



**SUBJECT: Discontinuation of the Seniors' membership**  
**TO: Environment, Infrastructure & Community Services Cttee.**  
**FROM: Recreation, Community and Culture**

Report Number: RCC-09-21

Wards Affected: all

File Numbers: 910-01

Date to Committee: July 8, 2021

Date to Council: July 13, 2021

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### **Recommendation:**

Authorize the Director of Recreation, Community and Culture to approve the discontinuation of the Seniors' Membership as outlined in recreation, community and culture department report RCC-09-21.

### **PURPOSE:**

This report will outline the history and current state of the Seniors' Membership and the recommendation to discontinue this membership from a two-fee system to a blended fee structure in order to reduce fee complexity, increase convenience, and provide fee transparency to the customer. Connection to the Burlington Active Aging Plan (BAAP) engagement is identified and the recommendation is guided by focus group feedback held with older adult serving groups.

### **Vision to Focus Alignment:**

- Building more citizen engagement, community health and culture
- Deliver customer centric services with a focus on efficiency and technology transformation

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## **Background**

Purchase of an annual Seniors' Membership is a requirement to register for and attend programs at the Burlington Seniors' Centre, and only necessary during three seasons of the year (Fall, Winter and Spring). Historically, we have not required a current membership to register or participate in programs at the Seniors' Centre during the summer months. In promotional materials, member fees were listed but only available to those 55+ holding the additional \$40 annual membership.

For those attending locations other than the Seniors' Centre, the sole reason for purchasing a Seniors' Membership was to access discounted fees designated for 'Members'. Only a select number of programs offered at other city recreation facilities were priced with Seniors' Member discounts available. The lack of consistency in the number of eligible members'-discounted activities from facility to facility contributed to the complexity of fees and created confusion among shoppers.

For very active adults who were affluent enough to participate in many programs each season, paying the "Member's Fee" realized savings in excess of the \$40 purchase price and offered good value and return. At the same time, for older adults wanting to participate at the Seniors' Centre once per week as an example, the membership requirement was a financial burden that hiked the admission fee significantly, and acted as a barrier to participating at this popular location. In fact, frequently we heard that the membership was seen as an exclusionary practice offering those with financial constraints, no benefit at all. In this way it became a significant financial barrier to participation for many.

During the service re-design process related to the pandemic, the Seniors' Membership was not required when participating in any activities. Its value became diminished as fewer activities were available to choose from, and frequent cancellation became both possible and likely. The rationale in eliminating the membership was to reduce as many barriers as possible to participation during uncertain times when activity offerings were markedly reduced. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive when customers learned of this change and membership holders were credited the unused balance of their membership fee.

## **Discussion**

### **Seniors Membership**

Discussions and focus groups were held with a variety of older adult and advisory stakeholders on several fee related questions including the continuation of the Seniors' Membership or its potential discontinuation. As mentioned, holding a valid/current annual membership has allowed an individual to do two things prior to 2020:

- participate in programs offered at the Seniors' Centre in three seasons, and
- become eligible for program discounts for select programs at other City locations

Overwhelmingly those we engaged with felt the membership created more administrative red-tape when participating in activities. Others mentioned that it gives an exclusive club feel to those who are members, but also a sense of exclusion to those who are not members.

Administratively, the discontinuation of this membership will help significantly with streamlining the registration and admission process as we would no longer need to validate a member's age, membership status or payment prior to a transaction when joining drop-in and/or registered activities. Feedback from focus groups noted in 'Engagement Matters' identified add-on fees as a hindrance to simple admission processes and felt that membership's based on proof of age were associated with barriers due to age-related stigma. As such, staff recommend the discontinuation of this membership to allow everyone to access and register for City programs at the Seniors' Centre. In so doing, the activity fee advertised is the sole fee paid, and is void of any additional costs initially unforeseen by the customer.

The new fee structure will represent the blending of the former membership cost with the activity admission fee. Blended rates will remain aligned with fees in place for 2020 with typical market driven increases. Program diversity will continue to ensure a full continuum of no-cost, low-cost and economical activities to ensure affordability remains in place for all, not just discount card holders. Education on the blended fee will be robust, communicate the new single fee structure, and as always will promote the availability of Fee Assistance for all in need. The discontinued membership revenue stream will be recovered through broad-based redistribution of blended fees across all adult programs.

## **Options Considered**

Recreation, Community and Culture (RCC) considered multiple options when determining how to best meet the community's desire to streamline fees. In focus group discussion and in-line with BAAP engagement findings, staff explored discontinuing the membership and recovering revenue loss through increased participation and volume as well as considering the implications of not making any change at this time.

Focus group contributors and staff unanimously recognized that the current Covid-induced pause on memberships represents a unique window of opportunity to discontinue the membership and instead redistribute and streamline fees. Other options became far less desirable as they did not address the interests raised in engagement.

The clear preference was to return to service in 2022 without re-instituting the previous confusing pricing structure, and to launch robust communications to educate customers on the modest adjustment in fees resulting, as well as to ensure awareness of financial assistance is well promoted.

## Engagement Matters

The catalyst for this report and recommendation is primarily driven by on-going customer feedback received from participants for many years. The pandemic has served as our opportunity to now initiate this change. The recommendation also draws on feedback from the following engagement processes:

1. Focus Group 2021 dialogue with Older Adult and Inclusivity groups.  
Those who contributed to the discussion included:
  - Burlington Seniors' Advisory Committee
  - Representatives of the Burlington Seniors' Centre 55+ Peer Volunteers
  - Burlington Inclusivity Advisory Committee
  - Ontario Association of Older Adult Centres
2. [Burlington Active Aging Plan](#) developed in 2018
  - Entailed broad community engagement among residents 55+ and older adult serving agencies
3. The [Framework for Community Recreation](#)
  - operationalizes the community input received and ensures areas like 'inclusivity' and 'affordability' are in place.

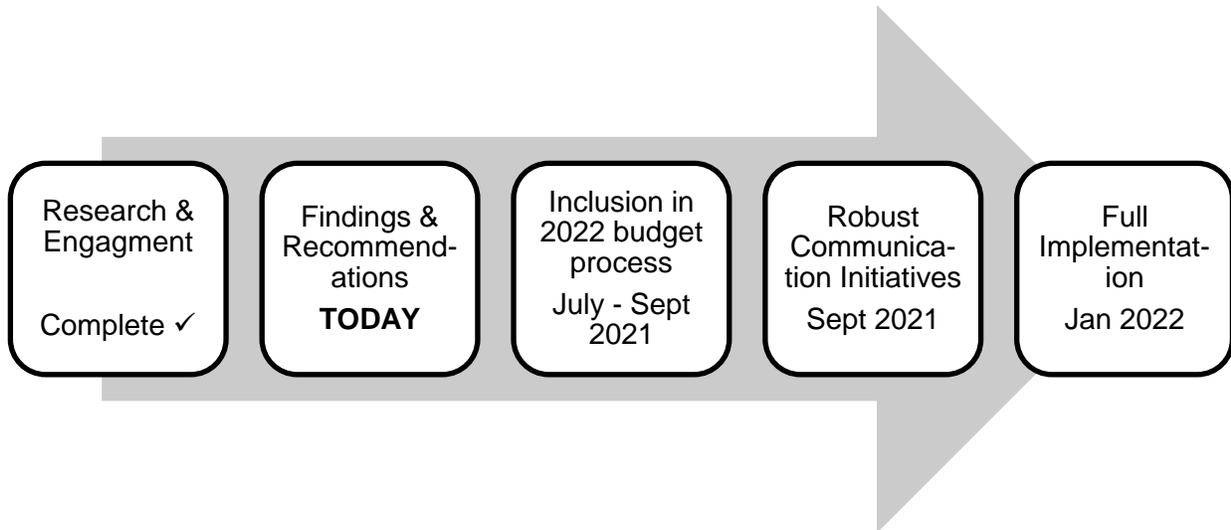
Focus groups unanimously agreed that older adult participation can be optimized by focusing on the following:

- developing transparent easy to understand fee structures
- providing short-term commitment options, not annual lock-ins
- creating easy to access Fee Assistance procedures essential to reducing barriers and minimizing stigma-related concerns and by
- retaining a sense of belonging in all older adult social programs and activity outcomes

This community feedback regarding access, inclusivity, and affordability guides the recommendation to discontinue the Seniors' Membership and is in direct alignment with Calls to Action outlined in the BAAP, and the operational best practices outlined in the Framework for Community Recreation.

## Strategy/Process

Once approved, a variety of next steps will occur. Summarized below is the target implementation process and schedule:



Strategy around the elimination of the Seniors' Membership will include a communication plan to all existing customers and the broader community. It will entail the following:

- Continuation of the existing 'no membership required' practice currently in place since 2020 due to COVID:

For consistency, should this report and recommendation be approved, the Seniors' Membership will not be re-introduced as service returns only to be later eliminated in Fall 2021. Instead to reduce confusion, the discontinuation of the membership and blended fee structure would be put in place as we emerge back into operation. This structure will be introduced across the full range of adult / older adult programs and will compensate lost membership revenues

- Enhanced promotion and awareness of the Recreation Fee Assistance program to the adult and older adult community and to all senior-serving community partners, to support those experiencing hardships either as a result of COVID or due to any other personal circumstances.

## **Financial Matters:**

### **Seniors' Membership**

The annual revenue stream for the Senior's Membership is approximately \$118,000 as shown in the 2020 budget. During COVID, when the membership had greatly diminished value as a result of closures, the membership was suspended and all impacts captured in financial reporting during 2020/21. Should Council approve the recommendation in this report membership revenues will be removed from the 2022 budget and Rates and Fees, and RCC will look to recoup the \$118,000 revenue through blended admissions across all adult programs. This redistribution detail will be included within the 2022 budget process. On a more granular and customer experience level, the changes to customers will be nominal and in fact will reduce financial barriers to a large number of participants who found the extra Membership Fees prohibitive to participating in one or two classes weekly. To help reduce financial hardship, no typical inflation increases have been included in the 2022 fee strategy and will only reflect the fee changes that result from the blending of membership fees into the base activity fee. In this way, the impact of fee distribution feels in-line with typical costs prior to COVID.

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### **Conclusion:**

The discontinuation of the annual Seniors' Membership has been challenging to implement until now. Membership expiry dates were unique to each member, making communication and restructuring difficult during normal operations. COVID and the pandemic-related closures have provided us with a uniform starting point as a result of the current temporary membership pause. We find ourselves in an unprecedented period, and a timely position for Council to consider finalizing this change permanently by supporting the removal of red-tape around older adult's accessing recreation services. Staff believe the recommendations and details put forward in this report directly align with the Framework for Community Recreation and the Burlington Active Aging Plan, and represent what the broader community has wanted for some time.

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Respectfully submitted,

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**Report Approval:**

All reports are reviewed and/or approved by Department Director, the Chief Financial Officer and the Executive Director of Legal Services & Corporation Counsel.