



## REPORT

### 2025 Council

**Meeting Date: May 26, 2025**

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**FROM:** Parks and Open Space Department

**DATE:** May 13, 2025

**SUBJECT:** Winter Recreation Strategy

**LOCATION:** Town-wide

Town-wide

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#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- 1) That the permanent addition of the Winter Recreation Strategy, at an estimated cost of \$528,800, be referred to the 2026 Budget Committee.
- 2) That the cost of the Winter Recreation Strategy for December 2025, estimated at \$158,900, be funded from the Tax Stabilization Reserve.

#### **KEY FACTS:**

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

- The Winter Recreation Strategy was implemented during the pandemic to provide the community with additional outdoor recreation opportunities when many indoor facilities were closed and/or there were limits imposed on congregating with social distancing requirements. Hence many of the activities offered were geared towards individual recreation opportunities and the promotion of physical activity.
- From its inception in December 2020 the Winter Recreation Strategy has been enormously popular with Oakville residents. Throughout the pandemic many Oakville residents flocked to town parks, trails, and waterfront areas. Many found being in an outdoor environment a welcome respite from the regulations surrounding Covid-19 and restrictions on social distancing. In many respects an even larger group of Oakville residents fell in love with the great outdoors during the pandemic and that continues today.
- The Winter Recreation Strategy has been funded through the Tax Stabilization Fund since its inception. Once again, the 2025 Winter Recreation Strategy (January to April 2025) is being funded from Tax

Stabilization, but long-term funding of a program in this manner is not sustainable.

- This report seeks a Council decision on whether to include the Winter Recreation Strategy as a service level tax increase to the 2026 Parks and Open Space operating budget or alternatively to discontinue the Winter Recreation offerings contained in the program.
- Should Council decide to implement the Winter Recreation Strategy permanently, funding for the beginning of the program (December 2025) will be required from the Tax Stabilization Reserve for this year (2025) as it was not included in the 2025 budget.
- A decision of Council on whether to continue the Winter Recreation Strategy is requested.

## **BACKGROUND:**

The Winter Recreation Strategy fundamentally began with the intent of allowing and encouraging residents to be outdoors in the winter months during Covid-19. This was at a time when indoor facilities were closed or closing, and social distancing restrictions prohibited group activities. As a result, staff brought forward an outdoor slate of activities that focussed on individual opportunities for recreation, mental health, and fitness. The duration of the program was from December – April, typically periods when the community is focussed on indoor recreation and gatherings. The program has continued to be highly successful and offered each winter since December 2021.

Winter Recreation Strategy activities included:

**Walking:** Walking was incredibly popular during the pandemic especially along the town's waterfront areas. To encourage walking during winter months Parks staff added several locations to winter control maintenance. These included all walkways within Bronte Heritage Waterfront Park and Waters Edge Park, all walkways within Oakville harbour (Tannery Park – Waterworks Park) and the Crosstown Trail (Neyagawa Blvd – Sixth Line) This provided expanded walking routes in the east-west-central areas of Town. This required additional resources to inspect these routes daily and undertake winter control maintenance (as required) from December 1 – March 30.

**Washroom Access:** The Town is well supported with seasonal washrooms typically closed in November. Encouraging residents to be outdoors and walk all winter meant winter washrooms were required. As a result, staff winterized washrooms at Tannery Park, provided rented washroom trailers with heat and water at Coronation Park and Gairloch Gardens, and maintained an existing year-round washroom at

Fisherman's Park. This required additional resources to inspect and maintain the washrooms 7 days per week, 8:00 am – 10:00 pm from December 1- April 30

**Trails:** Oakville residents have always enjoyed the hundreds of kilometers of trails offered through Parks and Open Space. This was very much the case during the pandemic as residents flocked to trails for exercise and outdoor recreation. To enhance the trails; during heavy snowfalls staff groomed trails for X-country skiing at Bronte Creek Trail, Joshua's Creek Trail, West Joshua Creek Trail and The Parkway.

**Tennis/Pickleball:** During the pandemic tennis and pickleball were two of the sports that were deemed open for play because of the ability to respect social distancing protocol in playing both singles and later doubles. At this time, interest in pickleball was already significantly rising everywhere and tennis was also popular because it was one of the few sports open for play. Staff selected 2 locations per Ward for winter tennis and pickleball and tried to geographically cover the Town. If lights were available on courts in a Ward those took precedence for evening play with lights being shut off at 10:00 pm. In all, staff maintained 14 court locations for tennis and pickleball from December 1 – March 30. Additional resources were added to maintain the courts during the winter months.

**Ball Hockey:** As another outdoor recreation opportunity staff-maintained ball hockey at 1 location per Ward. Frequently there were congregation limits imposed by the Regional Medical Officer of Health and these were posted at all locations. Ball hockey was offered from December 1 – March 30.

**Outdoor Skating Rinks:** Oakville residents' affection with outdoor skating rinks has been outlined in several Parks and Recreation Masterplans. This affinity continued into the pandemic because Arena's frequently closed, and when open offered limited programs due to indoor congregation limits and social distancing. Particularly in the first couple of years of the Winter Recreation Strategy, the number of neighbourhood outdoor ice rink requests skyrocketed. In 2022 and 2023 Parks staff nearly doubled the number of ice rinks constructed in neighbourhood parks due to the number of people who wanted to skate. That number did decline once Arena's fully opened and full ice programming was reinstated, however, there remains a large number of requests for neighbourhood operated rinks across Oakville in winter months.

**Holiday Lights:** The pandemic was difficult for so many people. From not being able to gather with friends and family, to not attending restaurants, theatres, sporting events, to pure isolationism for many; the pandemic placed a unique strain on a large segment of the community. To boost the spirits of the community, Parks staff decorated the trees on the ring road at Coronation Park with holiday lights. This was nicely coordinated with the OPFFA Holiday Toy Drive whereby the community could

drop-off unwrapped toys while driving through decorated trees along the ring road at Coronation Park. The lights have been highly successful and remain on from early December until Family Day.

**COMMENT/OPTIONS:**

Since its implementation, the Winter Recreation Strategy has been incredibly popular; however, like any program, it comes with expenses. Staff must be hired for either 4 or 5 months, washroom trailers must be rented and hooked up to electrical cabinets, and equipment must be used that requires fuel and maintenance. In total the Winter Strategy Program costs \$528,800 annually.

In the past, the program has been funded by the Tax Stabilization Fund. This was done primarily because it was originally thought to be a short-term initiative that would end when Covid-19 was declared over. However, the popularity of the program (especially in the areas of winter tennis/pickleball, availability of winter washrooms, and the ability to walk most of both Oakville and Bronte harbour year-round) has become a service level that many residents have come to expect.

Funding the Winter Recreation Strategy from Tax Stabilization Fund on an annual basis is not sustainable since that funding source is not intended for that purpose. If council wishes to continue the Winter Recreation Strategy, approval of a budget service level increase for Parks and Open Space will be required. Alternatively, council could choose to end the program, acknowledging that it achieved its original purpose as a pandemic related initiative. Since staff recruitment and equipment rental contracts (for washroom trailers, etc.) must be entered into early this fall, a decision from Council on whether to continue the program beyond April 2025 is required.

If the program is approved to permanently continue by Council, funding will be required for the first month of the 2025/2026 season, as it starts in December 2025. The one-time funding requirements are as follows:

<b>December 2025 Winter Recreation Strategy</b>	
Personal Services & Benefits	\$ 89,600
Materials & Supplies	\$ 20,000
Purchased Services	\$ 22,700
Vehicle Usage & Maintenance	\$ 26,600
<b>Total Annual Cost</b>	<b>\$ 158,900</b>

Additionally, as part of the 2026 budget approval process, a service level budget increase for Parks and Open Spaces would be required:

Annual Winter Recreation Strategy	
Personal Services & Benefits	\$ 370,500
Materials & Supplies	\$ 20,000
Purchased Services	\$ 33,400
Vehicle Usage & Maintenance	\$ 104,900
Total Annual Cost	\$ 528,800

Whether Council approves or denies approval of the Winter Strategy, washroom winterization will continue to occur annually as Council has previously approved capital funding allowing one seasonal washroom be converted per year from seasonal to year-round. CCTV cameras were also included in the funding model. Resources would be obtained annually through capital impact adjustments to the Parks and Open Space operating budget.

#### **CONSIDERATIONS:**

##### **(A) PUBLIC**

Public feedback and participation rates, in the use of amenities, indicate that the Winter Strategy Program instituted during the pandemic was and remains extremely popular for many Oakville residents.

##### **(B) FINANCIAL**

The current temporary winter recreation strategy has been funded each year from the town's tax stabilization reserve. While this reserve is healthy, ongoing operations should not be funded from a stabilization reserve; rather, they should be included in the annual tax levy.

The consideration of making the program permanent is estimated at \$528,800 per year.

The cost of offering the Winter Recreation Strategy for December 2025 is not included in the 2025 budget and is estimated at \$158,900. This amount could be funded from the Tax Stabilization Reserve for 2025.

##### **(C) IMPACT ON OTHER DEPARTMENTS & USERS**

This report was written with the assistance of the Finance department.

##### **(D) COUNCIL STRATEGIC PRIORITIES**

This report addresses Council's Strategic Priorities of Community Belonging

and Accountable Government. The principles of the program were aimed at inclusion, belonging and engaging residents in a variety of activities for their well-being in terms of recreation, mental health and fitness.

**(E) CLIMATE CHANGE/ACTION**

N/A

**APPENDICES:**

N/A

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