In many rural communities and small towns, local governments are being forced to make decisions about whether to maintain or decommission community recreation facilities such as hockey arenas, curling rinks, and community halls. Most of these facilities were built several decades ago, when rural communities tended to be younger and recreation activities generally took place within the community. As a result of technological improvements, demographic shifts, and societal change, many communities are finding themselves with costly facilities that are being underused by community members. Within these rural communities, however, there is often a deep emotional attachment to the values and institutions of earlier generations, when the social and recreational life of the community centred on its arena. As a result, communities may resist attempts to shutter a recreational facility, even when the costs of maintaining the facility are shown to exceed the benefits.

What is this research about?

When deciding whether to maintain or decommission a recreational facility, rural communities must balance rational economics and emotional attachment.

What did the researchers do?

This case study examined the experience of a recently amalgamated rural municipality in southwestern Ontario as it decided whether or not to close a hockey arena. The local government and leisure researchers used a “rational choice model”, making decisions by comparing the costs and benefits of different scenarios. In this case, the municipality looked at the current and future costs of operating the arena and community use of the arena. The researchers made a recommendation to decommission the hockey arena in the smallest village but leave open arenas in the other two villages.

What you need to know:

When deciding whether to maintain or decommission a recreational facility, rural communities need to consider not only the economic costs and benefits, but also the community’s attachment to places which have historical, social, and symbolic meaning for them.
What did the researchers find?
Although the facility was aging, expensive to maintain, and underused by the community, there was a significant and surprising amount of resistance to closing the facility from many community members. The residents who opposed closing the arena were not driven by economic factors, but instead by a “sense of place” – that is, their emotional attachment to a community landmark that had historical, social, and symbolic meaning for them. Lingering resentment over the village’s place within the amalgamated municipality likely also contributed to the resistance.

Keywords:
Community development, recreational facility, facility closure, rural, amalgamation, sense of place, rational choice

How can you use this research?
Municipalities and city planners can use this research to better understand how place attachment and a “sense of place” can affect a community’s desire to maintain recreational facilities.

Leisure researchers can further this research by designing a facility decision-making process that incorporates rational economic analysis, while also acknowledging a community’s emotional attachment and “sense of place”.

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Article citation:

Cite this work:
University of Guelph, Institute for Community Engaged Scholarship (2012). In deciding to close recreation facilities, communities must balance rational economics and emotional attachment. Retrieved from: http://hdl.handle.net/10214/5685