

Date: July 18, 1996

SUBJECT: LEISURE ACCESS CARD PROGRAM -  
APPLICATION PROCEDURES & BENEFIT CHANGES

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT the Board receive for information the attached report regarding new Leisure Access application procedures and benefits for residents with limited incomes who do not receive income assistance.

POLICY

The Board has an Economic Access Policy that provides Leisure Access Cards (LAC) for those persons on some form of income assistance and for those persons whose gross family income is below low income guidelines specified by Statistics Canada for Vancouver. These cards provide free admission to public swim and skate programs and reductions for other specified Park Board programs and services.

BACKGROUND

The Economic Access Policy was approved in 1992, with Leisure Access Cards introduced in January 1993. The first review of the program indicated an impact of \$ 50,000 in decreased revenues in 1993, which rose to approximately \$ 80,000 in 1994. This impact has increased during 1995, as the volume of applicants continued to increase. The greatest increase in the number of applicants was from the "others in need" category who made a simple, verbal declaration of need.

At a meeting of the Board held November 20, 1995, a report on the Leisure Access Program was considered. The report dealt with a Notice of Motion regarding the impact of allowing free access to basic programs and services for residents who receive income assistance. It further indicated that, in the coming year, changes to the program would need to be designed to contain its growing financial impact, while maintaining the policy's original goals.

During the most recent review of the program with staff, clients, participating agencies and low income advocates, two prominent issues were identified. First, concerns were voiced that cards were being requested, and used, by residents who did not meet the low income criteria. Staff heard this with increased frequency from facility staff, the general public and other card holders.

Secondly, fitness centres have experienced stable participation and real revenue declines over the past 2 years. This is most evident in the West End and Kitsilano Centres. This decline appears to be related to the increased purchase of the Flexipass, particularly the LAC discounted one. (a Flexipass is an unlimited admission pass to any pool/fitness centre, which can be purchased for 1 to 12 months ) The correlation

between LAC patron eligibility and fitness centre revenues is difficult to determine.

This report describes administrative changes introduced to screen applicants not previously screened by a senior government in order to address issues of ineligibility. The report also discusses the removal of the discounted flexipass as a benefit provided to Leisure Access Card patrons.

## DISCUSSION

### Screening for Income-Assisted Applicants

Procedures have not changed for those who receive some regular form of government income assistance, provincial or federal. Income-assisted client/s complete a one-page form, and may choose from providing documented proof of assistance, or obtaining a stamped, pre-approved form from the Ministry of Social Services' Income Security Offices.

There is no waiting period. Cards are available directly from 30 Board facilities, and are now dated for 12 months from the date of issue instead of six months.

### Screening for Other Eligible Applicants

Procedures for those who are not receiving income assistance but whose income falls into the eligible category, have been changed as of June 30, 1996. ( see Appendix: Form II ) These applicants now complete a more detailed, two-page form and mail, fax or deliver it along with appropriate gross income (before taxes) documentation to Central Recreation Services.

When approved, Leisure Access Cards are mailed to the applicant's home. The stated waiting period is four to six weeks, although the current wait is 3 weeks from the date the application is received. The wait period has been instituted to allow batch processing, due to the volume of applications and limited support staff.

Close to 10,000 cards may be requested, with most expected in the next three months. About 750 applications for 1,500 family members have already been received in the first 20 days of July.

### Reasons for administrative changes

The reasons for changing application procedures have been developed following extensive discussions with staff, LAC patrons, agency reps and advocates. Copies of this report will be sent to representatives of the above groups.

### The need to screen:

Changes in procedures for those applying without documentation were instituted after many requests for improved screening. Front-line staff were concerned that some applicants misunderstood the intent of the program or were unable to state their needs due to language barriers, and that others were misrepresenting their gross income. Many regular patrons reported other patrons who have a Leisure Access Card but whose income exceeds the limit for eligibility under the Economic Access Policy.

The need for consistent application procedures:  
 Clients expressed many concerns about staff attitudes during the in-person application process. These concerns have been reinforced by agency representatives during program review discussions. The new centralized system for processing applications addresses these issues, albeit with very limited resources.

The need to address impact on facility staff:  
 The impact on facility staff due to the volume of applicants and the processing time has been significant, particularly in low income areas. Consistency and quality of information about the program has often been an issue, given the sometimes frequent changes in auxiliary support staff.

Comments from community agencies:  
 Staff consulted with 50 local social service and advocacy agencies about changes to the procedures. Half of these agencies responded to our request for comments, and many attended a workshop session held for this purpose. Most agreed that for the above reasons, it was no longer appropriate to provide this service at the front counter, and that application procedures should be centralized and more objective.

The Vancouver Charter, in Chapter 55, section 489 (q) provides the Board powers to collect fees and "do such other things in furtherance as shall be deemed expedient", and in 489: (r) 2, "may impose different fees for different classes of persons and activities".

Eligible applicants classified by type of income  
 Figures below represent income categories as reported on Leisure Access Card application forms during two calendar years. The trend may be misleading, as the growth shown in 1995 under "others" may include income assisted clients who preferred to make a simple verbal declaration, rather than provide proof of assistance.

Low income residents who indicated they did not receive income assistance grew exponentially compared to those reporting they did, between 1993 and 1995. This threefold growth in the real number of applicants not providing any proof of income was an issue.

Income type	1993	1995	% Increase
Low income proof	17,350 (84%)	18,380 (57%)	6 %
"Others in need"	4,348 (16%)	13,870 (43%)	319 %
Totals	21,698	32,250	50 %

Over 20% of Vancouver's citizens are poor, with 60,000 GAIN recipients and another 60,000-70,000 not receiving any income assistance.

Alternative Screening Methods:  
 Before implementing the above described new procedures, every attempt was made to find alternate methods of screening. The BC Medical Services Plan's premium assistance program had been used until recently.

The Ministry of Health screens all BC residents for the purpose of reducing medical premiums, and at one time issued coded Carecards for all residents. This practice ended in November of 1995, and no alternatives are available to non-health services.

A request for permission to use this confidential information electronically, was denied. This position was reinforced by officials of Vancouver's Health Board.

Staff determined, then, that some form of modified screening procedures should be implemented, and that proof of low income or verification from a health or social service professional was sufficient to satisfy the low income criteria.

#### Program Benefits

Most benefits have remained the same, including free swimming, ice skating and ice skate rental, half price (or more) swim or skate lessons, and half price admission for racquet courts, pitch 'n putt, VanDusen, Bloedel and the Children's Farm/Railway. The Vancouver Aquarium also discounts single admissions 50%.

One issue identified during the review phase was that half-price flexipasses sold to Leisure Access holders had a negative impact on revenues, and that fitness centre clients at peak times were complaining about limited access to equipment.

Sales of flexipasses for half price or less were suspended effective June 1st, for more study. Single half-price admission, at any time, is the only fitness centre benefit now available to Leisure Access Card holders.

#### Flexipasses Issues and Alternatives

Many LAC patrons complain that the current single admission discount for fitness centres does not meet their needs, and that a further reduced payment method is required. The convenience of pre-paying for multiple visits is most practical for frequent users. Staff have also been approached by a number of patrons who say that they cannot pay the \$ 1.83 single admission fee.

Staff would like to further study the impact on revenue after the changes to LAC application procedures and the removal of flexipass benefits, until the end of 1996.

There may be alternatives to the reduced-fee flexipass and staff are currently studying those methods which might best meet the stated needs of Leisure Access Card holders, while limiting the impact on fitness centre revenues.

#### CONCLUSION

Original application methods created a number of problems and issues for staff and clients who had no proof of eligibility. The Board has obligations to ensure that its policies reach only those individuals who are targeted by the Economic Access Policy.

New screening methods will ensure that only eligible applicants receive low income benefits.

Flexipass benefits have been withdrawn due to frequency and timing of use, and the resulting impact on revenues. Alternate fee reduction methods are being studied.

Prepared by:  
Recreation Division  
Vancouver Board of Parks & Recreation

/bp

Appendices (4 page application form) available at the Park Board Office

✓