

**Street Talk column June, 2006**  
**Accessible, Affordable Recreation**  
**Writer: Ramona Johnston**

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**Summer Recreation and Leisure on a Limited Budget**

Think summer is only about longer days, warmer weather and lounging in the sun?

Unfortunately, for thousands of Calgarians summer presents a number of challenges. Not everybody can afford recreational and leisure programs – and with school getting out, many low-income families are scrambling to find inexpensive summer activities for their children.

Thankfully, Calgary provides many accessible low-cost alternatives to avoid such an issue and addressing barriers to participation in recreation and leisure activities for low-income families has become a priority for many local groups and organizations including the City of Calgary.

“We understand the rewards of recreation and leisure opportunities, and recognize the contribution to quality of life that participation offers,” says Barry Strangward, Manager of Business Services in The City of Calgary’s recreation department.

There are a number of proven benefits related to participation in recreation activities including improved mental and physical health and well-being, skills development and social inclusion. Research has also shown positive links between recreation and youth development through higher self-esteem, sportsmanship, academic improvements and prevention of high risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol use.

“We also recognize many low-income Calgarians do not have the means to take advantage of city programs and facilities so we developed the Fee Assistance program,” says Strangward.

Fee Assistance is available to residents of Calgary who are in financial need to access recreation programs and admissions at a reduced rate.

“Essentially, the program allows any Calgarian, deemed eligible, affordable access to our recreation facilities and services,” says Strangward. “In 2005, nearly 5,500 families, representing about 15,000 Calgarians, took advantage and enrolled in the program.”

In developing the program, feedback from low-income individuals suggested they really appreciated the opportunity to access City leisure and recreation but did not want everything for free.

“We were told by customers that they would prefer to pay reduced registration and admission fees,” continues Strangward. “They wanted to be able to contribute what they could.”

With Fee Assistance, admission prices at City facilities are 10 percent of the regular cost. For example, admission at a City of Calgary pool is \$4.50; an individual on the Fee Assistance program would pay just 45 cents. A variety of programs offered by The City are also covered by Fee Assistance. Children can register in four City programs per year and adults one per year, also at 10 percent of the regular cost.

To qualify for Fee Assistance customers must be residents of Calgary and provide proof of financial need. Applying is simple and proof of eligibility can be easily confirmed from a variety of sources including, but not limited to, a current copy of a Canada Revenue Agency “Notice of Assessment” or Health Benefits Card from any AISH or Alberta Works program. Once approved, customers will receive a Fee Assistance card that they can use at any City of Calgary facility including pools, leisure centres and golf courses, or at any civic partner in the program.

“The program continues to expand year by year and we only see it getting bigger,” says Strangward. “We now have a number of Fee Assistance partners including the Calgary Zoo, Science Centre, Fort Calgary, Heritage Park and the Talisman Centre, and continue to look for opportunities to collaborate with community-run organizations.”

Strangward adds that The City is continually reviewing the program and looking at ways to address any barriers they may have initially overlooked.

“Although we are experiencing great success, we know the market for this is bigger,” says Strangward. “We continue to be active in looking for ways to get the message out that this program is available and easily accessible.”

Strangward reminds people that the summertime is also a good time of year for a variety of free activities at locations around the city like Olympic Plaza, and that many community-based agencies offer low cost or free programs and services throughout the summer to meet the needs of low-income Calgarians – organizations such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of Calgary, the YMCA and YWCA. For example, the Women’s Centre of Calgary offers free Girl Power camps for girls aged 11 to 16 years.

Calgary and area Community Resource Centres, located all across the city, offer a wide range of activities that cater to parents, youth and families – many of them for free. Everything from Moms and Tots programs to barbeques to self-care and health programs for young girls are available in communities throughout the city.

Understandably, it can be complicated and frustrating accessing the countless resources available in Calgary. Sometimes it can be difficult even knowing where to start. Fortunately, access to information on more than 4,000 community, social and government services is just a phone call away. To find out more information on the free and low-cost services available across the city, people are encouraged to call 2-1-1, a free, confidential, multilingual information and referral service available to Calgarians 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

For City of Calgary services, citizens can call 3-1-1, a municipal phone service that provides convenient access to city information and services including the Fee Assistance program. Calling 3-1-1 also provides the opportunity to offer any feedback, make suggestions on improvements or to put in a request for additional services people would like to see included in the program. Information on the Fee Assistance program can also be found at [www.calgary.ca](http://www.calgary.ca).

(Ramona Johnston is Manager of Vibrant Communities Calgary, a local non-profit poverty-reduction organization.)