. As described by one participant:

“When you look in the recreation guide, there’s like the kids yoga and like, it’s like 12 and under, and there’s adult, which goes from 16 and up. So the 14 and 15 year olds have nothing left.” (p.26)

Other barriers to the use of recreation facilities mentioned by participants were the high costs to use facilities as well as feeling intimidated at facilities.

### **Outdoor Spaces**

Participants indicated that their parents’ perceptions of lack of safety at certain outdoor spaces within the community acted as a barrier to their use. Some youth participants mentioned that their parents would not allow them to visit the skate park for this reason. The following was shared by a participant regarding parental perceptions of safety:

“My mom won’t let me go to the skate park at Millennium...I’m not allowed to go there...apparently there’s like drug problems.” (p.14)

Perceived lack of safety felt by youth themselves also acted as a barrier to the use of outdoor spaces. One participant shared the following regarding a perceived lack of safety on trails:

“...There’s a bunch of trails right by my house, so it’s not bad to get to them or anything, but sometimes like when it’s kind of getting later, like around 4 o’clock or something, it’s kind of sketchy.” (p.6)

Finally, youth mentioned that poorly maintained outdoor spaces act reduce the use of these areas, as exemplified by the following:

“And sometimes trails aren’t like properly cleaned up, like there might be branches falling down, and you can’t access it properly.” (p.6)

### **Theme: Suggestions for Improvements to Transportation**

One of the major suggestions brought up by the youth participants was to improve public transportation options for travelling to and from indoor facilities and outdoor spaces. One participant suggested the following:

“I would say like just the regular busses that go around, like just residential areas, like that take you to the transit type of station, and then there should just be like a bus that you can take to Millennium, or just the recreational centres, and like that should be, I’d say like every day of the week, after like school, work hours, to do that.” (p.21)

Through the discussions with youth, it became clear that improving public transportation would effectively help this age group to access facilities and spaces, as transportation issues emerged as being one of the major barriers to their use.

### **Theme: Suggestions for Maintenance of and Improvements to Existing Facilities and Spaces**

#### **Indoor Facilities**

In their discussions of how to improve indoor facilities, youth participants emphasized the need to have more activity options available. For example, one participant shared the following:

“I’m not sure what they’re redoing at the Ardrossan one, but...I know before they started doing stuff it was mostly just hockey, the rink, and I could walk there from school, after

school, it's within walking distance, but I have no reason to because I don't do hockey or ringette or anything." (p28)

### **Outdoor Spaces**

Youth also revealed a few issues with the maintenance of outdoor spaces that limit the use of these spaces by community members. For example, exposed roots on trails were mentioned as being a hazard. Additionally, youth mentioned that the goalie posts and nets available for use were in poor condition. Maintaining the walking trails and existing sport equipment may increase the use of these spaces by community members of all ages.

### **Theme: Suggestions for Improving Programming and Communication at Indoor Facilities and Outdoor Spaces**

*Youth* focus group participants had a number of suggestions for ways in which facility programming could be improved. Their main suggestion was to increase the number of teen classes available at facilities. As shared by one participant:

"More teen classes would be good, or even just have like yoga, or kickboxing or something different." (p.25)

Another recommendation made by youth was to have facilities specifically for youth, or to section off areas (or designate specific times) within facilities for this age group. In addition, it may be beneficial to have staff members of facilities available to youth to introduce them to the equipment and activity opportunities within the facilities.

The youth were asked what forms of advertising about opportunities at facilities and spaces would be most effective for reaching youth in the community. Participants suggested that advertisements in the paper or on the radio, a website, or Facebook would be effective means of communicating opportunities to this age group. An additional recommendation was to advertise within schools by handing out informational or promotional newsletters to students. One participant indicated that the recreation guides are a good form of information, but suggested that there be a specific section for listing opportunities for youth.

## Summary of Main Thematic Findings from Focus Groups

The table below summarizes the major thematic findings that emerged through the focus groups with *Adult Regular Users*, *Adult Non-Regular Users*, and *Youth* in Strathcona County.

<b>Theme</b>	<b><i>Adult Regular User Focus Groups</i></b>	<b><i>Adult Non-Regular User Focus Groups</i></b>	<b><i>Youth Focus Group</i></b>
Satisfaction With Indoor Facilities and Outdoor Spaces	•	•	
Facilitators of Use and Preferences	•	•	•
Barriers to Use of Indoor and Outdoor Facilities	•	•	•
Suggestions for Maintenance of and Improvements to Existing Facilities and Spaces/Ideas for New Facilities and Spaces	•	•	•
Suggestions for Improving Programming and Communication at Indoor Facilities and Outdoor Spaces	•	•	•
Public Transit	•		
Suggestions for Improvements to Transportation			•

## Limitations and Considerations

The discussions with community members revealed a number of very interesting points regarding the accessibility and use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces within Strathcona County; however, there are some considerations that must be taken into account when interpreting findings from focus groups. As with most focus groups, our discussions only involved a few individuals. This small sample of individuals may not represent the larger community in their thoughts about indoor and outdoor recreation facilities, which must be taken into account when considering the findings. Additionally, when participants were recruited over the phone there were challenges with putting people into the correct group (Regular User vs. Non-Regular User). Some people may have self-selected themselves into the incorrect group.

It is also important to note that there were some differences in socio-demographic variables between the *Adult Regular User* and *Adult-Non Regular User* focus group participants. First, there were a higher proportion of individuals aged 45-64 (67%) in the *Adult Non-Regular User* focus groups than in the *Adult Regular User* groups (50%). Second, there were a higher proportion of females within the *Adult Regular User* focus groups (63%), whereas exactly half of *Adult Non-Regular User* focus group participants were female. Thirdly, with respect to total household income, there was no representation by individuals with income levels below \$20,000 or between \$20,000 and \$40,000 within the *Adult Non-Regular User* focus groups, whereas there was a greater distribution across all income levels within the *Adult Regular User* groups. Lastly, the *Adult Regular User* focus group participants, a much larger proportion of these participants (87%) resided in Sherwood Park than did the *Adult Non-Regular User* focus group participants (67%). Overall, and despite these considerations, the focus groups illuminated many factors that would not have been found through telephone survey data alone.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The focus groups conducted with Sherwood Park and Strathcona County residents provided valuable insight into the access and use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces by community members. Focus group participants revealed a number of facilitators and barriers to their use of indoor facilities and outdoor spaces. Suggestions for improvements to programming and communication as well as suggestions for how existing facilities and spaces could be improved to

increase their use by community members were also provided by focus group participants. Following the analysis of the focus group discussions, members of the research team formulated their recommendations that could enhance equitable access to indoor facilities and outdoor spaces by all members of the community. Some of the major challenges to accessing facilities and spaces presented by community members could be addressed to promote equitable access by all residents of Strathcona County.

1. As participants mentioned the limited ability to access facilities and spaces by public transportation, increasing the availability of public transportation through improved or special scheduling could increase the use of facilities and spaces by residents.
2. Scheduling and the lack of flexibility of classes at facilities emerged as a barrier. Adjusting the scheduling of programming and increasing the number of drop-in class options at facilities could help to increase participation in classes.
3. Although most focus group participants indicated that the cost to use facilities and spaces was reasonable, some felt that not everyone in the community is able to afford to engage in recreation at these areas. Subsidizing the cost for families who cannot afford to utilize facilities and spaces may promote equitable access. In addition, and as suggested by focus group participants, providing incentives, such as complementary passes to facilities, may help encourage certain members of the community to use facilities and spaces.
4. Proximity to facilities and spaces emerged as a facilitator to use; however, participants shared that greater travel distances act as a barrier to the use of these places for recreation. This suggests that providing a variety of facilities and spaces across Sherwood Park and Strathcona County would promote equitable access.

## Next Steps

During the second phase of this project in the fall of 2013, focus groups will again be conducted following the collection of survey data. These focus groups, in conjunction with survey findings, will help us gain further insight into the impact of the OSRFS Project on health and health equity for the residents of Strathcona County.