

Standing Committee Report

REPORT NUMBER 345-2025-Community Services-Recreation & Culture		
DATE PREPARED October 26, 2025		FILE
STANDING COMMITTEE MEETING DATE November 18, 2025		
SUBJECT Affordable Access Program to Recreation and Transit 2025 Update		

PURPOSE – To seek endorsement from the Standing Committee on Quality of Life

WITH RESPECT to Report 345-2025-Community Services-Recreation & Culture, we request endorsement of the Standing Committee to forward the following recommendations to City Council:

WE RECOMMEND THAT the Affordable Access to Recreation and Transit Pilot Program be extended from June 30, 2026 to December 31, 2026;

AND THAT any necessary by-laws be presented to City Council for ratification.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an update on the Affordable Access to Recreation and Transit Pilot Program (Affordable Access Program) and recommends a six-month extension of the pilot from June 30, 2026 to December 31, 2026. The program was established in July 2023 as a 3-year pilot program to help reduce financial barriers to accessing recreation and transit geared towards adults in low-income households.

With endorsement from Lakehead Social Planning Council (LSPC), the partner administering the intake process, Administration recommends that the pilot program continue to the end of 2026 in order to better align with the budget cycle, and to provide a full calendar year of data for its final year to help inform recommendations on the future of the program. Extending it to the end of the calendar year will also give participants access to recreation credits and bus passes for the duration of the year.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The Affordable Access to Recreation and Transit Program was launched in July 2023 to help achieve the following goals:

- Making the cost of transit and recreation and culture programs more affordable for low-income individuals.
- Assisting residents living in low-income households by enabling them to spend less on transportation and recreation program costs, therefore being able to allocate more of their budget toward basic needs such as food, clothing, child care and accommodations.
- Improving program participants' well-being through increased opportunities to participate in and contribute to their communities.

The program intake is administered by Lakehead Social Planning Council. The program includes a single application process where adults that meet eligibility criteria may receive a \$350 recreation credit and/or a half price adult monthly bus pass.

Program Trends

Participation in the Affordable Access Program increased by 35% from year one (July 2023-June 2024) to year two (July 2024-June 2025).

Awareness of the program is growing, particularly with direct outreach to social service agencies. As of November 1, 2025, 93 individuals have received half price Adult Monthly Bus Passes, and 133 clients accessed a recreation credit in 2025.

Administration is exploring ways to further promote the program to target audiences. This includes, but is not limited to, continuing to work with PRO Kids staff to promote the program to parents who may not otherwise have a chance to participate in recreation or access transit themselves. This family-centred approach has proven to be successful, and the program is seeing an increase in participants that are parents of PRO Kids participants.

Program Eligibility

Eligible income threshold is based on the Low-Income Cut-Off +20% and participants must live within City limits. Applicants must meet the age eligibility criteria (18+ for the recreation credit, and 25-59 for the Affordable Bus Pass).

Applicants must not be currently receiving transit assistance through Ontario Works (OW), Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or the Passport Program if applying specifically for the Affordable Bus Pass. However, they are still eligible to apply for the recreation subsidy. Recreation credits may be used toward City recreation programs, admissions, paid-in-full memberships, rentals (including birthday parties), and other activities that are purchased through the PerfectMind registration system, excluding programs already subsidized by PRO Kids.

CONSULTATION

An applicant survey was distributed after the end of second full year of the program. 46 applicants responded. The survey provided a valuable opportunity to capture feedback on the impact of the program, identify challenges/barriers to applying or accessing credits/passes, and for suggestions on how to improve the program in the final year of the pilot.

Over 98% of respondents would like to see the program continue past the pilot. The most common benefits identified by respondents included:

- Allowing clients to access programs and services they otherwise could not afford
- Saving more of their money for basic needs like housing and food
- Improving quality of life
- Improving physical and mental well-being
- Having reliable transportation to access work, school, medical care, etc.

Testimonials

Through the applicant survey, there was a clear message that the program has had a significant impact on participants' lives. Below are some of the testimonials received:

"This program has literally saved my life & helped me to improve my health."

"Allowed me to access services at the Thunder Bay Complex, and provided affordable public transit to get there, much appreciated."

"The pilot program is an awesome way to not only afford recreational services but gets individuals involved."

"Prescribed pool therapy by Neurosurgeon & Physiotherapist. This is this only thing helping keep me out of a wheelchair. I would not be able to afford this at all on my own, & this is an amazing program."

"Thank you for this program, it helps me and many others and is a great way to support low income folks."

"Access to pool exercise which is physical therapy as I'm unable to do land exercise. Life changing. REDUCES PAIN. HELPS REGAIN FITNESS."

"I was able to join the Churchill Pool through the winter which was excellent for my mental and physical health. I've also been able to attend all of my appointments as now I have the affordable bus pass. I'm so grateful for this pilot program."

FINANCIAL IMPLICATION

The current budget for the program is \$231,600 per year split between the Transit and Recreation & Culture operating budgets. Based on program uptake trends and statistics, there is room to accommodate an increase in participants at no additional cost, as the participation level is still below the cap and total budget for participant allocation costs. The administrative fees for LSPC associated with a six-month extension is anticipated to be \$12,000, which will be included in the 2026 Operating Budget for City Council consideration.

BACKGROUND

The Affordable Access Program was created in response to the identified need for fee assistance through both the User Fee Review Project (Report 116/2021 – September 13, 2021 – Community Services - Recreation and Culture) and Transit Fare Strategy consultations (Memo – Transit Fare Strategy Update - July 19, 2021). A need for fee assistance in the adult population was identified for individuals that did not have access to other subsidies such as PRO Kids and ODSP or other discounted rates, but still faced financial barriers in accessing services.

Council approved the Recreation and Culture User Fee Model (R164/2021 – December 6, 2021) and asked Administration to report back with recommendations and implications for a proposed Affordable Access to Recreation and Culture Pilot by Q4 2022. Council also approved Transit Fare Strategy 2022-2026 (Report 163/2021) and asked Administration to report back with recommendations and implications for a proposed Affordable Monthly Bus Pass program by Q4 2022.

Council approved the 3-year Affordable Access Pilot Program in Report R 28/2022 (Community Services – Recreation & Culture). Recommendations in the report considered the objectives of the “Provincial Policy Framework on Affordable Access to Recreation for Ontarians: Everyone Plays” and addressed recommendations of the Recreation and Facilities Master Plan and Program and Services Review related to fee setting, subsidization and revenue generation.

The recommendations also aligned with the Transit Fare Strategy 2022-2026 which recognizes that residents living in low-income households have specific challenges that may reduce their access to public transit.

Administration provided an update after the first full year of the program was completed in November 2024 (345-2025-Community Services-Recreation & Culture).

REFERENCE MATERIAL ATTACHED

None.

REPORT PREPARED BY

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REPORT SIGNED AND VERIFIED BY

Shane Muir, Acting Commissioner – Community Services

11/07/2025 (MM/DD/YEAR)