To: Members of Committee, Emergency and Community Services

From: Tom Cooper, Director Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction

Date: January 15, 2010

Re: Program Enhancements, Community Services Department

Dear Chair and Members of Emergency and Community Services Committee,

Access to affordable recreation opportunities for low income families is a vital social policy issue. Significant work has been undertaken across the province to urge governments to look at policy shifts, proactive funding and flexible solutions to improve access to recreation opportunities for children and their families.

Nearly one quarter of Hamilton's children are growing up in families who live below the low income cut off. The report before you today provides a strong case for helping children escape the cycle of poverty through programs which offer access to recreation opportunities. These are critical investments in our children which pay tremendous dividends for our community in the years to come.

Best practices have demonstrated the long term social and economic benefits of investing in access to recreation for children of families living below Canada's low income cut off. As noted in a recent study: "Quality of life is enhanced for (both) individuals and communities through an engaged and active population; physical activity levels improve when opportunities to participate in quality recreation and sport are available, helping to address the growth in obesity rates". Research indicates that social inclusion through recreation opportunities can halt generational poverty and the dependence on social assistance programs. The outcomes include improved community health, significant educational benefits, fewer interactions with the justice system and a more engaged citizenry.

The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction is keenly aware of the current fiscal pressures facing the municipality, and have committed to working with Council to highlight Hamilton's program requirements with both the federal and provincial governments. However, the Roundtable strongly encourages Council to support the proposed program enhancements and the continuation of funding for the important programs described under Staff Report (CS10007). We are critically concerned that "An estimated 6,000 children (YSAN and City Bridges Program) will lose subsidies if the enhancement is not approved." The
enhancements suggested today will provide a significant return on investment for the City of Hamilton down the road.

Despite strong community efforts and progress, poverty is deeply entrenched in Hamilton – particularly in some neighbourhoods. The Roundtable and City Council has recognized that a long-term, systemic approach towards addressing critical points in the lives of children, youth and families is vital. Skills through education, activity and recreation must be an integral component of our framework as a plan to prevent and reduce poverty.

In a recent report compiled by Hamilton’s Social Research and Planning Council, it was noted that: “The Youth Service Agencies Network (YSAN) Grow program was named in nearly all of the focus groups as a critical service for helping connect families to affordable recreation for their children. This program is a model for the critical connection between providing information, providing transportation, coordinating and subsidizing recreation opportunities”.

Responding to the numerous obstacles faced by families living in poverty who would like to participate in community recreation programs requires a broader and more holistic approach than simply providing subsidies. The programs outlined in Staff’s report recognize that a collaborative approach is necessary. Families often cite user fees as one of the systemic barriers to participation, however “they also cite complex subsidy approaches, equipment costs, transportation barriers, awareness of programs and stigma they may face when requesting support”. The program enhancements before you today may not address all these barriers, however your support would be an important step towards improving access to recreation for all children in our community and towards our shared aspiration of “Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child”.

Thank you for your consideration.