

2024 Rural Arena Operations Assessment

Objective

The objective of this report is to connect with rural ice operators to discuss current operating practices and explore if there are any opportunities to increase ice capacity in the region. The intent is to gain an understanding of the current landscape with a view to optimizing ice utilization in the region.

Background

The Grande Prairie Regional Recreation Committee (GPRRC) recognizes the social return generated from investment into publicly available arenas. Regional arenas have been a large part of the Committee's work since 2019, when they decided to review the allocation of ice time to ensure that the facilities were being used to their full potential. The GPRRC Ice Allocation Framework was developed in 2020 and brought to each partner Municipality of the GPRRC for decision and implementation in 2021. The framework is a multi-step approach, and each Municipality has the autonomy to implement the framework in stages as approved by individual municipalities.

In 2020, a motion was made by Reeve Marshall of the County of Grande Prairie:

GPRRC-12-10-2020-05 To direct AWG to come back to a future meeting a proposal on how the Region can better track Black Ice, specifically ice that is allocated, paid for, and not being used on an ongoing basis.

In response to this motion, the GPRRC began tracking Black Ice in the region. Black Ice is defined in the GPRRC Ice Allocation Framework as **Prime Time Ice (Monday-Friday 4pm-11pm, Saturday and Sunday 8am-11pm) that is paid for but not utilized.**

Regional ice availability remains an ongoing and important conversation within the GPRRC. In March 2024, the Administrative Working Group (AWG) started to plan conversations with rural arena operators to identify shortfalls in ice availability, explore potential for extra ice capacity in the region as well as collecting information on how rural arenas can be supported to increase ice capacity for the region.



Rural Arena Operators Feedback

From August to September 2024 members of the AWG, the Regional Recreation Coordinator (RRC) and Karna Germsheid, the Executive Director of the Grande Prairie Regional Sport Connection, met with the Arena Operators of Hythe, Sexsmith, Beaverlodge, Wembley and La Glace. *See Attachment A* for individual facility reports.

**Important notes*

- *The Hythe, Sexsmith, Wembley and La Glace arenas are operated by not-for-profit societies.*
- *The Beaverlodge arena is the only rural arena operated by their municipality.*
- *Tables prepared in this report reflect the higher end of the range reported by the operators.*
- *Information and data gathered was self reported to the AWG by the facility operators and is an estimate based on recent trends.*
- *La Glace & District Agricultural Society announced on November 8th, 2024 that their ice plant went down and is not repairable. A decision was made to operate with natural ice for the 2024-2025 season.*

Operations

Winter

Normal operating hours vary by facility, with the bulk of the ice demand being during Prime Time hours.

Table 1 Usual Arena Operating Hours (Winter)

Usual Operating Hours								
Arena	Operator	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
Beaverlodge	Town of Beaverlodge	7-8 am, 4-10:30/11pm	7-8 am, 4-10:30/11pm	7-8 am, 4-10:30/11pm	7-8 am, 4-10:30/11pm	4-10:30/11pm	8/9:00am- 9/10:00 pm	8/9:00am- 9/10:00 pm
Hythe	Hythe Athletic Association	5-10/11:00pm	4:15- 9:30/9:45pm	5-10/11:00pm	4:15- 9:30/9:45pm	5-10/11:00pm	8:30am- 10:30pm	8:30am- 10:30pm
Sexsmith	Sexsmith & District Agricultural Society	6:30am- 10/11:00pm	6:30am- 10/11:00pm	6:30am- 10/11:00pm	6:30am- 10/11:00pm	9am-10:30pm	8am-10:30pm	8am-10:30pm
Wembley	Wembley & District Agricultural Society	3:30pm- 10:30pm	3:30pm- 10:30pm	3:30pm- 10:30pm	3:30pm- 10:30pm	3:30pm- 10:30pm	9:00am- 9:30pm	9:00am- 8:30pm
LaGlance	LaGlance Agricultural Society	3:30pm-11pm	3:30pm- 11pm	3:30pm- 11pm	3:30pm-11pm	3:30pm-11pm	8:00am- 10:00pm	Closed



**GRANDE PRAIRIE REGIONAL
RECREATION
COMMITTEE**

Sexsmith and Beaverlodge Arenas stood out in that their daytime; weekday use was very high. This is due to their walkable proximity to the local schools (two for Sexsmith and three feeder schools in Beaverlodge). During the months of January and December Beaverlodge is booked from approximately 8:30am-3:10pm by schools. Their overall ice time usage was extremely high, with significant social return to the community.

Summer

Summer use varied by facility and was restricted at several locations due to the condition of the concrete slab (cracking and heaving). This made the cracked slab unsuitable for certain dryland activities such as roller skating and ball hockey. Sexsmith had occasional bookings by Robert W. Zahara Elementary School during the day, and a Ball Hockey organization that rents about 5 days/week during Prime Time. Wembley has regular summer bookings from a youth Lacrosse organization.

Many facilities plan scheduled maintenance for the summer months, so they are unavailable to the public for part of the summer. Tables below reflect bookings for the arena dry pad only, not other areas of the facilities.

Table 2 Regularly Booked Prime Time Hours (Summer)

Regularly Booked Prime Time Hours Summer									
Arena	Operator	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total hours
Beaverlodge	Town of Beaverlodge	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hythe	Hythe Athletic Association	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sexsmith	Sexsmith & District Agricultural Society	6	6	6	6	6	0	0	30
Wembley	Wembley & District Agricultural Society	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	0	0	0	18
La Glace	La Glace Agricultural Society	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2

Last minute cancellations

All facilities said that filling last minute bookings was generally not an issue. Last minute cancellation practices vary from facility to facility. Facility staff will call user groups, user groups will often transfer it to each other, it is advertised on social media or an arena bulletin board. Public Skates as well as Stick and Pucks were also scheduled during last minute or available ice times at multiple facilities in order to maximize social return for the community.



Expansion of operating hours and current capacity

All facilities we met with were at, or near capacity for Prime Time ice. The operators were open to discussions on expanding their operating hours outside of Prime Time, however, there had not been much interest from the community expressed to them at this time. Hythe had some availability on Friday evenings from 8:30-11pm for a Recreation Hockey League but the groups from the City were not willing to drive that distance for ice. La Glace Arena was the only arena where we identified potential for expansion during Prime Time ice, as it was closed on Sundays to allow their Ice Technician a day off. The plan for 2024/2025 season was for the arena to be closed every second Saturday and most of Sunday. If there was a booking request, they would be willing to accommodate it by having a volunteer open the facility for the booking. La Glace arena is however limited in the type of user groups it can accommodate due to the size and type of rink boards. Table 3 shows the approximate percentage of Prime Time ice booked per facility, along with any ice times regularly available at each facility.

Table 3 Percentage of Prime Time Ice Booked and Opportunities for Ice Availability per Facility.

Arena	Estimated % of prime time ice booked	Ice Availability	
Beaverlodge	95%	Sunday 7-10am 1 weekend/month	Fridays 7-10am
Hythe	100% Mon-Thurs	Weekday mornings and daytimes	Friday evenings 8:30-11pm
Sexsmith	95%	Early mornings Friday	
Wembley	95%	Weekday mornings and days	Sporadic weekend
LaGlace	90% booked excluding Sundays due to closure	Weekday daytime	Some Saturdays, all sundays



Black Ice Tracking

Black Ice was not identified as a major issue amongst the rural arenas. The demand for ice is high, and it can usually be filled by another user group. Weather and bussing related cancellations were the only source of Black Ice reported at the Hythe Arena. All arena operators agreed that an email to the coordinator was the simplest way for them to communicate Black Ice to the Committee.

Facility operators were asked to email the coordinator and report "No Black Ice", in order to track it definitively.

Ice Manager Meeting

All of the Facility Operators were aware of the GPRRC Ice Manager Meeting that is held twice a year, at the start and end of the season. One of the challenges identified with attendance for the rural arenas run by non-municipal organizations is that staff are often part time and/or have day jobs. We received a request from, and extended an invitation to, one of the La Glace Agricultural Society board members to attend the Ice Operators Meetings.

It may be valuable to hold two options for the Ice Operators meeting; one in the daytime for municipal employees and one in the evening for the volunteer board run arenas.

Extending the invitation to all arena operator board members in the future, may help with buy in from the rural arena operators.

Those operators that had attended in the past had enjoyed them, felt that it was empowering, helped make connections and obtain resources.

Staffing

Four out of the five rural arenas are operated by a volunteer board, with the exception of Beaverlodge Arena that is owned and operated by the Town of Beaverlodge.

Both Hythe and Sexsmith Arena have recently hired a Full Time Arena Attendant as part of their succession planning for the retirement of their current Arena Manager and reduce the reliance on one ice technician.

Beaverlodge Arena has the advantage of having some additional staff in other municipal departments that are trained as Ice Technicians. This allows them to pull additional staff to the arena as required to assist with operations.



**GRANDE PRAIRIE REGIONAL
RECREATION
COMMITTEE**

For the volunteer board run arenas, staffing challenges exist due to the seasonal, and part time nature of the employment, especially with the hiring and retention of experienced Ice Technicians.

Hythe and Sexsmith Arenas indicated that there were no gaps in their current staffing model.

LaGlace indicated they would require additional support to staff the arena on Sundays, as that is currently their sole employee's day off.

Wembley was willing to accommodate more mornings and weekday daytime slots if assistance with staff was available. The biggest challenge for them was that the availability of Ice Technicians is currently limited during the daytime.

Beaverlodge Arena indicated they would require another part time staff member to accommodate bookings on Friday mornings.

Table 4 shows the current staffing models at the rural arenas.

Table 4 Staffing at Regional Rural Arenas

Arena	Staff			Concession
Beaverlodge	1 FT Beaverlodge Recreation Manager (acts as Arena Manager)	3 FT Ice Operators	1 contract janitor hired for after Junior B games due to late hour	3rd party contract concession operator
		2 Casual Ice Operators pulled as required from other departments.		
Hythe	1 FT Arena Manager	1 PT to FT Arena Attendant*	1 PT Janitor	3rd party contract concession operator
Sexsmith	1 FT Arena Manager	1 FT Arena Attendant*		3rd party contract concession operator (includes upstairs custodial duties)
		1-2 PT Arena Attendant		
Wembley	1 PT Arena Manager	3rd party Ice Tender Contractor which includes team of 4-5 technicians		3rd party contract concession operator (includes lobby custodial duties)
	1 PT Administrative Assistant			
LaGlace	1 PT contract Ice Tender/Arena Manager*			3rd party contract concession operator (includes upstairs custodial duties)



Facility Condition

A common theme amongst the rural arenas is the age and condition of the ice plant, brine lines and concrete slab. Beaverlodge currently has funds allocated to replace the chiller in the ice plant, but these repairs would require a two-season shut down.

We heard from multiple facilities that addressing a lot of these concerns would require the facility to be closed for up to two ice seasons if the ice plant or brine lines were to fail.

Facility operators were asked to self-report the status of four critical elements of their facility: brine lines, ice plant, concrete slab and the facility overall. The rating categories were the same as those used in the 2016 Grande Prairie Facility Analysis Report, as in the table below. All facilities except La Glace Arena were included in the 2016 report and therefore a baseline for comparison is available.

Table 5 Facility Condition Rating Definitions

**Rating taken from 2016 Grande Prairie Facility Analysis Report*

Rating	Definition
Critical	Unsafe, high risk of injury or critical system failure.
Poor	Does not meet requirements, has significant deficiencies. May have high operating/maintenance costs.
Marginal	Meets minimum requirements, has significant deficiencies. May have above average operating/maintenance costs.
Acceptable	Meets present requirements, minor deficiencies. Average operating/ maintenance costs.
Good	Meets all present requirements. No deficiencies noted.
Excellent	As new/ state-of-the-art, meets present and foreseeable requirements.

Table 6 Condition of Critical Infrastructure and Equipment for Regional Rural Arenas

Arena	Operator	Brine Lines Status	Ice Plant Status	Concrete Slab Status	Facility Status
Beaverlodge	Town of Beaverlodge	Poor	Marginal	Poor	Acceptable
Hythe	Hythe Athletic Association	Poor	Poor	Marginal	Acceptable
Sexsmith	Sexsmith & District Agricultural Society	Good	Good	Acceptable	Acceptable
Wembley	Wembley & District Agricultural Society	Acceptable	Poor	Marginal	Acceptable
LaGlace	LaGlace Agricultural Society	Marginal	Non-Functioning	Marginal	Poor



**GRANDE PRAIRIE REGIONAL
RECREATION
COMMITTEE**

**2024 Rating is self reported by facility operator. 2016 rating was assigned by consultant Architecture-Tkalcic Bengert.*

Arena Closure

With all arenas in the region running near capacity for Prime Time ice; and the sudden closure of the La Glace Arena, there is a significant deficit of ice in the region as the remaining arenas are unable to accommodate all of the needs of displaced user groups. Should another arena in the region close, the ice deficit and displaced users will grow exponentially.

The La Glace Arena had up to 31.75 hours per week of regular bookings scheduled for Prime Time ice by user groups for the 2024-2025 season, in addition, up to 6 hours a week of Prime Time was scheduled for Public Skate and Stick and Ball.

Table 7 represents an estimate of the weekday daytime hours per week that would be in deficit if one of the remaining rural arenas were to close.

Table 7 Regularly Booked Weekday, Daytime Hours (Winter)

Regularly Booked Weekday Daytime Hours Winter									
Arena	Operator	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total hours
Beaverlodge	Town of Beaverlodge	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	4
Hythe	Hythe Athletic Association	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sexsmith	Sexsmith & District Agricultural Society	9	9	9	9	6.5	0	0	42.5
Wembley	Wembley & District Agricultural Society	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0	0	2.5
La Glace	La Glace Agricultural Society	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0	0	2.5

**Beaverlodge is booked 33 hours/week in December/January due to school bookings. The rest of the season it is 4 hours/week of regularly booked daytime ice.*

**Hythe is booked up to 9 hours/week from December-Mid March for daytime weekday school bookings.*



**GRANDE PRAIRIE REGIONAL
RECREATION
COMMITTEE**

Table 8 represents an estimate of the number of additional weekly Prime Time ice hours that the region would be in deficit due to a rural arena closure based on the number of Prime Time hours that are regularly booked at each facility.

Table 8 Regularly Booked Prime Time Hours (Winter)

Regularly Booked Prime Time Hours Winter									
Arena	Operator	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total hours
Beaverlodge	Town of Beaverlodge	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	12.0	12.0	59.0
Hythe	Hythe Athletic Association	6.0	5.5	6.0	5.5	6.0	14.0	14.0	57.0
Sexsmith	Sexsmith & District Agricultural Society	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	6.5	14.5	14.5	63.5
Wembley	Wembley & District Agricultural Society	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5	12.5	11.5	56.5
LaGlace	LaGlace Agricultural Society	6.5	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	14.0	0.0	48.5

Other Feedback

Other feedback of note was the request that training opportunities held by the municipalities be open to board run facility employees. The cost associated with sending employees away for training is often cost prohibitive and/or difficult to access and having locally available training opportunities would reduce the barriers for participation to their employees.

Cost sharing opportunities for purchasing essentials such as janitorial supplies, equipment etc. was also brought up as a way to reduce costs for board run arenas and facilities.



Conclusion

Ice usage within the rural arenas in the region is at maximum capacity, with little room for growth, or for accommodating user groups should one of the other rural facilities shut down.

Black Ice is not a problem within the rural arenas with ice utilization at between 90-100% capacity during Prime Time hours and any cancellations being quickly booked by other user groups as the demand for ice is so high.

Based off the information gathered from these meetings, there were no major opportunities identified to increase ice capacity in the region within the rural arenas. In fact, it is likely that in the near future, with current trends towards program growth and the imminent risk of an arena closure, that there will be a significant deficit in available ice regionally.

