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Dear Paddling Friends,

I am writing in support of a paddling facility in your community – a place where people of all ages can get together and safely enjoy a truly Canadian sport.

To understand the value that such a facility brings to a community, you first need to understand something about our sport.

Paddling is a uniquely Canadian sport. We're all aware of the role that canoes and kayaks have played in the culture of our indigenous people. We've all learned in school how the first Europeans in Canada used canoes to explore and open up the country. Over the last couple of centuries, the canoe has gone from a mode of transportation to a favourite mode of recreation for many Canadians and the only Olympic sport with an event named after a country – the "Canadian" canoe.

In the last few decades, new paddle disciplines have arrived on Canadian shores and have been embraced by Canadian paddlers. Outrigger canoes from Polynesia, dragon boats from Asia, surf skis from ocean countries like Australia and South Africa, and stand up paddling, a new sport that has really gained popularity globally since approximately 2010.

All of these paddle disciplines, and the people who participate in them, have found homes at canoe clubs across the country. It doesn't really matter whether you are in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia; Oakville, Ontario; or Calgary, Alberta. What you'll see at the local canoe club is remarkably similar.

Canoe clubs operate just about 365 days a year. During the paddling season, which extends for most clubs from late March when the lakes and rivers open until late November, club doors open at dawn and close past dusk. During the winter months, club activities are centered around fitness activities like weights, aerobics, running etc.

Early mornings at canoe clubs see adults training before work or kids paddling before school. In the summers, the kids train early so that after they are finished training, they can stay at the club and help coach the novice kids, who start programs as early as age eight. These day programs run all morning and into the afternoon, then the kids that are training seriously for racing hit the water again for their second workout of the day under the direction of their coaches. Just as the kids are finishing their workouts, adult "masters" who have worked all day,

arrive at the club for their evening paddle. The kids usually don't go home right away as they often stay for crew practice in the uniquely Canadian "war canoe" that carries 14 paddlers and a captain.

At most clubs, you'll see parents arrive at the club in the evenings to watch their kids, spend time with friends they've made in the sport and do a variety of volunteer jobs, from boat repair to clubhouse maintenance. You'll see the mothers working in the club kitchen preparing dinner or fathers flipping burgers so that when the kids finish their war canoe practice they can eat, together, as a club. At my club, this takes the shape of Thursday night spaghetti dinners where you'll see paddlers of all ages, from 10 to 70, often sitting at the same tables sharing their meal and talking about their day on the water. It's more than just a sports club or a business. It's a family gathering place, and it's the same no matter where you are in the country.

Paddling is a unique sport in that people can pursue it individually in a single craft or as a member of a team in a 15-person war canoe, a 22-person dragon boat or a 6-person outrigger. There's something for everyone. It's also unique in that paddlers of all ages are often on the water training together and, if you're at a club like mine, the Burloak Canoe Club, you'll see Olympic medalists training at the same time as 14-year-olds.

Unfortunately, these people can't enjoy their sport and create this wonderful community together without both equipment and a place to safely store it.

Canoes and kayaks cost anywhere from \$2000 to \$20,000 depending on the size of the boat. At most clubs, the paddlers use club equipment that's got to be stored somewhere. You can't leave these boats outside in a fenced compound or chained to the dock. Sadly, this leaves the very expensive, and often fragile, equipment vulnerable to vandalism. It also poses a huge liability risk, for if anyone were able to somehow cut the locks to the storage compound and take a boat on the water, they'd face a serious risk of drowning.

Paddling is an inherently safe sport when done under the auspices of a club. Before anyone gets on the water, they're learning basic water safety. They're required to be strong swimmers. They've had instruction in all types of craft that they can paddle at the club. And, most importantly, they are supervised. However, if vandals, who are both uneducated in water safety and lacking in paddling skills, are able to access equipment they are in real danger. The equipment needs to be secure, and the only way to do that is with some type of clubhouse facility.

While it's true that what makes a club special is the people, not the bricks and mortar, people need a place to congregate. There needs to be a hub where the wonderful things I've described above can happen. There needs to be change rooms and washrooms. If you really want to have quality year-round programming, you need a place to do winter strength training. And, it really helps to have a meeting place where members can gather for events.

When I first started paddling in Oakville, Ontario, our “clubhouse” was an old, condemned, sewage treatment plant. Amazingly, we kids hung around the sewage plant all day, even though there was no running water, no plumbing, no electricity or even glass in the windows. While one might contend that as long as we had boats to paddle in and water to paddle on we had all we needed, not having a clubhouse limited the growth of our club. Parents would see an ad for paddling in the recreation brochure, think that it looked like a cool activity and drive their child to the club, only to see the clubhouse was a sewage plant. They’d drive into the parking lot, turn around, and drive away, never to be seen again.

It wasn’t until the early 1990s when our fundraising reached a critical mass and we secured the support of the Lions Club, that the Town of Oakville agreed to help us build our new club. Since then, we’ve been able to run much more extensive programs and see many, many more people pass through our doors and out onto the water. We’ve had success at almost every level, from local, provincial, and national championships for all ages and we’ve sent numerous paddlers and coaches to the Olympics, where our athletes have won a total of seven medals.

Since we opened the doors to our new club almost 30 years ago, we’ve seen thousands of kids pass through the facility, most paddling for the bulk of their teenage years until university. Many have come back after university to continue to enjoy paddling or coach.

I challenge you to use your imagination and envision some version of what I have described in your community. Imagine, thirty years from now, looking back at the thousands of kids that will have found fun, healthy and safe ways to spend their teenage years. Imagine that some kids will have had the desire to take things a step beyond, and will have represented your community internationally, perhaps even at the Olympics. Imagine that your club will have established a reputation as a site of family-centered activity in a time when too many families seem to be too busy to do things together.

Dreams like this can’t come true without help from municipalities and service clubs, who have the vision and imagination to think of what could be, and elect to work together with passionate club members to create something truly special.

Canoeing changed my life. I started paddling when I was 11-years-old. I was fifteen when my father died. My mother has said, numerous times, “thank god for the canoe club” as the older role models there helped me through a very difficult time. My experiences paddling, which would never have happened without our club, have made me the man I am today – a retired teacher, community leader, coach, and advocate of health and wellness for people of all ages. Please consider the lives you might change if you support the construction of a paddling facility in your community. This is a real chance to make a difference in a truly unique way.

Respectfully yours,

Larry Cain

1984 Olympic Champion

Member of Canada’s Sports Hall of Fame and Order of Canada

