

Spotlight On...



Town of Aurora: Investing in Gender Equity

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“Much of what’s been accomplished has happened because the Town is committed to innovative thinking and viewing recreation through a gender equity lens,” says Robin McDougall, Director, Community Services for the Town. “The Town’s Sport Plan has empowered Staff and our broader community to bridge gaps, celebrate diversity and enhance our commitment to celebrate and advance women and girls in sport, healthy active living and leadership.”

Aurora’s first [Sport Plan](#) was adopted in 2016, and included the decision to hire a Sport and Community Development Specialist. Hailey Jones joined the Town in late 2022 to continue the impactful work of Erin Hamilton, who initiated, and remains connected to the gender equity project after moving on to a new role within the municipal government.

Breaking down barriers

The Sport Plan laid the broader foundation for improving the community’s physical activity levels, but also led the town to dig deeper into the needs of women and girls in the community. Research

reveals that girls drop out of sport at a higher rate than boys, with top barriers to sport for 13 to 19-year-old girls being body image concerns, the quality of programming, safety, injury and a lack of confidence and skill. Girls also experience more gender, racial, and religious/spiritual discrimination as they become adolescents and identify these experiences as [barriers to sport](#).

With the support of [Canadian Women & Sport](#) and local sport organizations (LSO’s), Aurora adopted a comprehensive Gender Equity Plan in 2020 aimed at ensuring a safe, inclusive and welcoming community for female athletes, coaches, administrators, volunteers, and officials.



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“The Town’s commitment to expand the Gender Equity Plan’s beyond ‘girls’ only’ programming is a direct example of our intentional and innovative commitment to increasing overall opportunities for women and girls,” says Jones. Aurora has started the work of reviewing internal policies with a gender equity lens that directly and indirectly impact women and girls as it relates to access, programming and permitting of the Town’s resources.

The plan in action

In April 2023, Aurora received a request from a local boys’ ice hockey organization to reduce its ice rental fees. Rather than evaluating the request in a silo, Town staff intentionally applied its Gender Equity Plan to ensure that the request was considered fairly.

The Town began by examining implications of the request including, but not limited to, examining the financial, permitting, and overall community sport enhancement in Aurora. The request also prompted staff to review an existing partnership with the boys’ teams for shared access to rink board advertising to support team sponsorships, resulting in the expansion of the program to the girls’ team. Within weeks, staff at the Town of Aurora brought a request forward to Council requesting approval for reducing both the boys’ hockey ice fees as per the official community request, and the girls ice hockey fees at the same level of competition, as well as expanding the rink board partnership to include the girls’ team. This deliberate approach resulted in direct cost savings for the girls’ sporting organization, allowing it to dedicate more of its budget to certifications and development of female coaches.

The table below outlines how the Gender Equity Plan’s six key pillars informed the outcome:

Gender Equity Pillar	Application and Impact
Create a governance structure with representatives from the Town, local sport organizations and the community to endorse gender equity initiatives.	The Town’s ‘Sport Equity and Inclusion Committee’ was in place to review and endorse the ice rental fees proposal.
Promote female participation in sport, including increased media and social media recognition campaigns, showcasing role models and sharing best practices.	“If you can see it, you can be it” applies to creating more female role models, as some anticipated costs savings have been invested into certifications for female coaches.
Improve awareness of the opportunities for women and girls in sport in Aurora.	Reports written and presented in Town Hall resulted in increasing awareness as it relates to gender equity. Notes and records of Council meetings have been archived, ensuring the precedent is captured.
Establish innovative partnerships with existing businesses and organizations and ensuring access to facilities for all genders and abilities	The Town’s established relationships with both hockey groups facilitated the evaluation of the request for financial assistance for the boys and extending it to the girls’ organization. Both groups also spoke at Council regarding the impact of cost savings on their programs and development plans.
Focus on innovative programming	LSOs were empowered to reinvest their budgets to develop and think creatively about how they can develop female leaders.
Find ways to recruit and retain female athletes, coaches, and officials	Supports organizations’ goals to recruit and retain female coaches, particularly by offering personal and professional development.

How was this able to happen?

1. Ongoing gender equity discussions. In her role, Jones met early and often with Town managers to discuss gender equity and inclusion. These conversations varied in focus and length, but consistently had a gender equity lens.
2. Senior leadership support and empowering others as it relates to gender equity. Applying the gender equity lens cannot be the responsibility of one person at an organization.
3. Fact finding and community conversations for gender equity. For example, the manager responsible for issuing permits prepared a cost analysis to determine the financial implications for the Town of reducing ice costs for the girls' organization, while also speaking with permit groups that directly service women and girls in our community.
4. A gender equity lens has also been applied to motions and recommendations provided to Council. In this case, the motion and information

provided to Town Council on behalf of staff was inclusive of the boys' organization and the girls' organization of the same level of competition.

5. Council approval for a gender equity approach. Aurora Town Council approved the staff recommendations for the girls' organization to receive the same benefits as the boys' organization. Council could have opted to only receive the initial letter from the boys' organization and therefore only reduce the boys' organization permitting fees.

With Council endorsement and approval, the Town ensures that municipal ice costs are balanced between the boys' and girls' like-level hockey clubs, a progressive approach that may initially result in lower revenues but "will provide immeasurable gains over time in terms of gender equity," Jones points out. In fact, both organizations have indicated that the lower ice rental costs may enable them to schedule more ice time for additional training, resulting in greater access for the athletes while minimizing any financial loss to the Town.



Expanding influence

The six key pillars of Aurora's Gender Equity Plan have informed multiple projects and programs to varying degrees over the past few years. Other notable initiatives include:

- The launch of the Recreation & Healthy Active Living Leadership Course for girls in high school (see **Educating Leaders** below).
- Hosting Team Sweden's hockey training camp and a pre-tournament game against Switzerland leading up to the IIHF Women's World Championship in April 2023. The community was offered free tickets for the event, skating times, autograph sessions, and volunteer opportunities in an effort to "elevate female sport and leadership" in the community, Jones says.
- 'Strong in Sport', a multi-sport recreation program for pre-teen girls led by female coaches in partnership with the Town in a non-competitive atmosphere. Knowing that girls tend to value social programming in addition to pure activity, the sessions include a half hour of physical activity and another half hour of social interaction.
- 20 Female Leaders in 2020, a funding program supporting 20 female coaches, officials, and administrators to further their training and

provide professional development opportunities. The program engaged participants in other initiatives around gender equity and all were profiled through the Town of Aurora social media feeds. The Town is currently refreshing this campaign to highlight and showcase female leaders across Aurora involved in healthy active living, sport and recreation.

- A partnership with online portal [SeeWhatSheCanDo](#) to create Women Coaches Circles, a safe virtual space for female coaches to find support, lift each other up, and hear from experts in the field.
- Meetings with social agencies serving immigrants and underserved members of the community to listen, learn and build long-term trust around the Town's commitment to gender equity initiatives.

Aurora has pushed traditional boundaries to promote gender equity through the development of the Recreation and Healthy Active Leadership grade 12 high school credit course.

Female Recreation and Active Living Leadership High School Course

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- First aid training
- Leadership and communication skills training
- Practice and event planning knowledge and much more!

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Educating leaders

Aurora has pushed traditional boundaries to promote gender equity through the development of the Recreation and Healthy Active Leadership grade 12 high school credit course. The course is aimed at giving female and gender diverse students the training, tools, and networks to help consider employment and leadership positions in various recreation and sport settings.

“Very simply, we are saying that these girls and gender diverse youth are worth it and worthy of being in leadership roles and positions,” says Jones. “It’s a long-term approach that is already paying dividends. These young people are building community networks, gaining leadership experience, having fun and building their resume in a safe and supportive environment. Many are now employed in leadership positions and the alumni want to stay involved with the program, starting a legacy of enrichment for the future.”

The first cohort of eight students received instruction in early 2023 partly online through self-directed learning modules delivered with ASKONLINE Canada, and partly through weekly in-person classes at the public library. Classes featured a variety of female identifying guest speakers from local government and the broader community, with students receiving instruction on sport and activity-related topics such as mentorship, event planning, and leadership, as well as practical skills including CPR and First Aid, various **NCCP** certifications and **High Five Certification**. The cost per participant of about \$425, mainly for certifications, was partially offset by Jump Start grant funding and the Town’s budget.

Now that the word has spread, enrolment for the next session is at capacity of 16 with a populated waitlist. A combination of community partners funding and Town budget means that it will be offered at zero cost to all participants.

Key Learnings

While Aurora’s gender equity efforts are still in the early stages, the Town has learned several important lessons that have helped to create change. They include:

1. **Establish new partnerships and connections with the community.** By broadening relationships with LSOs and community partners, the Town has been able to help change their programs to not only increase the number of female participants, but to improve the experiences of women and girls. “It’s about bringing sport to another level and investing in the community as a whole,” Jones says.
2. **Be willing to take risks.** Change depends on the willingness to try new approaches and ideas. More importantly, it requires the political will to make a significant investment in paid time and effort – as Aurora has done with hiring a Sport & Community Development Specialist – without a guarantee of immediate, measurable success.
3. **Set realistic goals.** “When you’re talking about changing outcomes for underserved groups, sometimes you have to walk away from quotas and take a longer-term, qualitative approach to measuring success,” Jones says.
4. **Be prepared for resistance.** It’s important to find and establish allies within the sport community to work with females and help to support gender equity. Arm yourself with research and relevant statistics as it relates to women and girls in sport and leadership.
5. **Language and representation matters.** Examine your policies, webpages and social media platforms. Take an unbiased look at the names, pronouns and images that have been shared and are prioritized across all platforms.





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Next Steps

Having learned valuable lessons with many of the initiatives of the past few years, the Town of Aurora now plans to refine and improve upon its efforts to break down gender-based societal barriers. In the course of updating existing programs, establishing new ones and deepening relationships within the community, it has become clear that longer-term

organizational change is taking hold on multiple levels, both inside and outside the corporation.

“We need to ask ourselves what the legacy of gender equity work is for our community. This work needs to be intentional and approached with an open mind to ensure we continue to elevate the minimum standard,” says Jones.



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