

Staff Report



To	Committee of the Whole
Service Area	Public Services
Date	Wednesday, March 4, 2026
Subject	Recreation Facilities Allocation Process Update

Recommendation

That the Recreation Facilities Allocation Process be approved.

Executive Summary

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the Recreation Facility Allocation Process. A comprehensive review was undertaken, including an examination of the current allocation of City indoor recreation space, existing facility booking practices, and the alignment of the process with the City's Strategic Plan.

Key Findings

Earlier this year, staff partnered with the Kitchener-based consulting firm, Overlap Associates, to support the review of the Recreation Facility Allocation Process.

The recommendations from that review identify opportunities to build a clearer, fairer, and more consistent approach to allocating recreation facility space across the City of Guelph. Key changes include:

- the development of a structured internal decision-making framework,
- a transparent Expression of Interest process for new or future access,
- the intentional designation of community-focused spaces and times within facilities,
- adjustments in scheduling practices to ensure space used is optimized efficiently, equitably, and to the greatest benefit of the community.

The results of the review point toward building a clearer, fairer, and more consistent approach to allocating recreation facility space across the City of Guelph. Together, they emphasize the need for a structured internal decision-making framework, a transparent Expression of Interest process for potential users, and the intentional designation of community-focused spaces and times within facilities. They also highlight the importance of optimizing scheduling to ensure that space is used efficiently and equitably.

Strategic Plan Alignment

The key findings are aligned with the City of Guelph's Strategic Plan, Future Guelph: City Building, grow and care for our community space and places. The outcomes are intended to support the City of Guelph in refining an equitable and transparent framework for the responsible and optimized allocation of recreation facility space. By reviewing and updating the process, the City's ability to balance the needs of residents will help to ensure fair access and the greatest possible benefit to the community.

Future Guelph Theme

City Building

Future Guelph Objectives

City Building: Grow and care for our community space and places

Financial Implications

Optimized facility utilization is expected to create opportunities for increased revenue and operational efficiencies. The overall financial impact has not yet been determined, and any revenue changes will be reflected in future budget submissions.

Report

Background

Access to recreation space in the City of Guelph has been shaped by historical patterns. While this helps establish continuity for existing users, it limits opportunities for new and emerging use, especially during high-demand time making balanced and equitable distribution a challenge. New, emerging, or equity-deserving groups can find it difficult to enter the system.

The current cancellation process limits the City's ability to offer returned time to other groups in a usable format or timelines and can lead to facilities not being used to their full potential. Additionally, this ties up valuable staff time with high-frequency, low-value transactions.

As demand for facilities continues to grow and overall capacity remains limited, a fair and consistent framework to evaluate and prioritize competing requests and make allocation decisions that align with community priorities is critical. This will create a more responsive approach, helping the City address evolving needs and reduce barriers to access.

Recreation Facility Allocation Process Review

The City of Guelph engaged Overlap Associates to support a review of its Recreation Facility Allocation Process. The goal of this work was to ensure that access to recreation facility rental space is fair, transparent, and responsive to community needs.

The review for indoor recreation facilities involved:

- A review of existing rental agreements, master schedules, facility usage statistics, and other documents
- A review of the current allocation process from start to finish

- A review of municipal best practices related to allocation policies
- Stakeholder engagement with a variety of facility rental customers, non-customers and staff through focus groups, interviews, and surveys

Stakeholder engagement identified several strengths of the existing Recreation Facility Allocation Process:

- Strong appreciation for relationships with staff
- Recognition of fair intent when balancing competing needs
- Demonstrated value of long-standing community programs
- Positive experiences with facility, quality, and availability
- Appreciation for flexibility when possible, including changes, resolving conflicts, or finding alternative solutions
- Support for clearer, more structured processes
- Shared commitment to community benefit rather than individual benefit

The review identified some opportunities for improvement in the Recreation Facility Allocation Process including:

1. Access and Equity

- Access to allocated time within recreation spaces can feel exclusive and bureaucratic, making use unpredictable and overly complex.
- Facility use is tied to history rather than demonstrated community need or impact.
- Long-standing users dominate prime time hours, leaving emerging or less resourced groups disadvantaged, resulting in fewer opportunities for balanced, equitable community use.

2. Stability vs. flexibility imbalance

- Existing groups benefit from predictable access to facilities. They can plan programs, maintain membership, and rely on consistent scheduling; however, new community groups struggle to gain access because most space is already booked by established organizations.
- If community needs shift, the system has little room to adapt. The process struggles to keep up with changing demographics, interests, and community priorities.

3. Transparency and Trust

- An existing, out-of-date process does not meet the needs of a growing community with changing demographics and increased requests for limited time and space.
- A perception of special treatment toward existing users and lack of opportunity to other users, even when applied fairly.
- Without a formal framework, it is difficult to evaluate requests or ensure decisions are consistent and transparent.
- The allocation process emphasizes scarcity and rivalry instead of treating the facilities like shared resources that should be optimized for fairness, efficiency, and inclusivity.

4. Efficiency and Capacity

- Support that customers are following the current cancellation policy.

- The current cancellation policy allows for allocated time to be returned, but based on the current guidelines this results in inconsistency, unpredictability, and short notice returning facility bookings.
- This results in unused or fragmented time blocks, the inability to resell or allocate time to other users, and creates an administrative burden on staff.

Summary of new Recreation Facility Allocation Process features

The following new process features are intended to support the City of Guelph in implementing an equitable and transparent system for the allocation of recreation facility space:

1. Develop a Decision-Making Framework.
2. Create an Expression of Interest for facility use.
3. Designate Community Space across facilities.
4. Optimize Facility Scheduling.

1. Develop a Decision-Making Framework

A decision-making framework would be a structured assessment tool used by staff to evaluate groups seeking access to newly available or reallocated recreation space, providing a transparent and repeatable way of assessing different types of users. It does not replace the allocation process for returning users; instead, it supports prioritization in situations where time becomes available—such as the opening of new facilities, changes in demand, or time returned during the season—and helps staff determine which interested groups should be allocated space first.

The questions asked in the tool would collect information on residency, organization type, participant age groups, service to equity-deserving or underrepresented communities, unique program or facility needs, community demand, and alignment with City priorities.

2. Create an Expression of Interest for use

A proactive, year-round tool for customers to indicate their interest in future access to recreation space, allowing the City to understand emerging demand, identify gaps, and provide space as it becomes available. This shifts the process from a reactive model—where new customers must wait for the annual intake period—to a more transparent and continuous process that tracks interest as it develops.

3. Designate Community Space across facilities

Designate a portion of high-demand space and rental hours to remain unallocated during the seasonal scheduling process, ensuring availability for casual or occasional use. This creates opportunities for new users and allows the City to respond dynamically to community requests. Time allocated as part of designated community space does not accrue as part of historical/continuity time allocation and bookings reset each season.

4. Optimize Facility Scheduling

Designed to make the most efficient use of available facility time, this feature establishes clear and consistent guidelines like block booking for seasonal rentals, guidelines for amending, cancelling, or returning facility bookings, standardized time blocks for use and seasonal or annual review. The goal is to significantly reduce unused or fragmented time that limits access for other users. It also aims to

lessen the administrative workload on staff, who currently spend considerable time managing last-minute changes and manually adjusting schedules.

As part of this improvement, the cancellation policy will be updated. The updated revised policy will promote fairness, increase overall utilization, and create a more predictable and manageable booking environment for both staff and renters. This review is expected to begin in April 2026 and will include feedback from existing users.

Implementation Strategy

The recommendations above outline a set of process features designed to improve transparency, fairness, and consistency in how recreation space is allocated in the City of Guelph. Successfully implementing these changes will require thoughtful sequencing, clear communication, and a shared understanding of how new tools and processes will be introduced over time.

A draft update to the Recreation Facilities Allocation Process, with recommendations outlined, is included in Attachment 1 Draft Recreation Facility Allocation Process.

Staff will use the implementation strategy to guide how the recommended policy features can be rolled out in a way that builds trust, minimizes disruption, and supports customers and staff through the transition.

The implementation plan will apply to bookings taking place in the Fall/Winter booking season (between September 1, 2026 to March 31, 2027). This updated process will be used in the allocation of new space at the South End Community Centre as well as other recreation facilities during this time.

Of note, the scope of the review was for indoor facility allocation, though the hope is that the updates and process changes are transferable to outdoor rentals.

Table 1 Recreation Facilities Allocation Implementation Strategy

Phase	Timeframe	Strategy
Phase 1 Planning and Design	March 2026	Finalize decision making framework, build Expression of Interest form, define community space model, update cancellation policy
Phase 2 Build and Test	April 2026	Build digital tools, train staff, conduct pilot testing
Phase 3 Launch	May to June 2026	Launch Expression of Interest and implement facility optimization guidelines including revised cancellation policy
Phase 4 Evaluation and Refinement	September 2026 to March 2027	Review data, adjust processes where needed

Phase	Timeframe	Strategy
Phase 5 Apply to Outdoor Facilities	April 2027	Launch Expression of Interest and implement scheduling rules for sports fields and park space
Phase 6 Monitoring and Maintenance	Ongoing	Priority or decision-making criteria and allocations are reviewed every two years (rotating between indoor and outdoor facilities)

Financial Implications

With optimized facility use there will be an opportunity to increase revenue and create staff efficiency resulting in improved customer service and response times.

With further processes to create and implement, the total increase in revenue is not defined. Increases in revenue will be included in the future budget updates.

Costs associated with consulting services and community engagement were included in the existing 2025 Recreation operating budget. There are no further costs associated with the implementation strategy.

Consultations and Engagement

This report brings forward the voices of residents, community groups, and City staff to paint a nuanced picture of how recreational spaces function today and what changes are needed to create a more equitable, inclusive, and coordinated system. Through this engagement, participants described not only what is working, but also where barriers exist and what values should guide decisions about limited space.

To capture a wide range of perspectives, the engagement process included the following activities:

- Survey: 290 responses from a wide range of community members
- Interviews: Ten one-on-one interviews with community members, user group representatives, and organizational stakeholders.
- Community Engagement Lab: One facilitated workshop with the nine members of the Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition to discuss challenges and opportunities related to facility access.
- Employee Engagement Session: A facilitated discussion with 23 City employees who interact with the facility allocation system to gather their perspectives on what works and what does not.

Together, these methods offered both breadth and depth—capturing large-scale patterns in how people experience the allocation system while also surfacing specific stories that reveal where improvements are most needed.

Finance was consulted on the financial implications.

Attachments

Attachment 1 - Draft Recreation Facility Allocation Process

Departmental Approval

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