

REPORT

Council

Meeting Date: May 1, 2025

FROM: Recreation and Culture

DATE: April 15, 2025

SUBJECT: Universal Change Rooms within Recreation Facilities

LOCATION:

WARD: Town-wide

Page 1

RECOMMENDATION:

That the report from Recreation and Culture entitled Universal Change Rooms within Recreation Facilities, dated April 24, 2025, be received for information.

KEY FACTS:

The following are key points for consideration with respect to this report:

- On January 27, 2025, Council requested that staff report back with a brief background on the implementation of universal change rooms at town facilities.
- Universal change rooms have been implemented in Oakville and neighbouring municipalities over the past ten years, including Oakville Trafalgar Community Centre (OTCC) and are planned for the future community centre at Sixteen Mile Sports Complex (SMSC) in the Town of Oakville.
- Users are encouraged to take brief cleansing showers in their appropriate swim attire before entering the pool and after their swim. Public nudity is not permitted. Fully private change stalls are available in a variety of sizes to accommodate both individuals and their caregivers.
- This design enhances inclusivity for people with disabilities, families, and trans and non-binary people. It also improves privacy, safety and operational efficiency.
- The decision to implement universal change rooms at OTCC followed extensive public consultation, reflecting the town's commitment to community engagement in the planning process.
- While some residents have expressed concerns about the model, overall satisfaction levels with the aquatic facilities remains high, indicating general support from most users.

- At OTCC, staff have increased their presence with regular walkthroughs of the change rooms and enhanced signage to clearly communicate behaviour expectations.
- For SMSC, the design has incorporated lessons learned from OTCC and best practices from other municipalities to ensure these facilities meet the highest standards of inclusivity and functionality. Features include an open-concept layout with glazing on both sides of the change room, providing unobstructed sightlines from the pool deck through to the lobby hallway.
- The town remains committed to engage the community through surveys and consultations to inform design improvements for future projects and to ensure they align with residents' needs.

BACKGROUND:

On January 27, 2025, Council requested a report back from staff providing a brief background on the implementation of universal change rooms at town facilities. This report includes a high-level summary of public feedback received to date, adjustments and improvements made in managing these facilities since their introduction, and operational recommendations for future consideration.

Introduced in municipal recreation centres in the Greater Toronto Area in the early 2000s, universal change rooms are designed to be accessible and welcoming for everyone. Over the past decade, this design has become a standard feature in new facility construction and renovations across Ontario. For example, the City of Mississauga, City of Brampton and the Town of Milton have adopted the universal change room model in their most recently redeveloped facilities. This model is often referred to as gender-neutral, universal, or community change rooms.

In the Town of Oakville, this model is in place at Oakville Trafalgar Community Centre for the aquatic change rooms and is also included in the design for the new Sixteen Mile Sport Complex aquatic change rooms.

In universal change rooms, users are encouraged to take brief cleansing shower in appropriate swim attire before entering the pool and after their swim. Completely private change stalls are available in a variety of sizes to accommodate both individuals and their caregiver (see Appendix A). Public nudity is not permitted at any time. A comparison could be made to many retail spaces where change rooms are not gender-specific.

There are many benefits to the universal change room model that support all users, including:

- **Inclusivity for people with disabilities:** These spaces accommodate people who use mobility-aids, and those who have a caregiver of a different gender.
- **Inclusivity for families:** Parents or caregivers can use the same change room as other family members, making it easier to support young children or dependents.
- **Inclusivity for trans and non-binary people:** The design creates safer, more welcoming spaces, and helps reduce feelings of vulnerability, harassment, or abuse.
- **Increased privacy and safety:** Design elements promote privacy, comfort and safety for all users, while the openness and connection in central areas promotes safety (i.e. increased visibility on locker spaces reduces the opportunity for theft). For day camp, daycare and school group programming, adults can supervise while still ensuring the child's privacy.
- **Increased efficiency:** By design, universal change rooms can accommodate a greater number of users than gender-specific facilities. They also allow for flexibility to accommodate program transitions. For example, day camp swimmers can use one change room while adult lane swimmers arriving for their program can use the other.
- **Greater flexibility for cleaning and maintenance:** Facility staff can access either changeroom at any time for cleaning. In a gendered changeroom, however, cleaning must be scheduled or the space temporarily closed. Additionally, one changeroom can be taken offline for deep cleaning during less busy swim times.

These benefits are further supported in a recent report published by HCMA Architecture + Design (HCMA) titled "Designing for Inclusivity: Strategies for Universal Washrooms and Change Rooms in Community and Recreation Facilities".

HCMA notes that while universal washrooms (single-user and multi-stall) and universal change rooms are common in Europe, they are gaining traction in North America as demand continues to increase. Gender-designated washrooms and change rooms often lack privacy and accessibility needed by for many users, including those with personal health requirements or mobility challenges, those who are transgender or transitioning, and those who may require assistance from someone of a different gender—including children and the elderly. According to HCMA, universal facilities enhance privacy and safety with private stalls and reduce wait times by efficiently managing higher usage.

Similarly, Queen's University's *"Research and Recommendations on Gender-Inclusive Washrooms and Changerooms"* emphasizes that universal changerooms meet the needs of diverse users, aligning with universal design principles to standardize equal access while addressing identity-based barriers.

COMMENT/OPTIONS:

History of Universal Change Rooms at Town Facilities:

In 2020, Oakville Trafalgar Community Centre (OTCC) opened with the town's first universal aquatic change rooms. The decision to implement universal change rooms at OTCC followed extensive public consultation, reflecting the town's commitment to engaging with the community in the planning process.

During the public consultation process, there was clear support for a universal change room model with specific feedback that validated the need to provide a space where aging patrons receive assistance.

Comments also supported the creation of a space that allows older children to remain with their parents, even if they are of a different gender. In gender-specific change rooms, patrons aged seven (7) and older are required to use the change room that aligns with their gender identity.

Clear policies are in place to ensure patrons remain fully clothed or in swimwear in open areas. Open showers are available only to those wearing swimwear. The facility includes 36 private changing stalls in a variety of sizes, including single, double, family, and accessible options.

Summary of Public Feedback and Consultation:

Recreation and Culture regularly collects feedback from registered program participants and membership holders through email surveys, with average response rates of 15% and 10% respectively. Respondents are asked to rate their satisfaction with the program, instructor, facility, and registration experience, with the option to provide open-ended feedback.

Since 2021, OTCC has received over 1,300 completed surveys from aquatic participants, achieving a 91% satisfaction rate for facilities, the highest among the

town's aquatic locations (see Appendix 2). A keyword analysis identified eleven comments related to universal change rooms: two were supportive and nine expressed opposition. Anecdotally, staff have received a mix of both supportive and oppositional feedback from residents. However, the consistently high satisfaction ratings suggest general support among most users.

In spring 2023, more than 2,000 responses were collected during the consultation phase for the Parks, Recreation, and Library Master Plan, supported by open house sessions with over 80 participants. While 12 comments opposed universal changerooms, two respondents specifically requested their expansion. The 2024 Parks, Recreation and Library Master Plan confirmation survey reaffirmed the town's commitment to creating inclusive spaces.

Operational Adjustments and Improvements to Date:

The Town of Oakville enforces strict policies to address inappropriate behaviour in all public facilities, including universal change rooms. While there was some initial confusion regarding the use of universal change room spaces following the opening of OTCC, the number of reported incidents has been limited.

To support public education, staff have implemented enhanced signage and procedures, including routine walk-throughs of the change room every 15 minutes to maintain a visible presence and ensure appropriate behaviour is observed. Any incidents requiring intervention are promptly addressed. In cases of unlawful behaviour, the Halton Regional Police Service would be contacted immediately to help maintain a safe and respectful environment for all patrons.

For customers who express discomfort with the universal change room design, staff can provide access to the gender-specific fitness change rooms onsite as an alternative.

Operational Recommendations Moving Forward:

The newly redeveloped Sixteen Mile Sports Complex will feature universal aquatic change rooms as part of its design. The town has incorporated lessons learned from OTCC and best practices from other municipalities to ensure these facilities meet the highest standards of inclusivity and functionality. Key design improvements include an open-concept layout with glazing (glass) on both sides of the changeroom, providing unobstructed sightlines from the pool deck directly through

to the lobby hallway. This is designed to create an inclusive environment where everyone feels safe and seamlessly connected to the surrounding amenities.

Additional design enhancements include fully enclosed, floor-to-ceiling washroom stalls that ensure complete privacy and effective sound attenuation. In a further effort to increase privacy and security, partition walls have been replaced with cinder block walls in the change rooms.

The town remains committed to engaging the community through surveys and consultations to inform design improvements for future projects and ensure alignment with residents' needs.

CONSIDERATIONS:

(A) PUBLIC

Information and educational materials related to universal change rooms will be updated online to assist in informing residents.

(B) FINANCIAL

N/A

(C) IMPACT ON OTHER DEPARTMENTS & USERS

N/A

(D) COUNCIL STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

This report addresses the corporate strategic goal to enhance community belonging, ensuring all residents are invited to engage in a fulfilling community life that is built to support wellbeing (inclusion and belonging).

(E) CLIMATE CHANGE/ACTION

N/A

APPENDICES:

Appendix A – Universal Change Room Design

Appendix B – Survey Responses

Prepared by:
Brent Copeland
Acting Manager, Recreation Services

Submitted by:
Kristina Zietsma, Director