

Town of Antigonish · Municipality of the County of Antigonish

Recreation Facilities and Recreation Needs Assessment

Summary

Final Report, Recommendations and 10-Year Implementation Plan

Prepared for
The Town of Antigonish and the Municipality of the County of Antigonish

Date
October 2026

Prepared by

ASBB
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Humanizing Economics

Prepared for
The Town of Antigonish and the Municipality of the County of Antigonish

About this Summary

This document is one of four reports prepared for the Town of Antigonish and the Municipality of the County of Antigonish through the Recreation Facilities and Recreation Needs Assessment:

1. **Recreation Facilities and Recreation Needs Assessment — Final Report** (the main report)
2. **Recreation Facilities and Recreation Needs Assessment — Summary** (this document)
3. **Public Engagement Report**
4. **Public Engagement Report — Summary**

This Summary is a shorter version of the main report, intended for readers who want the key findings, recommendations and next steps without the full supporting detail.

The content in this document is made up of excerpts taken directly from the main report. Each section notes the section and page of the main report it comes from. For full details, data sources, the complete gap analysis and all supporting appendices, please refer to the main report.

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SECTION 1

1.1 Structure of the Report

Executive Summary



The Town of Antigonish (the Town) and the Municipality of the County of Antigonish (the County) are two separate municipal units. Given their proximity and shared commitment to the community, they have strong partnerships to enhance service delivery, including between their recreation departments. The Town owns and operates several recreation assets, while the County supports many community-owned and non-profit facilities financially and by various other means and resources, rather than owning them directly. Together these form a wider community recreation system, and this Needs Assessment is one example of their collaboration.

All services provided are available to Town and County residents. Residents regularly use parks, trails, beaches, sports fields, the Antigonish Arena, schools, St. Francis Xavier University (StFX) facilities, community halls, and cultural spaces across municipal boundaries. While the region has a strong recreation foundation, this assessment found that the greatest challenges are not a lack of facilities, but barriers related to accessibility, affordability, coordination, transportation, and awareness of available recreation opportunities.

The statistics below are drawn from the public survey administered by ASBB, with the County and the Town, to residents of Antigonish, as a part of the Recreation Needs Assessment. It received 699 responses and some key insights are captured below, which shape our approach to this assessment.

89.9%
take part in recreation weekly

69.7%
leave Antigonish for recreation

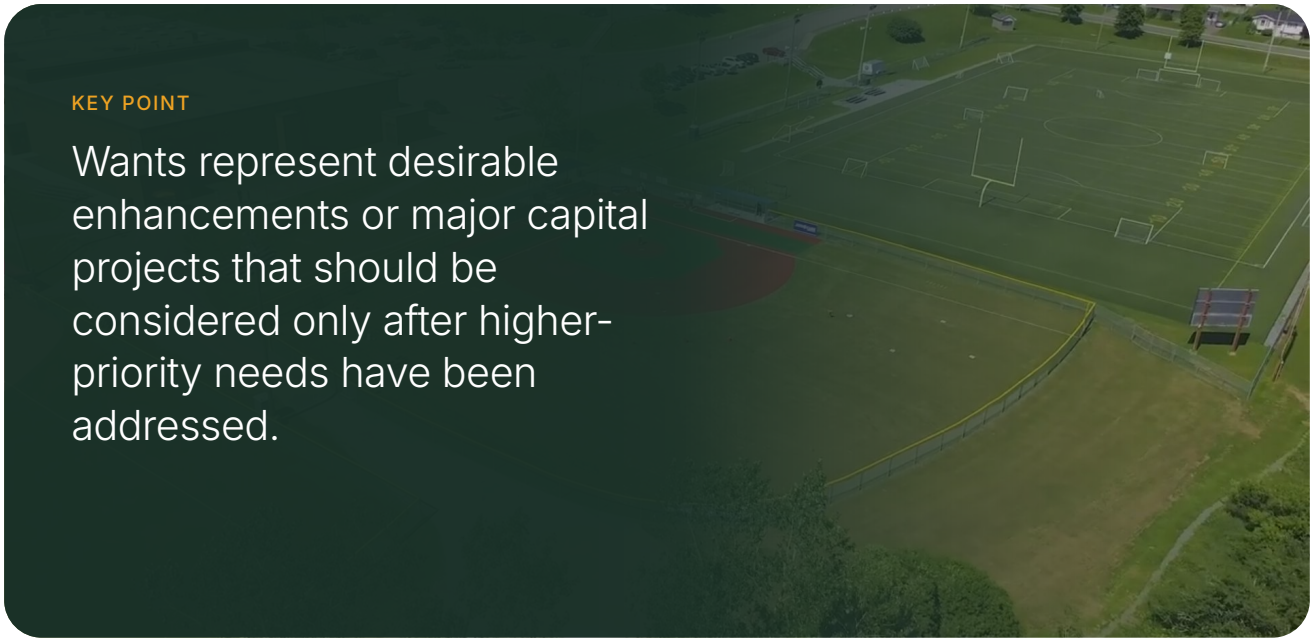
38.6%
of organizations use no municipal facility

95.2%
drive to recreation

The purpose of this Recreation Facilities and Recreation Needs Assessment is to provide an evidence-based framework to guide recreation planning and investment in the future. The study combined demographic analysis, facility inventories and condition assessments, booking data, public and stakeholder engagement, jurisdictional reviews, and recreation best practices to identify current service levels, future needs, and priorities for investment.

The assessment found that Antigonish has a diverse network of recreation facilities, organizations, and natural recreation assets. However, several system-wide issues were identified, including limited indoor recreation space during the winter, accessibility barriers at many facilities, transportation challenges for rural residents, affordability concerns, increasing pressure on volunteers, and fragmented information and booking systems. At the same time, many existing facilities have opportunities for increased programming and more efficient use before major new infrastructure is considered.

To help prioritize future investments, the report classifies recreation needs into three categories: Core Needs, Supported Needs, and Wants. Core Needs address fundamental barriers to access, safety, equity, and system function, while Supported Needs focus on programming, partnerships, and gradual improvements. Wants represent desirable enhancements or major capital projects that should be considered only after higher-priority needs have been addressed. A decision-making matrix is also provided to help evaluate future recreation projects in a transparent and consistent manner.



KEY POINT

Wants represent desirable enhancements or major capital projects that should be considered only after higher-priority needs have been addressed.

TABLE 1

Gap tiers at a glance

Tier	What it means	Number of gaps	Character
Tier 1 — Core Needs	Must ensure access	**11**	These are the system-wide barriers, which have a high equity impact. These predominantly include access, safety and coordination gaps rather than capital gaps.
Tier 2 — Supported Needs	Important, partner-led	**35**	Needs that should be addressed but can be delivered through partners, grants, or incremental facility renewal. The municipality's role is mainly to support and enable delivery.
Tier 3 — Wants	Enhancement only	**11**	'Wants' are desirable and often strongly demanded, but are lower priority because they are substitutable, enhancement-focused or high cost relative to impact.

The report concludes with ten recommendations and a phased implementation plan. The recommendations focus on improving access to existing facilities, strengthening partnerships, expanding recreation programming, improving accessibility and affordability, supporting community organizations, and planning strategically for future capital investments.

No capital commitment is recommended in this plan.

The plan does not ask Council to commit to a capital plan or investment. It asks Council to secure access to facilities it does not own, to understand the true long-term cost of the assets it already owns, and to build the evidence required to make a defensible capital decision at a later date. Where a future recreation centre or aquatic facility is discussed, the plan provides a decision framework rather than a recommendation to build.

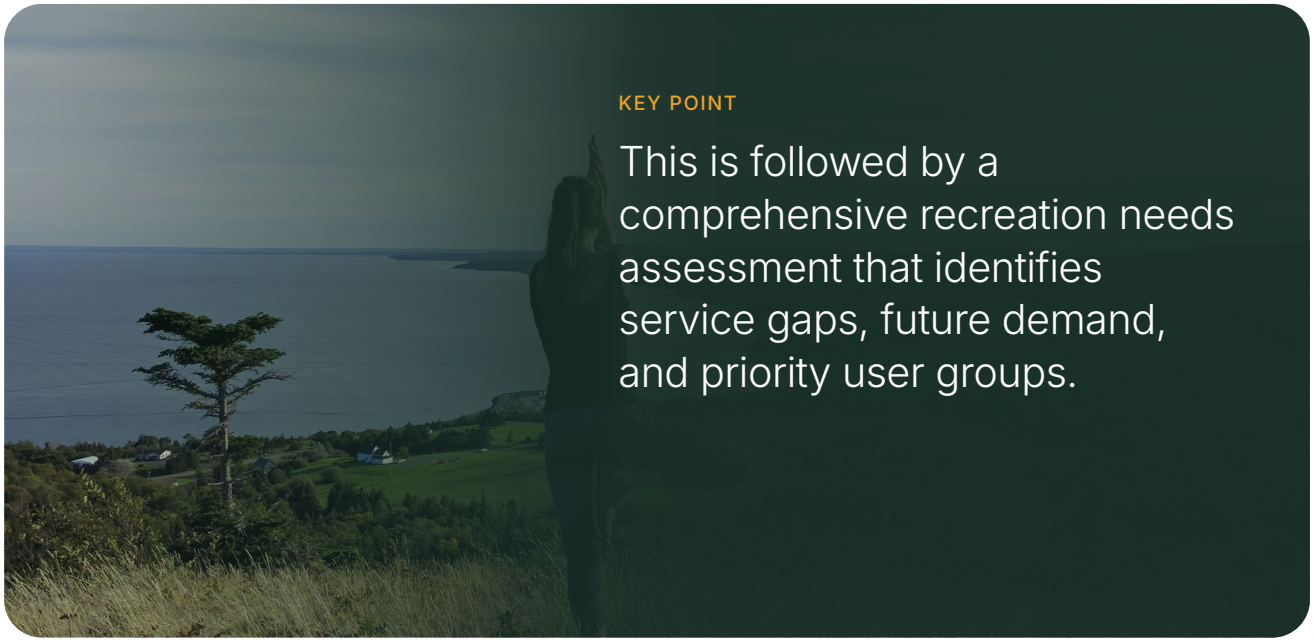




FROM SECTION 1, PAGE 12 OF THE MAIN REPORT

1.1 Structure of the Report

The report is organized into twelve sections. It begins with the background, purpose, and study methodology, followed by a review of the community profile and planning context. The report then examines the existing recreation system, including facilities, organizations, booking data, and facility condition assessments. This is followed by a comprehensive recreation needs assessment that identifies service gaps, future demand, and priority user groups. The final sections prioritize recreation needs, present a decision-making framework for evaluating future projects, and outline recommendations together with a phased implementation roadmap to guide recreation planning over the next decade. Four appendices carry the supporting detail.





SECTION 9

9

Recreation Facilities and Recreation Gaps

9.3 Results in Tiers

9.7 Key Findings

FROM SECTION 9, PAGE 107 OF THE MAIN REPORT

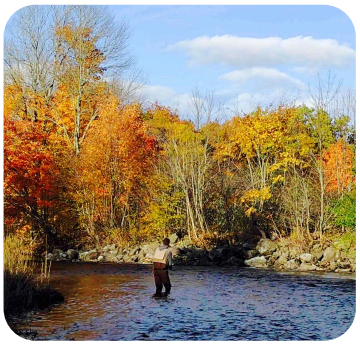
9.3 Results in Tiers

The identified recreation gaps were grouped into three priority tiers to help guide future decision-making and investment. Tier 1 – Core Needs includes 11 priorities that address fundamental barriers to recreation, such as accessibility, safety, equitable access, and system coordination. These are considered the highest priorities because they have the greatest community-wide impact and require direct municipal leadership. Tier 2 – Supported Needs includes 35 priorities that are important but can often be addressed through partnerships, external funding, improved programming, or gradual facility renewal. In these cases, the municipalities play a supporting role by providing coordination, funding, facilities, or other resources. Tier 3 – Wants includes 11 priorities that would enhance the recreation system but are not essential to meeting current community needs. These opportunities can be pursued as circumstances allow, particularly when factors such as available land, external funding, new partnerships, community capacity, or other favourable conditions align. While these priorities are not considered immediate needs, they remain valid opportunities for future investment when the conditions to advance them are in place

TABLE 40

Tier criteria

Tier	What it means	Number of gaps	What this tier is made of
Tier 1 — Core Needs	Must ensure access	**11**	System-wide barriers, high equity impact. The municipality is the only actor able to resolve them. Predominantly access, safety and coordination gaps rather than capital gaps.
Tier 2 — Supported Needs	Important, partner-led	**35**	Meet the need test but deliverable through partners, grants or incremental renewal. Municipal role is enabling: space, funding, coordination, data.
Tier 3 — Wants	Enhancement only	**11**	Desirable and often strongly demanded, but enhancing, substitutable or high cost relative to impact. Predominantly facility-driven requests and would be able to be achieve should the correct environmental conditions be present such as funding, land access, etc.


FROM SECTION 9, PAGE 113 OF THE MAIN REPORT

9.7 Key Findings

- **The Antigonish recreation system relies on partnerships.** Many recreation organizations operate from facilities that are not municipally owned, highlighting the importance of strengthening partnerships and securing long-term access agreements to existing recreation spaces.
- **The Antigonish recreation system relies on a mix of municipal and community-based delivery.** Many recreation opportunities are provided through community-owned and volunteer-operated facilities, organizations, and programs rather than municipally owned facilities. These assets are an important part of the County's recreation system and provide opportunities within local communities. Continued municipal support through funding, facility improvements, staff assistance, and partnerships will be important to sustaining this network.
- **Affordability remains one of the largest barriers to participation in Antigonish.** Community organizations identified low-income households as the group facing the greatest challenges accessing recreation. Maintaining affordable fees, financial assistance programs, and sustainable funding models will be essential to ensuring equitable access.
- **Transportation is critical to recreation access in Antigonish.** With most residents relying on private vehicles and limited public transportation options, particularly in the County, improving transportation and local access should be considered an important part of recreation planning.
- **Residents are leaving the region to access programs rather than facilities.** Many residents travel outside Antigonish because desired recreation programs are unavailable locally. Expanding and diversifying recreation programming may help retain participation without requiring significant new infrastructure.
- **Aquatic recreation is vulnerable for Antigonish.** The community depends largely on a single indoor pool to meet demand. Given the high demand for swimming across all age groups, ensuring reliable access to aquatic facilities should remain a long-term priority.
- **Some community recreation assets are at risk.** The potential loss of cultural and performance spaces highlights the need to preserve and strengthen important community facilities as part of the broader recreation system.

- **Antigonish's Community organizations need greater support.** Recreation in Antigonish depends heavily on volunteers, yet many organizations report challenges with volunteer recruitment, retention, and burnout. Supporting volunteers and community organizations will be essential to sustaining recreation services over the long term.

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SECTION 11

Recommendations

11.1 Summary of Recommendations

11.2 Guiding Principles







FROM SECTION 11, PAGE 123 OF THE MAIN REPORT

11.1 Summary of Recommendations

The Recreation Facilities and Needs Assessment produced ten recommendations for the Town and County of Antigonish. They are organized under five priority areas — Governance and Agreements, Facilities and Infrastructure, Access and Inclusion, Information and Staffing, and Financial Strategy — and together they set a ten-year direction for recreation across both municipalities.



The recommendations rest on a consistent premise drawn from the engagement process, resident survey, stakeholder consultations and facility review. Antigonish does not primarily have a recreation facility shortage. It has an access, coordination and information problem layered on top of an aging municipal asset base and a heavy reliance on facilities the municipalities do not own or control. Residents identified indoor swimming, year-round indoor space, affordability and transportation as their leading concerns, yet much of the infrastructure required to respond already exists — at StFX, in SRCE and CSAP schools, on provincial land, and in facilities operated by community organizations. Access to that infrastructure is, in most cases, undocumented.

Municipal and strategic plans combined with stakeholder interviews confirmed that large capital projects are not feasible in the near term, given competing pressures from water, roads and wastewater infrastructure. The

recommendations are therefore designed to maximize recreation value within existing fiscal constraints while creating the conditions — evidence, partnerships, reserves and decision criteria — for defensible future investment. No capital commitment is recommended in this plan.









FROM SECTION 11, PAGE 124 OF THE MAIN REPORT

11.2 Guiding Principles

Five principles guide the recommendations and provide an important reference for Council and staff when prioritizing investments, considering opportunities, and responding to requests over the life of the plan.

TABLE 47

Guiding principles

Principle	Importance and Relevance
1. Partnership before ownership	Partnerships can expand recreation access and make better use of existing facilities without requiring new municipal infrastructure. This is particularly relevant where recreation is already delivered through schools, community organizations and other providers.
2. Equitable access	Recreation access varies across the community due to geography, affordability, transportation, accessibility and other barriers. This principle keeps the needs of rural communities and residents who face greater barriers visible in future planning and investment decisions.
3. Build on existing assets	Existing facilities, parks, trails and community spaces are important parts of the recreation system. Maintaining and improving these assets can help extend their useful life and improve access while informing decisions about future facilities.
4. Support community-led recreation	Volunteers, community organizations and other local partners play an important role in providing recreation across the County. Supporting this network helps sustain local recreation opportunities and strengthens the capacity of communities to deliver services.
5. Financial sustainability	Recreation investments have ongoing operating, maintenance and renewal costs. Considering these costs, along with funding, partnerships and phased investment, helps ensure that future decisions are financially sustainable over time.

FROM SECTION 11, PAGES 125–149 OF THE MAIN REPORT

11.3 The Ten Recommendations

The Recreation Facilities and Recreation Needs Assessment makes ten recommendations. Each is set out in full in Section 11 of the main report (pages 125–149), with its supporting actions, lead, timing and evidence.

Recommendation 01 — Establish Formal MOUs with Non-Municipal Facility Owners

Recommendation 02 — Create a Shared TOA/MCOA Recreation Plan

Recommendation 03 — Upgrade Existing Facilities Before Building New

Recommendation 04 — Plan for Indoor, Aquatic and Year-Round Recreation Space

Recommendation 05 — Address Transportation as a Core Recreation Barrier

Recommendation 06 — Expand Inclusive and Community-Based Programming

Recommendation 07 — Build One Recreation Information and Booking Hub

Recommendation 08 — Strengthen Volunteer and Staff Capacity

Recommendation 09 — Adopt a Financial Planning Framework for Recreation

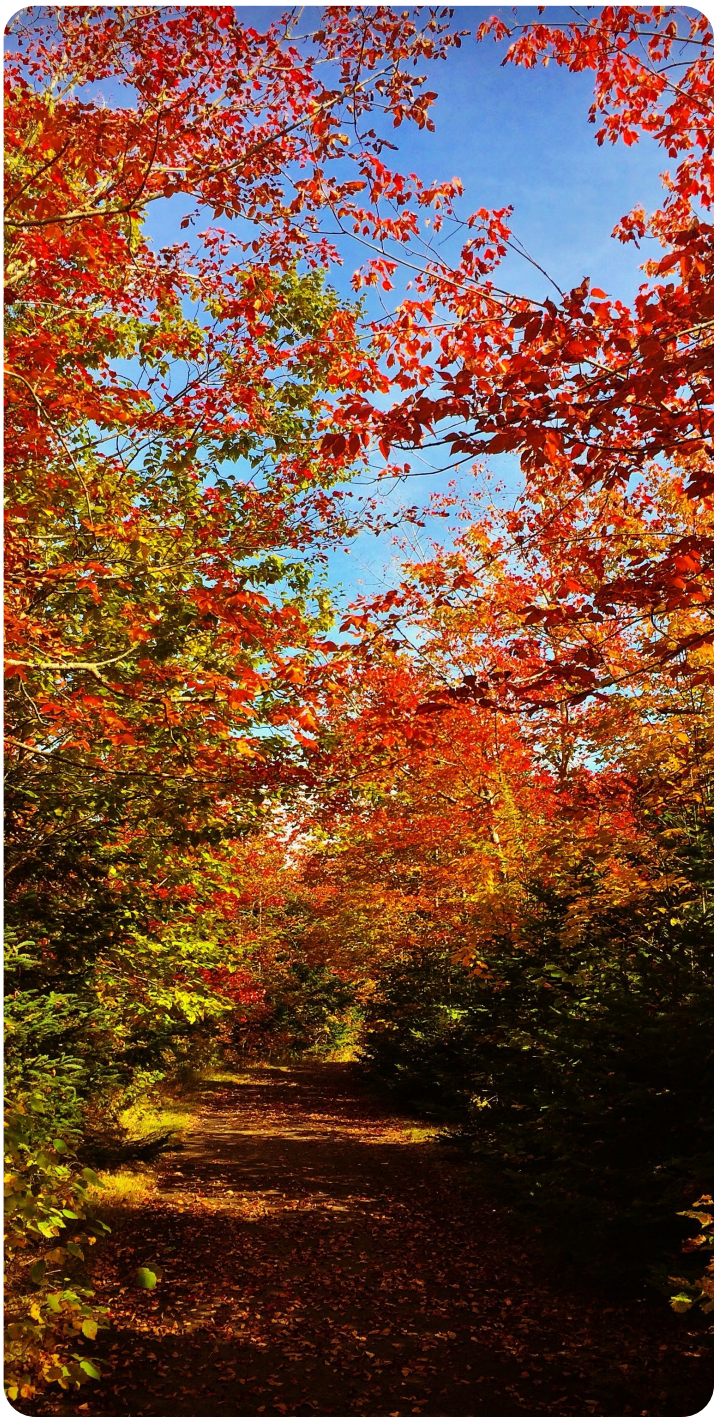
Recommendation 10 — Align All Recreation Decisions with Provincial Strategy and Plans

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SECTION 12

12.1 Immediate Actions (0–12 months)

Next Steps



Implementation Plan and Actions Timeline

This section sets out when and how the ten recommendations would be put into action. Immediate actions (0–12 months) build the foundation: access, governance and the evidence base. Medium-term (1–3 years) and long-term (3–10 years) actions follow once that groundwork is in place.

The action tables below are taken from Appendix F of the main report (pages 187–193), where each action is linked to its recommendation, lead and timing.

FROM APPENDIX F, PAGE 188 OF THE MAIN REPORT

12.1 Immediate Actions (0–12 months)

Immediate actions concentrate on foundation-building: securing access, establishing governance structures, and generating the evidence base. These items are largely low-cost and high-leverage, and the majority of later actions depend on them.

Three items sit on the critical path

The facility inventory and ownership map; the MOU template and negotiations with StFX and SRCE; and the baseline recreation data report. These should be commissioned as early as possible — most other actions in this plan cannot begin until they are complete.



TABLE F.1

Immediate actions — governance and agreements

Action	Rec	Lead	Timing
Compile the full facility inventory and ownership map covering all recreation facilities used by TOA/MCOA residents, and document the current access basis for each non-municipal facility.	01.1	Recreation staff / consultants	0–6 months
Identify the highest-risk facilities — those most relied upon with the least formal protection, beginning with the StFX pool and arena and SRCE gymnasiums.	01.1	CAOs and Recreation	0–3 months
Engage legal counsel to draft the standard MOU template and facility-type variants for school, university, provincial and non-profit facilities.	01.2	Recreation and Legal	0–6 months
Initiate MOU negotiations with StFX and SRCE, seeking a minimum five-year term with defined community access hours, cost-sharing, custodial responsibility and annual access-hour disclosure.	01.2	CAOs and Recreation	3–12 months

TABLE F.1

Immediate actions — governance and agreements

Action	Rec	Lead	Timing
Complete and adopt the Facility Allocation Policy, ensuring alignment with the partnership agreements under negotiation.	01.2	CAOs	0–6 months
The Town and County each designate a single staff lead as primary contact for all MOU relationships and establish a digital register with expiry dates and review triggers.	01.3	CAOs and Directors	0–6 months
Establish the joint TOA/MCOA Recreation Task Force with an approved Terms of Reference setting out purpose, membership and roles.	02.1	Recreation and CAOs	3-12 months

TABLE F.2

Immediate actions — evidence and alignment

Action	Rec	Lead	Timing
Compile baseline recreation data — facility usage, program participation by age group and geography, and unmet demand identified through this assessment.	02.3	Recreation	0–12 months
Complete the strategy alignment assessment mapping all recommendations against the NS Shared Strategy pillars, CCTH criteria, NS Accessibility Legislation and the Dismantling Racism and Hate Act.	10.1	Recreation	3–12 months
Develop the parks and outdoor space inventory covering municipally owned and DNR-managed parks, beaches, playgrounds and green spaces, including condition and amenities.	03.5	Recreation staff	0–12 months
Complete geographic equity mapping of outdoor recreation space distribution to identify underserved areas, particularly in rural communities.	03.5	Recreation staff	0–12 months
Audit all parks, and outdoor sites for accessible washroom provision and accessibility compliance.	03.2	Recreation	0–12 months
Complete the deferred maintenance assessment across municipal recreation assets and present findings to Council through the annual budget process.	09.3	Recreation and CAOs	12–18 months

TABLE F.3

Immediate actions — early service improvements

Action	Rec	Lead	Timing
Upon MOU execution, identify and publish additional community access times at school facilities for evenings, weekends and school holidays.	04.1	Recreation staff	On execution

TABLE F.3

Immediate actions — early service improvements

Action	Rec	Lead	Timing
Establish a short-term aquatic access schedule with StFX for community swim lessons, aquatic leadership development and recreational swimming.	04.2	Recreation and StFX	0–12 months
Explore ways to recruit and train lifeguards and swim instructors to address capacity constraints limiting public swim availability.	04.2	Recreation	0–12 months
Establish the joint aquatic registration and communications system as a single source of information for swim lessons, public swims, clubs and lifeguard training.	04.2	Recreation staff	3–12 months
Create a public indoor facility calendar covering all MOU-secured spaces through existing or new booking platforms.	04.1	Recreation staff	0–12 months
Define eligible uses for the Recreation Reserve Fund and confirm initial annual contributions from both municipal budgets.	09.2	Finance and Councils	0–12 months
Include arts and culture organizations in the Recreation Task Force and confirm eligibility under future community programming funding.	06.5	Recreation staff	0–12 months
Publish the Recreation Navigator contact and role across all TOA/MCOA channels once the function is assigned.	07.1	Recreation and Communications	On appointment

12.2 Medium- and Long-Term Actions

MEDIUM-TERM (1–3 YEARS)

Medium-term actions move from securing access to improving the quality, reach and coordination of the recreation system. Most depend on the immediate actions being substantially complete, and several are contingent on successful grant applications.

Strategy and planning.

- Complete and adopt the joint TOA/MCOA Recreation Strategy, incorporating short-, medium- and long-term priorities, named leads, measurable milestones, explicit NS Shared Strategy alignment, and a transparent decision framework for evaluating capital requests. (Rec 02.2)
- Convene the Recreation Task Force at least three times annually to inform budget priorities, coordinate initiatives and strengthen communication among partners. (Rec 02.1)
- Integrate census data, wellbeing indicators and demographic projections into the recreation evidence base, and establish the annual data collection protocol with all MOU partners. (Rec 02.3)

Facilities, parks and trails.

- Commission the facility condition assessment for all municipally owned recreation assets and produce the ranked improvement list. (Rec 03.1)
- Deliver priority upgrades in ranked order — washrooms at highest-use outdoor sites, accessibility compliance including ramps, parking and pathways, lighting to extend usable hours, and storage so volunteer groups can operate without renting off-site. (Rec 03.2)
- Identify sites with drainage or flooding issues, develop a costed drainage improvement plan for priority sites, and assess turf quality at all municipally owned and shared-use fields. (Rec 03.3)
- Map the full trail network, and install standardized wayfinding at all major access points. (Rec 03.4)
- Develop minimum service standards by park tier — neighbourhood, community and regional — and a playground replacement and enhancement schedule. (Rec 03.5)

Indoor and aquatic space.

- Pursue provincial and federal funding for the indoor facility feasibility study, structured to test at least three models with no model pre-selected, each supported by an operating cost model and staffing projection, and including transportation access within scope. (Rec 04.3)
- Identify underused SRCE classroom and multipurpose spaces for arts, wellness and seniors programming under MOU terms. (Rec 04.1)

Access, programming and transportation.

- Launch transportation pilots: the seasonal rural recreation shuttle, negotiations with SRCE on after-school bus use, and subsidized transit passes for youth and seniors, with evaluation after one full year. (Rec 05.1)
- Map gaps in sidewalk, crosswalk and cycling infrastructure between residential areas and key recreation sites, and incorporate recreation access routes into capital planning. (Rec 05.2)
- Expand programming: youth drop-in at a central location, a seniors wellness series co-delivered with existing providers, weekend family recreation sessions, and equipment lending in partnership with sport clubs. (Rec 06.1, 06.2)
- Establish the annual community recreation grant program with defined eligibility criteria and administration model. (Rec 06.4)
- Provide grant or in-kind support for programming delivered by neighbouring communities and organizations, including Paqtnkek Mi'kmaw Nation. (Rec 06.3)

Information, capacity and finance.

- Launch the single recreation webpage or application covering programs, registration, facility maps, financial supports, trail information and contacts, with all MOU-secured hours loaded and public-facing calendars enabled. (Rec 07.2)
- Develop the quarterly community recreation bulletin and establish consistent social media practice. (Rec 07.3)

- Implement the volunteer strategy: recruitment targeting students and young adults, a centralized volunteer database, simplified onboarding and record-check support, and annual recognition. (Rec 08.1)
- Establish the joint Recreation Reserve Fund with modest annual contributions from both budgets, growing as fiscal room allows. (Rec 09.2)
- Bring all recreation assets into the municipal asset management plan and develop the ten-year capital forecast showing when major reinvestment will be required and at what cost. (Rec 09.3)
- Adopt the recreation fee policy establishing clear guidelines for full cost recovery, partial recovery and subsidized or no-cost opportunities based on community benefit, accessibility and equity. (Rec 09.4)
- Develop the recreation evaluation framework defining indicators for each recommendation. (Rec 10.2)

LONG-TERM (3–10 YEARS)

Long-term actions depend on the preceding foundations being in place and on fiscal room becoming available. Several are contingent rather than scheduled — they proceed only if the evidence generated in earlier phases supports them.

- Make any capital decision only after the feasibility study, a full life-cycle cost analysis over a 30-year horizon covering construction, operating, maintenance, staffing and debt servicing, and comparison against the established cost-per-access-hour benchmark. (Rec 04.3, 09.3)
- Grow the Recreation Reserve Fund toward targets informed by the ten-year capital forecast, with annual balance reporting and five-year projections in each budget. (Rec 09.2)
- Embed parks and outdoor space standards into the joint strategy and into TOA and MCOA Municipal Planning Strategies so future land-use decisions protect and expand outdoor recreation opportunities. (Rec 03.5, 10.1)
- Advance natural space connectivity — linking parks, trails, beaches and green spaces into a coherent network supporting active transportation and nature-based recreation, coordinated with provincial partners. (Rec 03.5)
- Explore climate-resilient park design including shade structures, permeable surfaces and storm drainage as parks face increased pressure from extreme weather. (Rec 03.5)
- As part of overall strategic planning, consider how the costs and benefits of joint TOA/MCOA recreation programming are shared. (Rec 09.1)
- Reduce administrative barriers permanently through centralized booking and navigation support, improved access to affordable insurance, simplified registration, and shared administrative resources for community organizations. (Rec 06.4)
- Support arts and culture space planning, including the community arts hub feasibility study and long-term creative space needs, and establish the dedicated funding and support framework for cultural programming. (Rec 06.5, 06.3)
- Explore supplementary revenue through naming rights, sponsorship and community partnership models, and investigate whether a regional service agreement between TOA and MCOA would improve tax treatment or grant eligibility. (Rec 09.4)

- Review the Recreation Navigator role at twelve months and assess whether a full-time recreation coordinator position is warranted. (Rec 07.1)
- Install standardized wayfinding using tourism branding at all major parks and trailheads, and translate key recreation information into French and other community languages. (Rec 07.3)

TOA/MCOA Recreation Facilities and Recreation Needs Assessment — final report, recommendations and implementation plan.

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