



## Fort Nelson Overcomes Hurdles

May 2008

The community of Fort Nelson continues to find ways to keep active and healthy despite facing some challenges along the way.

In the spring of 2007, the roof and walls of the arena portion of the Fort Nelson Recreation Centre collapsed under snow, rendering the building unusable. In the meantime until the arena could be repaired or re-built, the Town constructed a secondary covered outdoor ice surface so children and adults could continue to play hockey and go skating. In addition, staff from the Northern Rockies Regional District Recreation department started up new active programs and events within the community, on top of continuing to run existing programs.

*“We’re still plugging away and still trying to keep our community active,”* said Irene Andersen, the Regional District’s new Active Communities Program Assistant.

Located four hours outside Fort St. John in the northernmost part of B.C., the Town of Fort Nelson and Northern Rockies Regional District areas’ main industries are the oil and gas and forest industries. An announced closure this year of two of Canfor’s mills in Fort Nelson turned out to not have the expected impact after the company and community worked together to minimize the number of jobs lost.

The Northern Rockies Regional District created the new part-time Active Communities Program Assistant position in January to assist the efforts of the Recreation Department and its community partners with its Get Active Fort Nelson initiative.

The area is surrounded by wilderness, and with that wilderness comes the threat of wildlife, including bears and wolves. So walking outdoors alone can be intimidating. To create opportunities to walk with a group, the Northern Rockies Walking Club started up this April.

*“When you’re in a group situation, it works out really well because they feel really secure,”* Andersen said. *“We started off slow with 20 people, which for Fort Nelson is pretty good. Then the word got out.”*

By May, 34 people had signed up. The walking club is joining Fort St. John in its Walk to Whistler online tracking challenge. As well, they are logging on to the ActNow BC Activity Challenge, using pedometers awarded through the ActNow pedometer grants program.

Andersen showed the group a Bear Aware video containing tips on preventing and dealing with encounters with bears. Twice a week, she leads the group on walks to different locations. On Wednesdays, they do more hills, and on Sundays, they go for longer walks outside of town. Destinations have included the golf course, the airport and heading along the Alaska Highway. Each week’s walk has a different theme to keep things interesting.

*“You get bored walking in a really small town, so they love the Sunday walks,”* Andersen noted.

And with a new multi-use trail in the works along the perimeter of Fort Nelson, the walking group will soon have even more safe places to walk. The Northern Rockies Regional District and local Spirit of BC Committee have spearheaded the trail



project, which is expected to break ground this year or next.

In addition to planning events and programs, Andersen developed an Active Communities plan for Fort Nelson, which identified a gap in recreation services for youth.

The Recreation staff and School District 81 have partnered to conduct a pilot testing of the Ministry of Health’s daily physical activity requirement in schools. With a grant from the BC Recreation and Parks Association, Fort Nelson Secondary students can access free aquatic programs at the pool and drop-in sports at the school gym from April to June. The daily physical activity requirement will be brought into B.C. schools in September 2008.

The Recreation staff connected with the physical education teacher and two students at the secondary school through a stakeholders meeting put on by Fort Nelson Active Communities. The group is working on surveying students to assess their activity levels and needs.

Andersen is planning to hold a community meeting in the fall for more community health promotion stakeholders to get involved with Get Active Fort Nelson.

## Peace River / Liard – Fort Nelson

In addition to targeting youth, the Fort Nelson Active Communities initiative aims to reach employees in local industries.

*“They work long hours, some of them are 12-hour shifts and then they get their days off, but it’s very hard to get through to them,”* Andersen said. *“They think that they’re getting physical activity at work, but that’s a totally different thing.”*

Andersen made presentations this spring to the Women of Industry group and the Rotary Club, which is fundraising to build a spray park in Fort Nelson. Andersen filled both groups in on ActNow BC and Active Communities. She discussed high smoking rates and obesity rates in the north.

*“Then I told them what we’re trying to do to change it,”* Andersen said. *“They loved the talk, and quite a few ladies signed up for our walking club.”*

In March, Get Active Fort Nelson co-hosted a community health fair, with community groups’ booths filling a three-storey building.

*“We had displays and kiosks on every floor, so it worked out really well and there was a lot of interest in town,”* Andersen said. An acupuncturist and Chinese medicine doctor Cam Pratt and the Regional District’s Recreation Program Manager Colleen Høglund spearheaded organizing the fair in addition to hosting booths at the fair. The participants included Northern Health, a chiropractor, massage therapist, a health food store, private gyms, Curves, and individuals. An estimated 200 people came out to get information at the health fair.

*“Everybody wants to do it again and we are hoping we can get a bigger place,”* Andersen said. *“It went over really well and the feedback was excellent.”*

This spring and summer, a free, instructor-led play in the park program is starting up. The program provides children and parents with drop-in activities at a different park twice each week. By taking advantage of programs put on by Get Active Fort Nelson, residents in the Northern Rockies will continue to have opportunities to build a healthier community.

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- Irene Andersen

## Fort Nelson Highlights

- Started the Northern Rockies Walking Club
- Hosted a community health fair
- Free family swim for Spirit of BC Week
- Move for Health Day community walk with the Mayor
- BCRPA pilot community for Ministry of Health’s daily physical activity requirement in schools – offering free aquatic programs
- Northern Rockies Regional District building a multi-use community trail
- Partnering with School District 81 staff and students to reach youth

## Fort Nelson Info

- Population:** 4,823 (BC Stats 2005)
- Located on the Alaska Highway in the Northern Rockies Regional District
  - Aquatic centre, recreation centre with arena [under repair], curling rink, tennis courts, golf course, parks, skateboard park, playgrounds, seniors’ activity centre
  - Main industries: oil and gas, forestry, agriculture, tourism and the service industry
  - Home to the Fort Nelson First Nation

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