

Fertile Ground for New Thinking

Improving Toronto's Parks

David Harvey

September 2010

METCALF
FOUNDATION

Metcalf Foundation

The Metcalf Foundation helps Canadians imagine and build a just, healthy, and creative society by supporting dynamic leaders who are strengthening their communities, nurturing innovative approaches to persistent problems, and encouraging dialogue and learning to inform action.

Metcalf Innovation Fellowship

The Metcalf Innovation Fellowship gives people of vision the opportunity to investigate ideas, models, and practices with the potential to lead to transformational change.

David Harvey

David Harvey has many decades of experience managing environmental and municipal issues in government and in politics. Most recently he served as Senior Advisor to the Premier of Ontario, working to develop, implement and communicate the Ontario Government's agenda in the areas of environment, natural resources, and municipal affairs. He played a key leadership role in many aspects of the Ontario Government's progressive agenda, including the 1.8 million acre Greenbelt, the GTA Growth Plan, the City of Toronto Act and the Go Green Climate Action Plan. He was awarded a Metcalf Innovation Fellowship in 2010.

Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction – Parks and the City	8
“Parks” and “the City”	10
The Benefits of Preserving and Enhancing Toronto’s Open Spaces	12
Why It’s a Critical Time to Ensure Great Parks in Toronto	14
Canadians Care About Their Parks.....	14
The State of Toronto Parks	15
The Hard Numbers	15
Who Does What	16
Who Pays for What	17
Morale in Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division	20
Community Engagement and the “Culture of No”	21
The State of the Parks	24
Reaching Out to New Canadians	25
The City’s Strategic Planning for Parks	27
Current Efforts to Expand and Improve Major Parks	29
Efforts by Public Groups to Expand and Enhance Parks in Toronto	30
Local Community Parks Groups.....	30
Citywide Parks Advocacy	31
The Role of National and Regional NGOs in Toronto Parks	32
Foundations and Efforts to Improve Parks.....	32
Interesting Urban Park Ideas From Across North America	34
Citizen Engagement	34
Reaching Out to Immigrants	34
Funding	35
Parks Department Budgets.....	35
Park Trusts and Foundations	35
Parks Conservancies	36
Business Improvement Districts, Parks Improvement Districts, and Adopt-a-Park	36
Separate Parks Agencies	37
Setting Specific Targets and Goals	37
Finding Space for New Parks	38
NGOs	38
Citywide Park Advocacy Groups	38
National Urban Park Advocacy Groups	39
Recommendations – Embrace Creativity and Community	41
Recommendation 1 – Put the Community First	42
Recommendation 2 – Move from a Culture of No to a Culture of Yes	45
Recommendation 3 - Capitalize on Creative Funding Ideas	46
Recommendation 4 – Use Food as a Tool to Engage People in Parks	48
Recommendation 5 – Develop a Citywide Voice for Parks.....	49
Acknowledgements	51

Executive Summary

Toronto has amazing parks. There are more than 1,500 of them and 80 square kilometres of parkland and natural spaces in the city. Half of the people in the city visit a park at least once a week and almost 14% visit a park every day.

But our parks are not as good as they could be. We've taken our parks for granted, neglected the need for improvements, and they are languishing. The post-1997 city amalgamation period has been a very difficult time for Toronto parks, their budgets and staff. Many people believe that no part of Toronto's infrastructure has suffered more from amalgamation and its after-effects than parks. Our parks are damaged and change is needed.

This crisis in maintaining public space is not unique to Toronto. Cities worldwide are struggling with this problem and coming up with innovative solutions. But decision-makers in Toronto resist change and are reluctant to embrace new ideas and we are now falling behind.

This paper examines challenges and opportunities for enhancing and expanding parks in Toronto. Better parks offer a host of benefits to Toronto's residents, businesses, and government. These parks play a crucial role in our highly diverse city. And given the City's goal of adding a half a million new residents and jobs over the next 20 years, now is a critical time to ensure great parks in Toronto.

Given the fiscal and organizational limits placed on them, City staff generally do a fairly good job caring for Toronto's parks, particularly the core function of basic maintenance. There are many people working for the City who understand the need for great parks and are putting forward new ideas. For City staff, working with the community can be challenging – "communities" do not speak with one voice and their concerns can be narrow and parochial. At the same time, the public can be frustrated with the slow pace of municipal responses to problems or suggestions.

This paper identifies a number of problems facing Toronto's parks and explores the core factors holding back progress:

- The crew-based "flying squad" maintenance model has been a mistake. General park maintenance has improved in recent years, but the lack of dedicated park staff in individual parks has led to unaddressed problems in parks and a disconnect with on-the-ground needs.
- There are a number of outstanding local "Friends of" park groups in the city doing excellent work improving their neighbourhood parks. But many have had frustrating and unproductive relationships with City

staff, characterizing the attitudes of City workers as a “culture of no.” A member of the Thorncliffe Park Women’s Committee summarized the frustrations of community groups across the city: “We don’t necessarily need the City’s money and staff; we just need permission.”

- For most people in Toronto, their main interaction with park staff is the requirement to obtain a permit for activities in parks. For many, this process is frustrating, leading to a perception that parks staff are “rule-driven” and see parks as their own “personal property.” Obtaining permits is especially challenging for new immigrants.
- New private-public funding partnerships will be required if the City is to have any hope of addressing the growing \$230 million backlog in maintenance and repairs to park and recreation facilities.
- Despite some individual successes, community groups and businesses often find it difficult to negotiate partnerships with the City to offer funding and volunteer efforts to improve parks.
- There is a “silent constituency” for parks. The lack of a citywide voice for parks makes it difficult to get the issue on the political agenda.

This paper identifies five key opportunities to overcome these problems and lists specific recommendations under each opportunity. All of the recommendations cost little or nothing, and many will allow the City to improve parks without increasing public expenditures.

All five recommendations centre on one theme: that parks management and decision-makers at City Hall need to unleash the creativity of our parks staff and embrace the communities that are home to Toronto’s parks. The City alone will never have the fiscal and staff resources to make our parks the best they can be. Our parks and our communities will be better places when City Hall makes full use of the community’s energy, ideas, and funding.

Positive changes are happening in our parks, some exciting new parks have been created, and effective community partnerships do exist. But these achievements have often been hard to realize. The City needs to experiment, try pilot projects, and say “yes” to the community more often. Some ideas will succeed; others will fail. But lessons will be learned from both successes and failures.

Toronto’s parks are fertile ground for fresh new thinking.

Recommendation 1 – Put the Community First.

The City needs to:

- Assign park maintenance staff to specific parks or small clusters of parks and post a park manager’s name and contact information in easy-to-find spots in the park. When staff are assigned to dozens of parks, they have no connection to the park and the community has no connection to park staff.
- Implement a practical approach to park liability issues. The City’s chief argument against community involvement and investment in parks is liability. Challenge City legal staff to work with the community and develop a reasonable solution.
- Assign a parks “animator” or “facilitator” to assist with and encourage the development of new “Friends of” parks groups and productive City/community relationships. Post signage in parks with contact information for the local park group and recognize good work by assigning a category for parks in the City’s Green Toronto Awards.
- Implement an Adopt-a-Park program to formalize collaborations with the community and allow volunteers and funders to assume shared responsibility for neighbourhood parks through a long-term agreement.
- Expand and improve the use of parks in the off-season. Stop automatically piling up picnic tables in September and keeping them there until after Victoria Day. Use cafés and food stands to draw the public into parks in the winter and ensure pathways in parks are cleared of snow and ice.

Recommendation 2 – Move from a Culture of No to a Culture of Yes.

The City needs to:

- Experiment and embrace differences in parks through new pilot projects – “different is better than perfect.”
- Stop insisting on the need for a citywide policy before allowing new activities in parks. Say yes to pizza and bake ovens, barbeques, and other new ideas.
- Overhaul the permit system, reduce the number of activities that require permits, and make the process for obtaining permits more user-friendly.
- Use park “animators” to reach out to new immigrant communities and ensure that the City is meeting their park needs and that they can take advantage of Toronto’s great parks. Hire for diversity, especially in parks staff engaging in community outreach.

Recommendation 3 – Capitalize on Creative Funding Ideas.

The City needs to:

- Review the no-naming policy for corporate donations to parks and consider selling naming rights for park facilities. Other cities have dealt with these issues; so can Toronto. Protection for the public interest can be put in place.
- Allow the establishment of park conservancies and Park Improvement Areas to facilitate individual and corporate funding for local parks.
- Reform the way in which Section 37 development funding is handled and ensure that the flow of funds into this program and the use of these funds are done in a transparent and accountable manner.

Recommendation 4 – Use Food as a Tool to Engage People in Parks.

The City needs to:

- Use the development of the Toronto Food Strategy to enhance the role of food in parks.
- Install more barbeques, benches, and picnic tables and relax permit requirements for picnics.
- Create more community gardens and open up more gardening opportunities in parks and hydro corridors. Expand outreach to community garden groups.
- Stop fighting the creation of new pizza and bake ovens in parks.
- Encourage more farmers' markets in parks, particularly in less affluent neighbourhoods and "food deserts."
- Allow more cafés, bars, and food stands in parks.
- Use space in large parks like Downsview Park and Rouge Park to create farming opportunities for young farmers and new Canadians.

Recommendation 5 – Develop a Citywide Voice for Parks.

Torontonians need to:

- Form a citywide parks advocacy group modelled on groups in New York, San Francisco, and elsewhere. Such a group could drive a progressive agenda on city parks, help make connections between local community park groups, and ensure a strong voice for parks in Toronto.

Introduction – Parks and the City

“You can neither lie to a neighbourhood park, nor reason with it.”

- Jane Jacobs (The Death and Life of Great American Cities)

“I would argue that we do not need just the great public wildernesses, but millions of small private or semiprivate ones. Every farm should have one; wildernesses can occupy corners of factory grounds and city lots – places where nature is given a free hand where no human work is done, where people go only as guests. These places function, I think, whether we intend them to or not, as sacred groves – places we respect and leave alone, not because we understand what goes on there, but because we do not.”

- Wendell Berry (Home Economics)

I’ve never figured out if I’m a country person who loves the city or a city person who loves the country. I crave wilderness and beautiful natural spaces, but I prefer the dynamic excitement and diversity of the city as a place to live.

Maybe that is why I’ve always loved city parks. City parks are a refuge, allowing people to cope with some of the frustrations of city life. Parks are also public spaces where people engage with their community and help overcome the isolation of life in the city.

I love visiting parks – both in my own city and when I travel. Parks are often some of the most inspiring and exciting public spaces in any city. Great cities have great parks.

Toronto has wonderful parks, from the white pine forests of Rouge Park to the gathering place of Nathan Phillips Square, from its hidden ravines to the beaches and the islands. One of the main reasons I live in Riverdale is its proximity to Riverdale Park. The park is our backyard, a place we meet and engage with neighbours, and our retreat.

But as with many elements of Toronto, there is a general feeling that our parks are not as good as they could be. We’ve taken our parks for granted, neglected the need for improvements, and they’re now languishing.

Nevertheless, I think we are on the verge of an exciting time for parks in the city – a parks renaissance. Not only will this renaissance give us better parks, it will also lead to a more engaged civil society in the city.

There are three good reasons to improve Toronto’s parks now:

1. As Toronto intensifies, people are demanding more and better parks. The city has added 600,000 people since 1971 and is planning on adding an additional half a million by 2031. More people are now living in densely situated apartments and condominiums and depend on parks

for recreation and fresh air. For many Torontonians, a country retreat from the city is unaffordable or the long drive to cottage country is unmanageable.

2. There is a growing recognition that government does not have the resources to solve the challenge by itself. Furthermore, building on the legacy of citizen activism from people such as David Pecaut, there is a growing recognition that not only is government incapable of solving all challenges by itself, but that solutions driven and delivered by the community can often be more timely and effective. There is a growing attitude of “How can I help make our local park better?” instead of “How can I pressure my government to make our local park better?”
3. Part of the urban renaissance throughout North America is a growing interest in parks and an understanding of their importance. There is increasing pressure for Toronto to draw on some of the creative ideas being used elsewhere to improve parks.

A campaign to improve and rethink Toronto’s parks is also an opportunity to revitalize and strengthen Canada’s environmental movement. In many ways, the environmental movement has been too focused on preserving nature and has become disengaged from people’s everyday lives. As *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote, the “environmental movement has focused so much on preserving nature that it has neglected to do enough to preserve a constituency for nature.”¹

Canadian environmental groups and their traditional, older supporters, tend to see parks as natural and environmental places first. Urban park expert Peter Harnick writes, “Parks, ultimately, are an interplay – a conversation if you will – about the relationship between people and nature.”² Canadian environmental groups have forgotten the human element of parks, to the detriment of their cause.

For example, in 2007 Environmental Defence issued the report, *For the Greener Good*, on opportunities for achieving sustainable communities in the Greater Golden Horseshoe. The section on urban parks talks only about the ecological benefits of urban parks and fails to mention the social, economic, and health benefits to people and communities.³

By contrast, “The Trust for Public Land [in the United States] conserves land for *people* to enjoy as parks, gardens, and other natural places, ensuring livable communities for generations to come [emphasis added].” The head of San Francisco’s Neighbourhood Parks Council, Meredith Thomas, told me that in her

¹ Nicholas Kristof, “How to Lick a Slug,” *New York Times*, August 2, 2009.

² Peter Harnick, *Urban Green: Innovative Parks and Resurgent Cities* (Island Press, 2010), page 8.

³ Environmental Defence, *For the Greener Good*, 2007, page 44-45.

opinion, city parks advocacy is closer to advocacy work for libraries, schools, and hospitals than advocacy for environmental and wilderness issues.

Parks in urban and rural areas have many elements in common – public ownership, public management goals, support for greenery and wildlife. But urban and rural parks are fundamentally different. This difference is not just a matter of size and scale; after all, Toronto’s 12,000-acre Rouge Park is larger than national parks such as Bruce Peninsula or Point Pelee. The key difference is that urban parks must first and foremost consider *people*. Urban parks are people parks.

A campaign for parks can help restore the connection between protecting the environment and a holistic sense of community and place. We need to get rid of the silos between “social justice” groups, “environment” groups, and “health” groups and link the efforts of these organizations. Parks can allow us to focus on place, community, and the true local “environment” and improve all three at once. As UK GreenFutures head Jonathon Porritt points out, environmentalists are missing something when they ignore a sense of place as an integral aspect of fighting for environmental progress. “Most people think the environment is everything that happens outside of our lives. Yet this is a huge philosophical error, creating a false divide between us and the physical world. We need to...acknowledge that the environment is rooted in our sense of place: our homes, our streets, our neighbourhoods, our communities.”⁴

This paper will examine challenges and opportunities for enhancing and expanding parks in Toronto. It is not intended to be an exhaustive account of the history, management, design and operation of the city’s parks. Nor will I attempt to identify every issue facing the city’s parks and offer a solution. I want to focus on the key challenges facing Toronto’s parks, identify potential opportunities for improving parks, and present a short list of recommendations on what I see as the best opportunities for positive change. I hope that this overview paper will stimulate further discussion to flesh out the ideas raised here.

Thinking about city parks goes beyond just what’s good for the environment. It’s an opportunity to rethink our cities and the place of citizens in the city – a microcosm for urban renewal and engagement.

“Parks” and “the City”

For this paper, I consider “parks” to be all publicly owned natural areas (forests, ravines, etc.), as well as playgrounds, playing fields, skateboarding parks, beaches, bike trails, river walks, cemeteries, hydro corridors, paved public squares, parkettes, and community gardens. These include parks owned by all levels of government (city, provincial, federal) or government agencies (e.g.,

⁴ Jay Walljasper, *The Great Neighbourhood Book* (New Society Publishers, 2007) page 113.

Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, Parc Downsview Park, Ontario Realty Corporation).

Throughout the paper, I use the term “The City” to refer generically to the staff and elected representatives of the City of Toronto. Where warranted, I refer specifically to either the civil servants in the Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division (PF&R), staff in the Parks Branch (Parks), or elected councillors and the Mayor (City Hall).

The Benefits of Preserving and Enhancing Toronto's Open Spaces

In many ways, the benefits of great city parks are so numerous and self-evident that Toronto and most other cities take parks for granted. It has been only in recent decades, as cities have struggled to maintain parks, that significant research has been undertaken to quantify the benefits of parks.

This research shows that investment in and care of city parks can have many positive returns. An added advantage is that so many of these benefits are interconnected – a win for local business is also a win for public health, a win for social justice, and a win for nature. When I worked for the government, we called these opportunities “sweet spots” – where one action or investment provides returns in many different sectors.

- **Stronger communities:** Great public parks can be focal points for bringing communities together. One of the people I interviewed called Toronto's parks “our city's connectors.”
- **Welcoming newcomers:** More than half of Toronto's residents were not born in Canada and this figure continues to increase. Cultivating and facilitating a connection to local parks can facilitate a connection to community and the environment for newcomers.
- **Attracting the best and brightest:** Access to good parks is an important quality-of-life consideration when businesses or individuals are deciding whether to locate in a region.
- **Children's play:** There is a growing understanding that play is not just fun for kids, but is also critically important to raising children who are physically, emotionally, and mentally healthy. Parks help fight “nature deficit disorder” in our children and ensure that kids do not lose their connections to nature.⁵
- **Healthier communities:** People who live in neighbourhoods that include parks and support physical activity have been found to have lower rates of obesity and diabetes, with implications for health care costs. The Toronto Community Foundation's 2009 *Vital Signs* report found that 7 of the 10 Toronto neighbourhoods with the highest rates of diabetes lacked access to parks, schoolyards, and recreation centres. All 10 of the neighbourhoods were low-income neighbourhoods. A 2009 study published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* found that people who

⁵ Erica Gies, “Playing It Smart,” *Land and People Magazine*, Winter 2008, pages 23-31.

live in neighbourhoods that support physical activity were 38% less likely to get diabetes.

- Transportation alternatives: Greenways and trails such as the Martin Goodman Trail and the Don and Humber bike trails not only promote physical activity, but also offer clean transportation options.
- Food security: Community gardens and farms give access to healthy local food and economic opportunity for lower-income people to supplement their diets or to grow food for sale.
- Property values: Successful parks increase the value of nearby residential and commercial properties. This increased value in land prices is passed on to the city in the form of higher property tax revenues. For example, New York City estimates that the new High Line Park has already spurred over \$1.5 billion in new construction investment in the area of the park with an additional \$2.5 billion expected in the coming decade. Proximity to the High Line has added 10 to 15% to the value of nearby properties.⁶ A 2007 study by the New York University Furman Centre for Real Estate and Urban Policy also found that community gardens in New York's poorest neighbourhoods had lifted property values by more than 9% over five years.⁷ Conversely, declining parks can pull property values and municipal property tax revenues down.
- Economic development: New businesses (restaurants, cafés, retail) are attracted to popular parks.
- Tourism: Great parks can be major tourist attractions. For example, Harbourfront claims that it is one of Toronto's top attractions, with 12 million visits a year.
- Reducing and adapting to climate change effects: - More parks and the expansion of tree cover will reduce urban "heat island" effects, absorb carbon emissions, and reduce water runoff and the risk of flooding in the Don, Humber, and Rouge river systems.
- Clean air: Toronto's parks are home to much of Toronto's urban forest. Trees and other vegetation improve air quality by absorbing pollutants and producing oxygen.
- Clean water: Greenspaces such as wetlands can play a cost-effective role in preventing contaminants and toxins from reaching Lake Ontario, the source of Toronto's drinking water.

⁶ Amy Cortes, "Taking a Stroll Along the High Line" *New York Times*, November 20, 2008.

⁷ Harnick, page 86.

- Nature and wildlife: Parks such as Rouge Park and Tommy Thompson Park support hundreds of species. Parks can also help facilitate the movement of wildlife through natural corridors.
- Great cities need places of respite, inspiration, beauty, and wonder.

Why It's a Critical Time to Ensure Great Parks in Toronto

The authors of the 1994 plan for managing Rouge Park argued that with 4.5 million residents in the GTA and 6.5 million expected by 2029, preserving this important natural area would be critically important for the region. In fact, the population of the GTA surpassed 6.5 million in 2006. The population of the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) is expected to be 11 million by 2031.⁸

The City of Toronto's Official Plan and the Province of Ontario's plan for managing growth in the GGH have Toronto accommodating an additional half a million residents and half a million new jobs by 2031, accounting for almost 14% of the GGH's expected growth in that period.

With about 125,000 new people moving to the GGH each year, Southern Ontario needs a significant number of those people to move to Toronto. Otherwise, further unsustainable sprawl is inevitable. But to accommodate that growth and to continue to attract new people, Toronto's infrastructure must keep up. And that includes more and better parks.

Additionally, Toronto's immigrant and visible minority populations continue to climb; 47% of Toronto's population in the 2006 census reported themselves as part of a minority. More and better parks that appeal to new Canadians are going to be important opportunities to ensure continued social cohesion in the city.

Canadians Care About Their Parks

In the 2009 survey of quality of life concerns by the Community Foundations of Canada, *Vital Signs*, Canadians ranked public greenspaces as the most important factor contributing to their quality of life (64%). Parks were ranked more important than local services, community engagement, employment opportunities, or the arts.

⁸ Ontario Growth Secretariat, *Growth Forecast Review*, February 2, 2010.

In terms of overall environmental issues, in general Canadians are more concerned about clean air and water than with conserving wilderness. There is strong support, however, for protecting greenspaces closer to home. For example, a 2009 survey of GGH residents showed 93% supported the Greenbelt.⁹

The State of Toronto Parks

The Hard Numbers

Toronto's PF&R Division manages:¹⁰

- 80 sq km (19,500 acres) of parkland and natural spaces (42% of city's public parks are natural habitats)
- 1,504 parks¹¹
- 225 km of trails
- 136 community centres
- 281 indoor and outdoor pools
- 833 playgrounds
- 4 stadiums
- 8 greenhouses and 3 conservatories
- 147 allotment and community gardens
- 121 indoor arenas and outdoor skating rinks
- 2 ski hills
- 839 sports fields
- 756 tennis courts
- 100 acres of horticultural displays
- 11 swimming beaches
- 5 golf courses
- 2.5 million trees on public parkland
- 1 campground
- \$6 billion in assets¹²

Overall, 18.1% of the surface of the City of Toronto is occupied by natural spaces and parks; this compares to 27.4% occupied by roads and highways.¹³

⁹ Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, *Measuring the Possibilities*, 2009.

¹⁰ Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division, *Report to Council*, January 29, 2010.

¹¹ City of Toronto, 2010 Budget Document, Analyst Briefing Notes (Revised) Budget Committee, February 16, 2010.

¹² Toronto Parks and Recreation, *Our Common Grounds*, 2004.

¹³ Community Foundations of Canada, *2009 Vital Signs Report*, and *Spacing Magazine*, Winter 2009.

Toronto's total park space numbers compare favourably to other North American cities. The following numbers are acres of parkland per 1,000 residents:¹⁴

Toronto – 7.88
Ottawa – 19.76
Montreal – 2.96
Chicago – 4.2
New York – 4.6
Boston – 8.3
San Francisco – 7.0

Not surprisingly, the largest amount of parkland is in the ravine systems in the eastern and western portions of the city, whereas park space is more limited in the older, denser parts of the city. A 2006 city report showed the following breakdown of acres of parkland per 1,000 residents:¹⁵

Scarborough – 11.81
Etobicoke – 10.13
East York – 7.56
North York – 7.43
York – 4.67
Toronto – 4.54

Although residents in eastern and western Toronto are well served in terms of park *space*, the question is: “Are they the right *kinds* of parks to serve the needs of these communities?” Many neighbourhoods in these areas are low-income and have very high immigrant populations for whom large ravine parks are not ideal places to meet their needs for recreation or relaxation.

Who Does What

Parks in Toronto are designed and maintained by Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division (PF&R). Parks is just one of the seven branches in the Division. Other branches play a major role in parks (e.g., community engagement, park development and design). PF&R Division is responsible for the development and delivery of:

- Recreation programs
- Facility planning, design, management, and maintenance
- Community development, parks, horticulture, and forestry programs
- Park and open space planning and environmental initiatives
- Operation of specialized services, including ferries, golf courses, and waterfront and regional parks systems.

¹⁴ Canadian numbers are from *Our Common Grounds*, page 13. U.S. numbers are from Trust for Public Land, *2009 Park Facts*, page 11.

¹⁵ Jim Byers, “Parks renaissance pushed for Toronto,” *Toronto Star*, May 9, 2007.

About 1,800 people work for PF&R on a full-time basis, and another 9,000 are part-time staff. Staffing numbers increase with summer part-time employment and decrease in the winter. Of full-time staff, about a quarter are dedicated to park and garden maintenance and operations, with another quarter focused on park development and infrastructure maintenance.¹⁶

Many of Toronto's parks and natural spaces are owned by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), with the majority of these lands in Toronto's ravine system and along its waterways. These lands are primarily managed by PF&R through a management agreement. TRCA also owns the 5,000 acres of Rouge Park located in Toronto, and PF&R assists TRCA and the Rouge Park Alliance in operating the park.

Tommy Thompson Park on the Leslie Street Spit and Black Creek Pioneer Village are owned and managed exclusively by TRCA. Additional agencies operating public parks in Toronto include Parc Downsview Park, Rouge Park, and Harbourfront Centre.

Who Pays for What

PF&R's 2010 budget is \$360 million for operating costs and \$117 million for capital improvements. On the operating side, Parks account for \$126 million, Recreation \$162 million, and Forestry \$41 million. The Division offsets its budget by generating about \$100 million in revenues from fees.¹⁷

The Division's budget has grown by an average of \$10 million annually or 3%-4% (not including fees) since 2003. The 2010 budget represents another 4% increase over the previous year.¹⁸

In addition to the spending by government agencies (TRCA, Waterfront Toronto, Parc Downsview Park, Rouge Park, etc.) on parks, the City's capital budget for the development of new parks or improvements to existing parks is supplemented in a number of ways.

For example, all new development in the city is supposed to include some new park space. The major new CityPlace development in the railway lands contains the new 10-acre park Canoe Landing, which was built by the developer. The city has taken ownership of the park and will maintain it.¹⁹

For the vast majority of new development, however, inclusion of new park space is not practical. In those cases, the developer provides 5% of the site's market value as assessed by the city (2% for commercial properties) cash in lieu of parkland to the City. These levies are allocated to the City's Parkland

¹⁶ Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, *2007 Annual Report*, page 28.

¹⁷ City of Toronto, 2010 Budget Document, Analyst Briefing Notes (Revised) Budget Committee, February 16, 2010.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, and Vital Signs 2009.

¹⁹ Unfortunately, the developer finished the park in fall 2009, but it took until May 2010 for the city and the developer to work out liability issues before the city took ownership of the park.

Acquisition Reserve Fund (PARF) and are spent equally in four ways: 25% for acquisition of land for park purposes in the local district; 25% for park acquisition citywide; 25% for the development and upgrading of existing parks facilities in the local district; and 25% for park improvements citywide. Decisions on how these funds are spent are generally made as part of the city's budget-making process.

In addition to PARF, new development can also contribute to capital improvements of new or existing parks through Section 37 contributions under the *Planning Act*. Section 37 allows the City to authorize increases in permitted height or density in return for "community benefits." The City has negotiated park capital improvement contributions from developers through Section 37. These improvements are supposed to be used in the "local community" (generally meaning the same political ward) where the development is being built. Despite accusations that the negotiation process is not sufficiently open and accountable to the public, these funds have been used for excellent new parks and park improvements, such as new parks in the Railway Lands/CityPlace, Queen West Triangle, and Fort York communities. As part of the development of the new *Parks Plan* (see below), PF&R has been asked to prepare a discussion paper to examine the issue of dedicating a portion of Section 37 funds collected in active development neighbourhoods to fund park projects in low-income neighbourhoods.

There is also a Land Acquisition for Source Water Protection program that uses funds from Toronto Water to purchase lands to protect water sources for the city's drinking water supply. In 2009, \$6 million from the fund was used to purchase and protect 165 acres of land in five different parcels, including 68 acres beside Rouge Park.

In recent years, the City has begun to make efforts to encourage private contributions to new parks or capital improvements to parks, and has achieved some successes. But overall, and compared to efforts in other cities, these moves have been seen only as tentative small steps.

The City has established an Office of Partnerships, which attempts to arrange funding partnerships with the community and private sector, but has met with limited success to date. One high-profile attempt to raise private donations failed – the City attempted to find private donors to cover half of the \$40 million cost of the renewal of Nathan Phillips Square, but came up empty-handed.

PF&R has its own partnership development section, which connects with businesses and other funders to develop parks and recreation facilities. The City will permit recognition of partners through discreet placement of corporate logos on interpretive signs, but it does not give partners naming rights to a park and does not permit advertisements in parks.

A number of the people I talked with expressed their frustration with trying to work with the City on these funding projects. They often found it extremely difficult to deal with the City's multiple divisions and agencies. In one case, a potential donor eventually gave up on a proposed park improvement idea and took the associated funding elsewhere.

These frustrations were not universal. There have been a number of partnering success stories.

- The Toronto Music Garden was built primarily with donations from private individuals.
- TD Bank and others contributed \$1 million to improve the Franklin Children's Garden.
- Almost \$1 million has been raised through the community to build an accessible playground in Oriole Park.
- Toronto Community Foundation has assisted in directing funds to a few parks including Budd Sugarman Park.
- Local citizens and businesses raised \$100,000 to improve the playground at Glen Cedar Park.
- Maple Leaf Sports, Toronto Blue Jays, Home Depot, ING Direct, and others have contributed to improvements in playgrounds, ice rinks, and ball diamonds.
- More than 100 companies and institutions have donated funds to refurbish parks and public rights-of-way through the city's Clean and Beautiful program.

Almost all the donations mentioned above provide for capital costs only. The City has had little success to date establishing partnerships to cover ongoing operating costs. Partly this is because donors are more likely to fund new, higher-profile improvements than ongoing maintenance and operations. But the City has also made it difficult to negotiate such partnerships. For one thing, collective agreements with unionized park maintenance staff provide little flexibility for creative outside partnerships. For another, City policy stipulates that spaces maintained by non-City employees must be covered by separate, independent liability insurance. This insurance can be prohibitively expensive for small community groups. I will explore this liability issue further in the section on community engagement.

But some progress has been made on creative new partnerships for both the capital and ongoing funding of parks. Grange Park, which is owned by the Art Gallery of Ontario and maintained by the City, is planning a major capital renovation that will be funded by the AGO and overseen by an independent advisory committee that includes community members, City staff, AGO representatives, and the local councillor. This project aims also to negotiate an

alternative and enhanced maintenance regime for the park that would be funded by the AGO.

Another example is Dundas Square, which is a public property managed by an independent board that was established through a City bylaw. The revenue generated by events at Dundas Square is used to cover its maintenance budget and excess revenue is returned to City coffers. Both representatives of local businesses and the city councillor sit on the board.

Morale in Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division

Almost everyone I talked with agreed that the post-1997 city amalgamation period has been a very difficult time for the Division – and for parks in particular. The delivery of park and recreation services across Toronto was diffused among the six former municipalities and Metro Toronto. It was extremely challenging to merge these services and staff. A series of Division reorganizations since 1997 has also made matters more difficult.

A number of people commented to me that Metro Toronto Parks played a key role in driving a citywide vision for parks, especially regional parks. This was a legacy of long-time Metro Parks commissioner Tommy Thompson. With the end of Metro, this vision and leadership on parks was lost and never picked up by the new amalgamated Parks Division.

The budget cuts of the late 1990s and early 2000s appear to have hit parks hard. For example, staff cuts to the Division led to a 45%-50% reduction in summer service capacity.²⁰

The Division itself has recognized this hardship, stating in the 2004 strategic plan *Our Common Grounds*, “In sum, while amalgamation was difficult for every department of the City, for Parks and Recreation, whose basic mission had been inclusion of the whole river of humanity flowing into the city, it caused major upheaval.”²¹ Ward 20 Councillor Adam Vaughan maintains, “After 10 years of amalgamation, I don’t think any part of city infrastructure has suffered as much as the parks.”²²

New funding in recent years has helped stabilize morale in the Division, but many people that I talked with still see the Division as small and weak compared with other city Divisions.

And within the Division, Parks is seen as the weakest component. Recreation dominates Parks, while Forestry is viewed as a strong and independent branch. A number of factors were cited in Recreation’s dominance of Parks:

²⁰ *Our Common Grounds*, page 14.

²¹ *Ibid*, page 17.

²² John Barber, “Let local groups manage their own parks, without a tangle of bureaucracy” *Globe and Mail*, February 7, 2009.

- Over the years, the executive leadership in the amalgamated Division has not been interested in parks, other than for their potential for recreation and activity. There has been no champion for the other uses of parks.
- The focus in recent years has been to encourage greater physical activity in the city.
- Many people have backyards for kids to play and to escape as a refuge. Parks have been seen as places to play organized sports.
- Many of the statistics used by the Division are based on sports use. Success in the Division has been measured on sports and active recreation numbers, not on achieving the social goals of parks.

Community Engagement and the “Culture of No”

Torontonians enjoy visiting their parks, and made 8 million visits to parks and recreation facilities in 2009.²³ PF&R surveys indicate that half of Torontonians visit a park at least once a week and that almost 14% of people in the city visit a park every day.

PF&R tries to engage with these visitors and bring volunteers into the parks for parks stewardship. In 2007, 4,000 volunteers and more than 100 groups worked on tree plantings in city parks and 18,500 students participated in clean-up events at 111 parks. Another successful program is the City’s Community Stewardship Program, through which 90 volunteers help maintain 10 natural areas in parks.²⁴

On an individual park basis, however, the City generally has a poor reputation when it comes to working with “Friends of” and community groups seeking to engage and improve their local parks. While there are notable exceptions, the experience of many of these groups has been frustrating and unproductive. I heard many stories about the lack of response from City staff to proposals and obstacles being put in the way of potential projects.

The people I talked with cited various barriers to better community relations, starting with a lack of funding and staff resources. For example, the City has only one staff person for all of Toronto whose job it is to help establish community gardens. Although a productive relationship with a community group could eventually lead to new volunteer and funding support for a local park, this relationship usually involves significant dedication of staff time up front. If senior management does not make these relationships a priority, staff cannot find the time to make them a priority either.

²³ City of Toronto, 2010 Budget Document, Analyst Briefing Notes (Revised) Budget Committee, February 16, 2010, page 5.

²⁴ Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, *2007 Annual Report*.

Insurance also creates a barrier to community involvement. City legal staff insist that volunteer community groups take on insurance to cover liability for areas where they work. At the Alex Wilson Community Garden, a piece of land was donated to the city for a community garden and members of a community group agreed to volunteer their time to manage and maintain the garden. But the City insisted that the group obtain liability insurance for the space at a cost of \$1,000/year – a significant ongoing cost for a small community group.

It was also suggested that parks staff tend not to have the necessary skills for negotiating with community groups. One person said, “The comfortable place for parks staff is managing parks, not managing people.” They are trained to manage an asset; they are not hired for their ability to reach out to people. Furthermore, parks staff generally receive no direction from senior management nor do they have standard policies on how to work with community groups.

Some people view the rigid union structure and rules used by the city as limiting creativity and flexibility. The City does not assign specific park staff to specific parks. At the time of amalgamation, staffing was switched to a crew-based “flying squad” management structure whereby each crew would be assigned up to 50 or 60 parks to maintain. Given the schedule, crews may not show up at a park for weeks. Only a small handful of parks have dedicated staff, including the Music Garden, Christie Pits, High Park, and Kew Gardens.

At the same time, the problem is not all on the City’s side. The “community” may not speak with one voice, and the City can be pressured to implement opposing visions for a local park. In addition, community groups may have little understanding of the complexities behind government decision-making and get frustrated with a lack of quick progress. An organization claiming to represent the “community” may not be representative of the broader neighbourhood and may be advocating ideas that may not be in the wider public interest. As one person with the City said, the frustration with unproductive relationships between “Friends of” groups and the City “is a two-way street” – City staff often want to see progress, but dealing with community groups can sometimes be difficult.

Problems with engaging the community in parks are not unique to Toronto. Fred Kent, the President of the Project for Public Spaces, has said, “The biggest challenge all over the world is that every developer, every profession, and every government is afraid of civic engagement. The reason is that they have their own agenda, and they have to impose those agendas on the community.”²⁵

The City has recognized this obstacle and is working on an overall policy framework to “give some policy underpinnings to resident-city partnerships.” As

²⁵ Barbara Palmer, “The Place Doctor,” *Project for Public Spaces website*, November 2008.

part of this work, the City is “doing some research on other cities that are ahead of us on public space management.”²⁶

In addition to these challenges dealing with community groups, the PF&R also has a poor reputation for dealing with the general public. Some of this results from a frustration with a lack of easy to find information on park amenities or how to access park staff.²⁷

A major source of anger is around the process for obtaining permits to organize activities in parks. For many Torontonians, the permitting process is their main interaction with park staff, and it is generally not a pleasant experience.

The City requires permits for any activity with more than 25 people (such as hikes, sports events, and group picnics). This includes events run by volunteers. Permits cost \$60. Activities with more than 200 people require special-event permits requiring a minimum of six weeks’ notice. Proper insurance is also required for many activities. In 2004, the City issued 27,000 permits. PF&R recently improved their website to include some downloadable forms and more information but the site is still very confusing. The permit system still relies on visiting a permit office or calling a phone number between 8:30 and 4:00.

Jane Farrow, Executive Director of Jane’s Walk, said that the permitting process is very difficult for the average person to understand.²⁸ Furthermore, many community groups see the City’s permitting rules as a means to dissuade community interaction in parks.

At a recent public meeting in Dufferin Grove Park, City staff heard many complaints about “the unintended effects of one-size-fits-all permit policies. The associated paperwork and fees shut down small-scale events set up by neighbours.” One member of the public asked, “Can such small local initiatives be seen as *partnerships* instead of *permits*? Would that word-change allow the program staff to support the gifts of local park users rather than charging them a permit fee for their contributions?”²⁹

Permits represent an ongoing source of tension between the public and parks staff. For example, in October 2009, a group of seniors walking in Humber Bay Park was confronted by a by-law officer because they did not have a permit.³⁰

In February 2010, PF&R staff told the planners of long-standing winter skating events at Dufferin Grove Park, Wallace Emerson rink, and other rinks that permits would now be required for skating parties. One organizer said, “When you add fees to volunteer events, you effectively end them. Why would you discourage things that cost the city nothing and bring so much to the

²⁶ Andrew Cash, “Trouble in the Grove,” *NOW Magazine*, March 3, 2010.

²⁷ Ryerson Parks and Recreation Consultants (rPacrc), *Park Uses and Features* (2010), page 1.

²⁸ Sue-Ann Levy, “Toronto parks over ruled,” *Toronto Sun*, March 14, 2010.

²⁹ Dufferin Grove Park, *Newsletter*, May 2010.

³⁰ Emily Mathieu, “Mayor urges flexibility in seniors park spat,” *Toronto Star*, (October 14, 2009).

community and facilities that are underused? We do this for the love of our community.”³¹

Organizers of a Friday-evening pizza night at Christie Pits were told in February 2010 that the event would now require a permit every Friday and that city staff would have to be brought in and paid to operate the pizza oven.³²

As Farrow points out, all of this “rule-driven” focus contributes to a perception by many that City staff members consider parks to be their own “private property.”³³ Others describe the Division’s attitude as a “Culture of No” or as Luigi Ferrara of George Brown’s Institute Without Borders puts it, “It’s a culture where nothing really happens” that “chokes” community activity.³⁴

The same factors that contribute to the City’s inability to effectively engage with community groups also lead to these problems with the general public: lack of staffing and resources, no dedicated staff located in parks, rigid labour rules, and a lack of clear policies and direction. What it all means is that, as one person told me, “the easiest answer is no.”

This “Culture of No” is holding back progress on better parks in Toronto and a more engaged community. A member of the Thorncliffe Park Women’s Committee summarized the frustrations of community groups across the city: “We don’t necessarily need the City’s money and staff: we just need *permission*.”³⁵

The State of the Parks

Following amalgamation and cuts to PF&R budget and staff in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many stories about garbage in parks and unmaintained gardens and lawns appeared in the media. Today, the consensus is that general upkeep has improved in recent years. An ongoing issue, however, is the lack of dedicated park maintenance staff attached to a specific park.

The “SWAT” team approach to park maintenance means that staff can be absent from particular parks for lengthy periods between clean ups. When incidents or problems happen, there are no dedicated staff members on site to respond promptly. And the “one-schedule-fits-all-parks” approach leads to situations in which garbage cans and picnic tables are removed or returned to parks on a standard annual schedule that ignore actual local park conditions and needs. This has left parks devoid of picnic tables, garbage cans, and amenities during warm early spring or late fall weekends.

Another challenge has been created by successful efforts over the last 20 years to naturalize parts of many parks and ravines. These efforts have been

³¹ Catherine Porter, “City crackdown hits park pizza nights,” *Toronto Star*, February 25, 2010.

³² Ibid.

³³ Sue Ann Levy.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Andrew Cash.

worthwhile because of the benefits for the urban tree canopy, wildlife, and wetlands rehabilitation. But there are now concerns that the City encouraged naturalization because it hoped to eliminate ongoing maintenance costs (e.g., lawn mowing, garbage clean-up). These sites still require ongoing maintenance and some park users are concerned that where the City is concerned, “naturalized” means “forgotten.”

In October 2008, Toronto’s Auditor General determined that the Parks, Forestry and Recreation Department faced a \$233 million backlog in maintenance and repairs. This amount was expected to grow to \$600 million by 2018. The auditor found most pools in “fair” to “poor” condition. Arenas are deteriorating. One-quarter of the city’s facilities are more than 40 years old. In 2009, the Auditor asked the Department to compile a list of facilities that are no longer cost-effective and develop alternative plans for programs in facilities where closure is recommended.³⁶

According to the 2009 *Vital Signs* report, in 2008, Toronto’s beaches were open just 68% of the time, down from 85% in 2007. At the same time, the number of Toronto’s eleven beaches obtaining Blue Flag status – beaches that consistently meet international standards for environmental quality – has increased from four in 2005 to seven in 2010.

Reaching Out to New Canadians

More than half of Toronto’s residents were not born in Canada. For new Canadians, access to a good-quality park can be very important. Many live in apartments, some of them overcrowded. A study in New York found that immigrants are three times more likely to live in overcrowded conditions than those born in the United States.³⁷ This makes parks both potential living rooms and backyards for immigrants.

Furthermore, studies have shown that although immigrants usually arrive in Toronto in good health, a combination of stress, inadequate diet, and inactivity translates into worsening health for new Canadians.³⁸ Toronto Public Health found that isolation and a lack of integration contribute to a 50% higher rate of inactivity for immigrants.³⁹ Senior immigrants, especially women, do not travel far from their homes and immediate neighbourhoods.

My interviews revealed that many believe that PF&R is trying to reach out to new Canadians. Local park groups are also actively trying to engage with them.

³⁶ “Maintenance backlog may doom city’s parks, pools: Auditor-General,” *National Post*, October 15, 2009.

³⁷ “Confronting the Housing Squeeze: Challenges Facing Immigrant Tenants and What New York Can Do” Pratt Institute, Fall 2008.

³⁸ *Vital Signs* 2009.

³⁹ Sheela Basrur, “Physical Activity and Public Health: A Call to Action,” Medical Officer of Health, City of Toronto Staff Report, 2003, page 14.

But in many parks, day-to-day use is still dominated by well-established communities, even though significant numbers of new immigrants live near the park.

Obtaining permits is especially challenging for immigrants. Not only must they deal with the hurdles that other groups encounter, but navigating the bureaucracy is even more frustrating for those facing language barriers.

Studies have shown that many immigrants want to enjoy parks in large groups in which they cook food, eat picnics, and socialize. This forces many groups to obtain permits for their favourite park activities. Furthermore, barbeques are permitted in only a few Toronto parks.⁴⁰

It would be wrong to overgeneralize or stereotype the park use preferences of Toronto's diverse ethnocultural communities. There is a wide range of attitudes about what should and should not happen in parks. Toronto's diversity means that not everyone will agree on the best use of space. This is one of the most significant park management challenges facing Toronto.

⁴⁰ SETHA LOW, DANA TAPLIN and SUZANNE SCHELD, *Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity*, University of Texas Press, 2005. MELISSA MITCHELL, "Researchers suggest parks should adapt to better serve Latino trail users" University of Illinois, News Bureau, February 4, 2008.

The City's Strategic Planning for Parks

In 2004, Toronto City Council approved Toronto Parks and Recreation's 15-year strategic plan, *Our Common Grounds*. The plan focused on three goals: Environmental Stewardship, Child and Youth Social and Physical Development, and Lifelong Physical Activity. The plan provided 53 recommendations to guide the Division's planning and set out targets to assist in measuring progress.

The major focus of the plan was on promoting physical activity. The authors were trying to address a concern that Toronto Public Health had raised about general physical inactivity, especially among poorer and new immigrant communities. The plan is generally thorough and well thought out.

Our Common Grounds identified a need for "reinventing our parks." "Our Plan calls for creating them anew, while promoting the maintenance of our parks as a shared responsibility. We will advocate that all residents are keepers of our common grounds, and use the restoration and creation of parks as another way to engage youth."⁴¹ But not one of the 12 recommendations for parks mentioned including the community in a "shared" role in parks. Everything was to be under the sole authority and responsibility of the City.

A key recommendation was the development of a Parks Master Plan to guide "the renaissance of our parks."⁴² The City followed up on that recommendation in 2006 with the initiation of a *Toronto Parks Renaissance Strategy*. The goal of the strategy was to formulate a "reinvestment program that will align the City's parks, trails and physical assets with the social, economic and cultural needs of residents." It was to be a "bridge between the vision of *Our Common Grounds* and the realization of this vision through ongoing support and investment in the parks and trails network." Work was to be completed by "early 2007."⁴³

A consultant was hired and public consultations were held. The consultant, Pino Di Mascio from Urban Strategies, said that his key findings were "there are issues with maintenance and lack of repairs, but we also need new parks for new neighbourhoods." Furthermore "there's no stable or predictable funding base" for the city's parks. He also said that the city had good playgrounds for young children, but teens needed different facilities, such as skateboard parks and basketball courts.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *Our Common Ground*, page 13.

⁴² *Ibid*, page 13.

⁴³ Brenda Librecz, General Manager, City of Toronto Staff Report, April 18, 2006.

⁴⁴ Byers.

It appears that little happened after the consultant filed his report. As of June 2010, PF&R's website still said it is "currently working" on the Renaissance Strategy.

Instead, in early 2010 City Council gave the Division approval to develop a new *Parks Plan*. The Plan will "guide decision-making in the acquisition, development, management and operation of the system of public parkland."⁴⁵ The research, consultations, and initial findings from the *Toronto Parks Renaissance Strategy* effort are to be "used as the basis for the development" of the new *Parks Plan*.

A draft *Parks Plan* has been prepared that outlines a potential seven-category classification system for Toronto's parks and trails, from biggest to smallest. The draft Plan also sets out some key principles to guide decision-making: equitable access for all citizens, the preservation of nature in the city, support for a diversity of uses, community engagement and partnerships, and environmental goals and practices.

This new *Parks Plan* is supposed to be presented to Council in 2011. Many people I talked with expressed their frustration with the lack of results from the *Parks Renaissance* process. Many are now sceptical of the *Parks Plan* process.

⁴⁵ Brenda Patterson, "Development of a city-wide parks plan," Staff Report, City of Toronto, January 20, 2010, page 1.

Current Efforts to Expand and Improve Major Parks

A number of specific initiatives are under way that could make major additions to Toronto's parks space in the coming years.

Downsview Park: In the new plan for this 570-acre space, half the lands will be converted to park and recreational space, with the rest being allocated for residential and commercial development. This compares with the original plan from 10 years ago, in which almost all of the lands were to be turned into park space. The upside is that work is now actually under way to make park improvements and to open these up to the public, whereas little was done in the previous 10 years to bring the original plan to fruition.

Rouge Park: Almost half (5,000 acres) of Rouge Park is located in Toronto, accounting for 25% of Toronto's green space. The multi-stakeholder board that manages the park is working to have the federal government declare the park a national park and expand the park by one-third by adding 5,000 of federally owned lands in Markham.

Toronto Waterfront: A number of excellent new parks are under construction by Lake Ontario. The 18-acre Don River Park should be complete in the next few years and will be a cornerstone of the new West Donlands community. The 2.5-acre Underpass Park in the West Donlands should be complete in 2011. It is an innovative use of "orphaned" lands under the Eastern Avenue underpass. The 923-acre Lake Ontario Park is still mostly on the drawing board, but it has potential to improve many kilometres of the waterfront.

Toronto RailPath: Work has stalled on completing the final two kilometres of the West Toronto RailPath, pending the outcome of decisions on the railway corridor in the west end of the city. But once complete, the new trail will be a major new greenway supporting active transportation.

Gardens: The City's Clean and Beautiful City program has been turning unused city-owned spaces into gardens. One very successful example is a former parking lot behind City Hall that was turned into a garden.

Efforts by Public Groups to Expand and Enhance Parks in Toronto

The focus of community efforts in Toronto has been on local park improvements. There has been little advocacy on a citywide basis and little involvement by regional, provincial, or national groups in setting Toronto-wide parks agenda. This also appears to be the pattern for other cities in Canada. In the United States, however, many cities have citywide parks groups and regional and national organizations help to set the agenda for urban parks.

It is difficult to determine the reason for this Canadian-American difference. Park improvements in every city are usually the outcome of local groups supporting their local parks. Every park is a unique local park and the people who have a direct connection to that park are the ones who will be motivated to get involved and make a difference in that park. In general, Torontonians and Canadians have taken their parks and their cities for granted. The expectation has been that government will take care of parks. Another factor is that there is a greater philanthropic tradition of supporting public institutions such as parks in American cities.

Local Community Parks Groups

Toronto is fortunate to have a number of strong community park organizations that have been transforming their parks and neighbourhoods into vital, active spaces. These “Friends of” groups volunteer their efforts to improve the operation of the park. These groups are often formed when a crisis engages the community (e.g., a proposed new development, proposed changes to park uses or park design), and later their leadership decides to maintain an ongoing organization once the crisis is resolved.

These groups are structured in different ways. Generally the organization of the group fits the unique needs of the park and the community. Toronto has several significant local parks groups:

- One of the leaders has been Friends of Dufferin Grove Park. The group was formed in 1992 and has spearheaded a revitalization of the park and the neighbourhood.
- The High Park Community Advisory Council has been guiding the park since 1995. It includes a separate foundation for fundraising purposes – High Park Initiatives.

- The Grange Park Advisory Committee has unique powers. Because the land is owned by the Art Gallery of Ontario, the committee (with the AGO's support) has the power to advise on the restoration and revitalization of Grange Park and on an oversight structure for the ongoing maintenance and programming for Grange Park. This also includes a role in reviewing permitted activities in the park.
- Friends of Clarence Square have paid planning consultants and volunteered their time to assist in developing a new plan for the park. The group has been negotiating with the city on how to implement and fund the plan.
- Groups have been formed to enhance many parks, including Christie Pits, Earlscourt Park, Greenwood Park, R.V. Burgess Park, Sorauren Park, Symington Park, Tommy Thompson Park, Trinity-Bellwoods, Vermont Square Park, Withrow Park and many others.
- Some organizations target their efforts on supporting specific facilities in City parks, such as the Friends of Riverdale Farm, or supporting specific activities such as the Don Valley Trail Users Club for mountain bikers.
- Broader-based environmental advocacy organizations advocate, volunteer, and fundraise for broader areas of the city. These groups include Task Force to Bring Back the Don, Friends of the Don East, and Friends of the Rouge Watershed.
- The Toronto Botanical Garden is unique – a completely independent non-profit group operates the gardens.

Citywide Parks Advocacy

Local parks groups share information and best practices, and support and mentor each other. There are many stories of new groups relying on the assistance and support of existing groups to get them started. For example, the Friends of Dufferin Grove Park provided support to a new group in R.V. Burgess Park in Thorncliffe Park. But this interaction happens in a very ad hoc manner, since local parks groups often do not have the time or capacity to assist other groups.

The Friends of Dufferin Grove Park set up a branch of its organization to focus on citywide parks and public space issues. Called the Centre for Local Research into Public Space (CELOS), the small group has had a particular focus on research and outreach. It has been a challenge for the group to overcome a shortage of resources.

Toronto's major environmental group, the Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA), does not include work on parks in its mandate. Its efforts "to promote a greener Toronto" include campaigns on "Smog and Climate Change, Public

Transit, Toxics and Urban Pesticides, Waste Reduction and Greenbelting Toronto.” Its work on “Greenbelting” focused on adding the Don and Humber valley lands to the Greenbelt. Aside from the Greenbelt campaign, since its inception in 1988, TEA has considered parks outside of its core mandate.

Certain organizations work for specific types of improvements that affect parks on a citywide basis, but these have a particular focus and do not include general park management and funding issues. For example, Local Enhancement and Appreciation of Forests (LEAF) advocates for the protection and enhancement of Toronto’s trees, while the Toronto Community Garden Network encourages community gardening.

This leaves no group actively trying to drive an overall parks agenda in Toronto. As one person told me, there is a “silent constituency” for parks that is not being heard at City Hall. No “rich, connected people” are fighting for a broad parks agenda. Unlike so many other constituencies in Toronto, there is no group attending budget meetings to fight for the parks budget and better staffing.

The Role of National and Regional NGOs in Toronto Parks

National or regional organizations active in Toronto parks have focused on specific activities. For example, Evergreen supports tree planting, naturalization, and community garden efforts in the city. Otherwise, for the most part, environmental organizations have traditionally ignored advocacy work for parks in Toronto and urban parks in general. This may be changing.

In Rouge Park, Environmental Defence has advocated for adding additional lands to the park, and the Wildlands League is involved in the effort to make it Canada’s first urban national park. Meanwhile, the David Suzuki Foundation has launched a recent initiative on measuring the environmental values and benefits of greenspaces in urban and near urban areas.

These are positive developments. Urban parks should be on the agenda of national environmental groups and their support will be needed to get more action on parks in Toronto and elsewhere in Canada.

Foundations and Efforts to Improve Parks

Foundations play a small but critical part in funding Toronto’s local park groups and improvements to parks. The Trillium Foundation is the most active. The Metcalf Foundation and the Greenbelt Foundation have also been important players, but others also play significant roles.

The Toronto Parks and Trees Foundation is modelled after park trusts in other North American cities. TPTF raises funds from individual and corporate donations to be used for tree and flower plantings in Toronto parks, open spaces, and schoolyards. The organization has raised about \$1 million since its creation six years ago. It does no advocacy work. Although it is an independent

organization, it is seen to be closely aligned with the City – current Deputy Mayor Joe Pantalone was a key driving force in the creation of the group and the City provides a half-time staff person and office space. Although the group does good work, it is a very low-profile organization, particularly compared with efforts in the United States. One observer called it the city’s “pathetic” attempt to copy fundraising efforts in American cities. Most park and environmental groups that I met with had not heard of the Foundation.

The Conservation Foundation of Greater Toronto is the fundraising arm of the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, raising \$1.5 to \$2 million/year to support TRCA projects across the GTA. The Toronto Community Foundation has worked with individual donors to support work on a small number of park improvement projects in Toronto. And the Waterfront Regeneration Trust supports work on the waterfront trail and greenway.

Interesting Urban Park Ideas From Across North America

Toronto's park challenges and opportunities are not unique – every city faces the challenge of how to create new and better parks. And as pointed out earlier by the head of Project for Public Spaces, all cities can improve their civic engagement efforts.

What follows is a selection of ideas from other jurisdictions. Just as every park is different, every city is different. Not all of these ideas will work in Toronto nor should they be blindly replicated here just because they have been successful elsewhere. But they all have merit and deserve consideration and further analysis as to whether they can be applied to Toronto's parks.

Citizen Engagement

In New York, Partnerships for Parks is a joint venture between the city's parks department and the City Parks Foundation that focuses its efforts on cultivating grassroots organizations and communities that are interested in taking care of parks. It helps citizens establish local parks groups and fosters their development.

The City of Calgary has placed citizen engagement at the forefront of its city centre parks plan: "Effective management of the Centre City Open Space System should strive to maximize the investment of community groups, business groups and others. This can be accomplished through the formation of Advisory Committees for specific districts within the Centre City that can proactively pursue opportunities that are seen as immediate, concrete, and achievable. The goal is for increased communications between Parks and local constituents, and ensuring that tools and resources are available for local open space priorities."⁴⁶

Reaching Out to Immigrants

New York's Immigrants and Parks Collaborative is a joint project of the JM Kaplan Fund, the New York Immigration Coalition, the City Parks Foundation, and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. The effort is focused on increasing immigrant engagement in eight parks, with dedicated staff people in most of the parks. These staff assist the local immigrant community to link with local government, institutions, and organizations to work together to use parks in creative ways for inclusive community development and park

⁴⁶ *City Centre Parks*, City of Calgary (2008), page 9.

improvements. The aim is to use lessons from this project to inform the Park's Department's efforts to foster more inclusive park engagement across the city.⁴⁷

Funding

Parks Department Budgets

The Chicago Parks District receives a dedicated portion of the city's property tax. This guaranteed source of revenue ensures parks are largely separated from the year-to-year budget-setting battles. This dependable source of revenue also enables the agency to issue bonds, since lenders know that repayment is guaranteed from tax revenues.⁴⁸

Park Trusts and Foundations

Parks trusts and foundations are organizations that raise funds specifically for parks. Most groups focus on capital projects only, with some exceptions. Many of the organizations listed below have been in operation for more than a century and have long-established connections with city philanthropists. Noteworthy organizations include:

- The San Francisco Parks Trust is a membership-based organization that has funded over \$100 million in park improvements in the last decade. One of their current projects is the Street Parks project; the Trust has collaborated with the city works department to free up 100 surplus parcels of city land to be used as parks.
- The New York City Parks Foundation funds extensive programming in 750 parks and park revitalization.
- Parks and People Foundation in Baltimore raises around \$4 million/year to support community greening programs.
- Parkways Foundation in Chicago raises more than \$5 million/year for capital projects in the city's parks.
- Forest Park Forever in St. Louis supports capital projects in and the maintenance and operation of Forest Park.
- Parks Foundation Calgary raises between \$4 to \$11 million/year (some in government funding) to support capital projects in parks and greenways.
- Pacific Parklands Foundation in Vancouver raises about \$400,000/year to support capital projects and volunteer work in Metro Vancouver parks.
- In 1999, when New York was going to sell off almost 100 community gardens for development, the Trust for Public Land and the New York

⁴⁷ JM Kaplan Fund, "The Immigrants and Parks Collaborative," *Urban Omnibus*, October 14, 2009.

⁴⁸ Peter Harnick, *The Excellent City Park System*, Trust for Public Land, 2006, page 22.

Restoration Project stepped in to purchase them from the city. The two groups have gone on to obtain additional gardens and have partnered with companies and foundations to make significant improvements to the gardens.

Parks Conservancies

In the park conservancy model, an independent non-profit body signs an agreement with a municipality to fund and, in many cases, operate and maintain, a park. The model is used effectively in many American cities. The best examples are in the following New York parks, where conservancies were established in the early 1970s to help rescue declining parks at a time of city cutbacks:

- Madison Square Park Conservancy organizes work and activities in this New York park; it funds 95% of the maintenance and 100% of the security and culture programs.
- Central Park Conservancy manages Central Park under contract to NYC Parks. It provides 85% of the park's \$25 million operating budget, employs 80% of park staff, and has raised more than \$400 million since 1980 to support the park.
- Friends of the High Line is a conservancy group that supports the High Line park.
- Battery Park Conservancy started with an endowment of \$115 million from the Battery Park development.
- The model also exists in Canada. In Winnipeg, in 2008 the city created the Assiniboine Park Conservancy, a not-for-profit corporation charged with operating and renewing the park.

Business Improvement Districts, Parks Improvement Districts, and Adopt-a-Park

All of these methods are used in different jurisdictions to provide funding for capital improvements and ongoing operating and maintenance funding for local parks.

Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), which are similar to Business Improvement Areas in Toronto, apply a special levy to businesses in a selected area and apply these funds to make improvements in the area. Some BIDs in U.S. cities direct some of these funds to make improvements in local parks. One of the best-known examples is Bryant Park in New York, where the local BID actually manages the very successful park on behalf of the city.

Park Improvement Districts (PIDs), like BIDs, apply levies to commercial, and in some cases, residential property owners to assist in capital improvements and operation of local parks. In Missouri, the state's Neighbourhood Improvement

District Act has been used by local communities to create special taxing districts to pay for new parks and improvements to parks. Some neighbourhoods in New York (Battery Park, High Line) are considering PIDs.

Adopt-a-Park programs vary from place to place. In many cities, this is a very basic program that allows private individuals, groups or businesses to contribute to a project in a park. But in a number of cities, these programs involve a long-term commitment to funding and/or volunteer time for ongoing maintenance of the park. Seattle insists that any group or business signing an Adopt-a-Park agreement show the department that it has the capacity to do agreed-upon work for at least a three-year period. Staff in the department spend considerable time arranging these agreements.⁴⁹ The City of Calgary's program is supported by a financial contribution from a development company. In Vaughan, Ontario, individuals, businesses, and community groups sign an Adopt-a-Park agreement to assist in maintenance, tree planting, and flower planting in a local park. In Milwaukee, a very successful example of Adopt-a-Park is the 125-acre Kilbourn Park, where a community group agreed to rebuild and maintain the park with \$20 million in start-up funding from the city.

Separate Parks Agencies

Instead of being just another division in the city's administration, a number of cities have established arm's-length independent agencies to manage their park systems. These independent bodies have generally been more creative and open to community engagement. Many have a long history.

For example, the Vancouver Parks Board dates back to 1888. Vancouver's parks and recreation services have been run by this arm's-length semi-autonomous board. The Board's seven commissioners are directly elected by the public every municipal election. The board sets the vision and policy direction for parks and park operations. In Minneapolis, a directly-elected, arm's-length board has run the city's parks and recreation services since 1883.

Seattle has an independent Board of Park Commissioners that is appointed by the Mayor and by Council. Its role is advisory to the city's parks department. Portland also has a similar appointed advisory Parks Board.

The precedent exists for such a board in Toronto, which already has several independent arm's-length agencies that operate the city's libraries, transit, Toronto Hydro, and Toronto Community Housing. Members of these boards are appointed by City Council.

Setting Specific Targets and Goals

Budgeting and planning for parks is often helped when a city has a specific, measurable goal for parks. For example, New York City has set a goal of having a

⁴⁹ Ibid.

park within a 10-minute walk of every New Yorker. The city has also set a goal of improving one designated signature park in every one of the five boroughs in the city. Ottawa has set a goal of 25 acres of parkland for every 1,000 residents. And Vancouver has set a goal that every person will live within a five-minute walk of a park, beach, greenway, or other natural space.

Finding Space for New Parks

Creating new parks in cities that are already largely built up is a challenge. Some cities are turning former streets and unused city land into parks in order to meet their goals. Cities like New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco are turning portions of their streets into public spaces. Great examples are New York's Plaza Program, which has created major new public spaces on Broadway, and San Francisco's Pavement to Parks program. Staff of the Street Parks program of San Francisco Parks Trust have also worked with the city's works department to free up 100 surplus parcels of city land to be used as parks.

NGOs

Citywide Park Advocacy Groups

No Canadian city has a citywide park advocacy group. There are many excellent groups in the United States, but two notable examples are in New York and San Francisco.

New Yorkers For Parks (NY4P) was founded over 100 years ago. The organization's key focus is to raise awareness of the importance of parks, be a watchdog to ensure equitable and efficient parks, foster public discussion regarding best practices for parks, and activate a broad coalition to place parks on the public agenda. It has eight staff members and a budget of \$1.3 million. NY4P tries to maintain a productive relationship with the parks department – it will push the department, but it “won't publicly embarrass the parks commissioner.” Key initiatives include:

- Annual report cards on the state of the city's parks and a biannual report card on the city's beaches.
- Open Space Index – a series of 15 parks and open space targets that can be used to measure and green every NYC neighbourhood, which allows community groups and elected officials to compare their neighbourhood data on existing open space against the index's targets.
- Recent report on new alternative funding opportunities for New York City parks.
- Parks Advocacy Day.
- Election advocacy work.

- Parks for All New Yorkers – this was a 2009 initiative to reach out to immigrant communities and identify their park needs. The project identified nine priorities to improve the connections between parks and new immigrants, including better translation services, a transparent permit process for fields and events, and increasing culturally diverse food vendors in parks.

San Francisco’s Neighborhood Parks Council was modelled after NY4P and started in 1996. The focus of the organization is to bring together the various local park groups together in a coalition. It has six staff members and is guided by a steering committee that has two representatives from parks groups in each of the city’s 11 electoral districts. Key initiatives include:

- The Green Envy report, which reviews the state of parks in the city and provides recommendations for improvements.
- ParkScan, an Internet tool for people to report on issues in their parks; the city’s parks department must respond to these concerns (through an agreement with NPC, this tool is now being used by Portland’s parks department as well).
- Playground Initiative, which reviews the safety and status of playgrounds across the city and grades them.
- A consultation exercise leading towards the development of the city’s new strategic plan for parks, OpenSpace 2100; the city government commissioned NPC to undertake this work.
- Providing information to candidates running for office, organizing candidate debates on park issues, and trying to make parks an issue in political campaigns.

Other noteworthy citywide parks advocacy groups are in Philadelphia (Philadelphia Parks Alliance), Chicago (Friends of the Parks), and Atlanta (Park Pride).

National Urban Park Advocacy Groups

There are two key national groups in the United States and one in the United Kingdom that advocate for urban parks.

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) split from the Nature Conservancy in 1972, when it was felt that NC was ignoring urban green spaces. It was the first national conservation organization in the United States with an explicitly urban component to its work. Its mission is, “The Trust for Public Land conserves land for people to enjoy as parks, gardens, and other natural places, ensuring livable communities for generations to come.” The main focus of its work is partnering with local groups and park trusts to protect and enhance urban and near-urban park spaces. TPL has an annual budget of over \$200 million/year and in most years works to acquire more than \$350 million worth of land. TPL also has an

outstanding Park Excellence office focused on undertaking and sharing research on parks.

The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) was originally called the Urban Parks Institute. PPS focuses on assisting governments and private organizations to improve public spaces. Its “placemaking” approach uses planning, design and education to help citizens transform public spaces into vital places that highlight local assets, spur rejuvenation, and serve common needs.

The UK group GreenSpace provides help, advice, and networking for community groups working in parks and green spaces. It organizes conferences and forums, publishes a magazine, offers awards, and maintains a learning institute for parks professionals.

Recommendations – Embrace Creativity and Community

Alan Broadbent, one of Canada’s leading thinkers on cities, once said: “You can tell what a city thinks about itself from looking at the way it looks after its parks. Parks, principal among public spaces, are a telling face to the world.” The shape of Toronto’s parks in many ways mirrors the overall state of our city.

The city has some excellent assets, but Torontonians have become complacent and take these assets for granted. The City is keeping up with general maintenance, but it is not making significant improvements, nor is it keeping up with competing North American cities. There is no shortage of good ideas and plans for improving the city, but our city government is too often overly cautious and tentative in implementing these plans.

Things are seriously broken in Toronto’s parks since amalgamation and fundamental changes are needed. This crisis in maintaining public spaces is not unique to Toronto. Cities worldwide are struggling with this problem and coming up with innovative solutions. Toronto needs to catch up with them.

I’ve listed dozens of potential opportunities and ideas that I believe could make Toronto’s parks better public places. I am going to focus on what I consider to be the top five opportunities for enhancing parks in Toronto. For each of these broad opportunities, I lay out some specific recommendations. I list what I consider to be the most immediately effective policy first, with the longer-term recommendations at the end of each section.

Increasing City spending on parks would have been an easy recommendation, but given current budget challenges, I have avoided any recommendations that involve significant new spending. All of these recommendations would cost little or nothing, and many will actually allow the City to do more for parks without any increased public expenditures.

I have not included any recommendations on creating new parks, because the City is already making good progress on new parks in spaces such as orphaned city lands and in underutilized areas such as under road overpasses. The City just needs to keep up the pace of progress, particularly in downtown neighbourhoods that are home to major new condominium developments.

All five recommendations centre on the theme that PF&R Division and decision-makers at City Hall need to unleash the creativity of our parks staff and embrace the communities that are home to Toronto’s parks. The City alone will never have the fiscal and staff resources to make our parks the best they can be.

Furthermore, our parks and our communities will be better places when City Hall makes full use of the community's energy, ideas, and funding.

PF&R has already identified this approach in the 2004 *Our Common Grounds* strategic plan: "We will advocate that all residents are keepers of our common grounds."⁵⁰ But the Plan's recommendations ignored this principle of shared responsibility. Instead, the Plan made it clear that the Division alone would deliver new and improved parks for Toronto.

I have sometimes been critical of PF&R Division and staff in this paper. But given the fiscal and organizational limitations placed on them, City staff generally do a good job caring for the City's parks, in particular the core functions of cutting grass, picking up garbage, and planting trees. And many people working for the City understand the importance of parks and have good ideas for improving parks. They know that collaborating with the community will lead to better parks, but they are struggling to implement new ideas and make changes. Staff can also be frustrated when a "community" is divided or puts forward narrow, parochial ideas.

There are some creative experiments in places like Grange Park and elsewhere. Positive changes are happening and Toronto is building good park success stories. The City needs to build on these successful projects.

Some people accuse Toronto of a culture of NIMBYism – in other words, they feel that the city is very good at rallying to stop things but poor at starting things. Embracing the community in our parks is an opportunity to invite the public in and build a culture of YIMBY, where we ask what we want in our local parks and get the community to help make it happen.

Parks should be an incubator for new thinking about our city and community engagement. As New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg said, "The urban park is as fertile ground for fresh new thinking as it is for the plants and trees that clean our air and improve our lives."⁵¹

It's definitely time for some fresh, new thinking on parks in Toronto.

Recommendation 1 – Put the Community First

The City's approach to parks must recognize first and foremost that every park is unique and is the community's park first. Parks may be in classifications, planning areas, work zones, and wards – but first and foremost they are in a community.

As important as this principle is, I do not want to oversimplify it by telling the City to "just listen to the community." As Peter Harnick, the TPL's Director of

⁵⁰ Our Common Ground, page 13.

⁵¹ Harnick, *Urban Parks*, page xii.

the Centre for Park Excellence notes, “Nothing about the interface between cities and parks is straightforward or simple.”⁵²

The “community” can often have very divergent opinions on what is most appropriate for their neighbourhood and their park. Furthermore, there are limits to the appropriate role of the community. There needs to be a common understanding between the City and local groups of the realistic and productive opportunities for community and volunteer efforts. Better dialogue and understanding in general will lead to agreement on what partners can and should usefully undertake in a park and what is better left to the City and its resources.

Specifically, the City needs to:

- Resolve a reasonable and practical approach to park liability issues. The existing position that volunteer groups caring for areas in a park must purchase their own liability insurance is a significant deterrent to volunteer work and community collaboration. All too often, potential funders for new park projects are stonewalled by City lawyers raising liability concerns. The City needs to bring together risk managers, legal staff, the insurance industry, park groups, and park users to develop solutions to reduce the cost of liability insurance and reduce the range of permits and park activities that require community members to purchase insurance.
- Switch from a crew-based management system to a park-specific management system. Park staff should be assigned to a specific park or small selected number of nearby parks and be “caretakers” of these parks. They can become the ongoing eyes and ears for the park. Like New York, the City should post the manager or caretaker’s name and contact information in one or more easy-to-find spots in the park so park users know whom to contact with questions, concerns or ideas. In New York’s Central Park, when staffing was switched from park-wide crew-based to zone-based specific areas, there were immediate improvements in cleanliness, horticulture, and public responsiveness. Parks Administrator Doug Blonsky said: “Zone-based management calls for direct accountability by an individual for his or her zone and instils a sense of pride and ownership. Providing a uniformed presence, zone gardeners become familiar to regular park patrons and often develop relationships with them.”⁵³

⁵² Harnick, page 38.

⁵³ “Public Parks, Private Partners,” Project for Public Spaces, 2000, page 34.

- Facilitate and encourage the development of new “Friends of” local parks groups and support the role of existing groups. Not all local community groups have the capacity to take on a long-term meaningful role in their local park. A dedicated PF&R “parks animator” or “facilitator” should be assigned to help facilitate relationships and build the capacity of smaller groups. There could be regular meetings with assigned city park “caretakers” and the parks groups. Signage could be placed in the park with contact information for the local committee. The City could recognize park volunteer work by assigning a specific category for parks in the Green Toronto Awards (there is a category for green roofs, but nothing specifically for parks).
- Implement an Adopt-A-Park program. Adopt-A-Park should be more than just accepting private and corporate donations or putting a business name on a swing set – it should be a means to enshrine collaboration with the community. Similar to the program in Seattle, Toronto could implement a program that is based on connecting volunteers to the park and taking shared responsibility for the park. Seattle insists that any group or business signing on to Adopt-a-Park must show the agency that it has the capacity to do agreed-to work for at least a three-year period. In addition, Adopt-a-Park could be used as an opportunity for the City to work with neighbourhood agencies, health centres and youth support organizations to connect targeted local groups with efforts to improve local parks.
- Expand and improve the use of parks in all four seasons. The crew-based management system has led to all parks being “opened” (e.g. garbage cans, picnic tables, and amenities set out) at a predetermined date in late spring and “closed” in early fall – regardless of actual weather conditions or the public’s desire to use the parks. Dedicated park crews can be more flexible to on-the-ground needs from park users. Toronto is a winter city – cafés, bars, and food stands could be used to draw the public into parks in the off-season and ensure key pathways in parks are cleared of snow and ice.
- Reduce the emphasis in the work for the current Parks Plan on imposing a new standardized classification system for parks. A “key deliverable” in the Parks Plan currently being drafted is to “confirm a classification system for parks which will outline the hierarchy of parks types and roles that individual park types play in their respective communities and the City as a whole. As well, the classification system will identify specific planning and operational objectives for each park type.”⁵⁴ Too

⁵⁴ Patterson, page 5.

much focus on a new classification system would be a step backward away from connection to community. As George Brown's Institute Without Borders' Luigi Ferrara said of parks, "Different is better than perfect."

- Emphasize people skills in the PF&R hiring and training process. In San Francisco, the Parks Department has put a special focus on hiring staff that are good at organizing and working with volunteers. Seattle's Department of Parks and Recreation has 335 contracts with non-profit organizations to provide volunteer work for parks and the city puts significant resources into maintaining these relationships.

Recommendation 2 – Move from a Culture of No to a Culture of Yes

A quote I used earlier bears repeating. A member of Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee hit the point precisely: "We don't necessarily need the City's money and staff: we just need permission."⁵⁵

Many people I talked to emphasized that by far the most important action the City could take to improve parks was just to say yes to new creative community ideas. One person I talked with said that PF&R could make excellent progress just by switching from a response of "no because of A, B and C" to "yes, if we can work together to resolve A, B and C." Another person said that the City should scrap work on the new *Parks Plan* and instead agree to a two-word new strategic plan – "Say yes."

Specifically, the City needs to:

- Be willing to experiment and accept differences in parks. I talked to dozens of people who have been pushing the City to try something new with their local park. The City just needs to say yes to many of these ideas. It is the easiest, lowest-cost opportunity for park improvement for the City. Some ideas will succeed wonderfully, others will fail. But lessons will be learned from both the successes and failures. Call the initiative a "pilot project" and experiment with it.
- Stop insisting on the need for an overall, citywide policy on every element of parks. For example, the City has been reviewing a citywide policy for pizza ovens for two years. Instead of engaging with community groups, the city has set up a working group aimed at arriving at guidelines for residents' participation and involvement in local parks.
- Reform the system for obtaining permits. Many activities will still require permits to ensure that sports facilities are not overbooked. But many others such as smaller picnics, arts, and other group activities should not need a permit. Implement an easy-to-use online permit

⁵⁵ Cash.

process and collaborate with ethnic communities to ensure it is user-friendly for all communities.

- Use park “animators” to reach out to new immigrant communities. New York’s Immigrants and Parks Collective has found that it is a myth that worries about housing, employment, and financial security prevent immigrant involvement in parks and in community life. The key factor is inadequate outreach and improper public processes. And the “immigrant community” is not homogeneous across the city – start with the local immigrant community.⁵⁶ Two potential quick wins for PF&R could be: (1) Work with the city’s Community Services department and social service agencies that support new Canadians and develop a new Canadian engagement strategy; (2) Place a special emphasis on hiring for diversity, especially for those PF&R staff engaging in community outreach.

A number of people I talked with believed that PF&R will have a difficult time changing their corporate culture to “yes” and that the best move would be for Toronto to implement a Vancouver/Minneapolis model of an independent, arm’s-length agency for parks. This idea has merit and warrants further examination. Independent agencies in Toronto such as Toronto Community Housing, the Toronto Public Library Board and Toronto Hydro are generally more creative and dynamic than city line departments.

But I do not recommend making such a change in the short term. Dismantling the department would create significant organizational chaos for some time. Instead, I believe that the focus should be on making improvements by freeing up the creativity of individual parks and achieving small victories first, with the option of major corporate restructuring later.

Recommendation 3 - Capitalize on Creative Funding Ideas

The City will never have the fiscal and staff resources to make our parks the best they can be. Our parks and our communities will improve only when City Hall fully embraces the community’s energy, ideas, and funding.

I do not want to make it appear that it will be easy to raise these funds. The ideas I recommend below are based on models in U.S. cities that have a strong history of private philanthropic contributions to parks and public institutions. Asking for money for activities that have always been paid for by the City is not easy, and many will feel that the City should cover these costs. Moreover, concerns have rightly been raised in U.S. cities about the influence of private-sector contributors to parks on the choice of programming and activities. Furthermore, the City is rightly concerned that private funding for parks could

⁵⁶ JM Kaplan.

lead to a two-tier park system with better parks in more affluent neighbourhoods.

But there are ways to deal with these concerns. There are means to ensure that the public's interest always comes first in our parks. Private and corporate contributions for one park could free up funds for the City to spend in other parks. Or a percentage of funds raised could go into a general fund controlled by an arm's-length parks foundation group (not the City).

I want to stress that the recommendations below are not about new ways to raise funds to pay for the existing way of doing business in parks. New funding is obviously needed, but more importantly, fundraising should be used as an opportunity to engage the community in our parks. Individual parks have individual needs and opportunities. The City needs to allow neighbourhoods, businesses, and the community to take advantage of these new tools and participate in our parks.

Toronto needs to initiate some pilot projects in public-private funding partnerships in parks. Test them, learn from them, and then try them in other neighbourhoods and parks in the city.

Specifically, the City needs to:

- Implement an Adopt-A-Park program. As mentioned earlier, this program should establish long-term commitments to partnering on a park and be based on successful models elsewhere, such as Seattle. To help offset the additional staff time required to operate the program, the City could follow Calgary's lead and seek a private-sector partner.
- Review the no-naming policy. In his report on the backlog on needed maintenance on existing parks and recreation facilities, Toronto's Auditor General Jeff Griffiths suggested that the city consider selling naming rights. Griffiths noted that there would have to be "proper policies and procedures" in place first to protect the public's interest. Other cities have dealt with this – we should examine other cities to see if any models could be used in Toronto. For example, the excellent cycling centre in Millennium Park in Chicago is called McDonald's Cycle Center.
- Allow the establishment of parks conservancies for high-profile and unique parks such as Allan Gardens. This park has the potential to be an important tourism attraction, but has always struggled.
- Allow the establishment of Parks Improvement Areas for local residents and businesses to financially support improvements and ongoing operation of their local park.
- In the longer term, the City also needs to reform its approach to Section 37 funding. Funds flowing into this program and their expenditures need to be done in a transparent and accountable manner.

Recommendation 4 – Use Food as a Tool to Engage People in Parks

People come together over growing, cooking, and eating food and these activities should happen more in Toronto's parks. Food is the great connector. Food is also a key tool in welcoming Toronto's immigrant communities into our parks.

In many ways, the City just needs to open itself up to more of what is already happening in some individual parks, but that overall is still too restricted. For example, the Friends of Dufferin Grove Park is a leader in organizing community activities with food: Friday night suppers, a farmers' market, bread baking, pizza baking, barbecues. Groups such as The Stop and FoodShare are doing effective community work through food – some of it in city parks. Toronto's first community orchard is being planted in Ben Nobleman Park.

Toronto Public Health has initiated the development of a comprehensive citywide food strategy. It released a discussion paper in May 2010 and is now consulting on the strategy. The paper includes the role parks can play in the growing, purchasing, cooking, and enjoyment of food and notes that PF&R are in the process of updating a range of food-related policies for parks (e.g., markets, gardens, community bake ovens). The development of the strategy provides an excellent opportunity to enhance the role of food in parks and to promote partnerships and cooperation across a range of city agencies and departments (e.g., parks, community centres, housing, health). Public Health needs to ensure that parks play a key role in the food strategy.

Specifically, the City needs to:

- Build more barbecues, benches, and picnic tables in parks and ease permitting requirements for picnics.
- Create more community gardens and open up more gardening opportunities in parks and hydro corridors.
- Expand the outreach resources for networking with and facilitating the development of community gardens. At present, there is only one staff person assigned to the community gardening portfolio. This is not just about engaging middle-income Torontonians in great tasting local food. Community gardens can be a community development opportunity for lower-income and immigrant communities – allowing people to supplement their diets and to grow produce for sale.
- Stop fighting pizza ovens. There are only about six pizza ovens in parks. PF&R have apparently been trying to work our rules and regulations for new pizza ovens for more than two years. In the Lawrence Heights neighbourhood, Toronto Community Housing has approved a new pizza

oven without waiting first for a comprehensive oven policy to deal with every potential policy or regulatory issue.⁵⁷

- Allow more farmers' markets in city parks. There has been a wonderful expansion of markets in more affluent neighbourhoods in recent years. The priority now should be expansion into less affluent neighbourhoods and "food deserts" – communities in the city without easy access to grocery and food stores. For example, Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee is working with FoodShare to bring in a farmer's market to the park.
- Be open to more cafés, bars, food stands, and vending carts in parks – these can be big draws to parks, particularly in off-season months.
- Use Rouge Park and Downsview Park for farming opportunities for young farmers and new Canadians. Partner with groups like FarmStart to explore opportunities for new Canadians.
- Create more opportunities to teach people how to grow food. Partnering with food groups, the City can use corners of city parks as showcase plots and demonstration/education centres.

Recommendation 5 – Develop a Citywide Voice for Parks

I believe that Toronto parks would benefit from the creation of a citywide organization dedicated to promoting and advocating for better-quality parks and community engagement in parks. As TPL's Peter Harnick notes, "The only way to strengthen an urban park system is to strengthen the political constituency promoting it."⁵⁸ Such a group could be modelled on groups in New York, San Francisco, and elsewhere. But it would be a Toronto version.

As I have said throughout this set of recommendations, community should come first – the major effort on improving parks in Toronto should be through individual community groups engaging and improving their park. But in addition, there also needs to be a broad-based organization to drive a progressive agenda on city parks, help make the connections between community park groups, and assist in the creation of new community groups.

Similar to successes that have been seen in bicycling issues following the formation of the Toronto Cyclists Union, a Toronto-wide parks group could put parks on the city's agenda and send a message to decision-makers at City Hall that there is a broad-based constituency for parks in Toronto.

A good first step would be to bring a coalition together to determine if there was support for a citywide group: community parks groups, social activists, environment groups, others. A Toronto-wide group would succeed only if there were a strong network of community parks organizations behind it.

⁵⁷ Catherine Porter, "Changing Lawrence Heights with a pizza oven," *Toronto Star*, June 1, 2010.

⁵⁸ Harnick, page 15.

In addition to the above points, a citywide group could:

- Hold government accountable, measure progress, or identify needs through report cards on parks, playgrounds, and beaches.
- Help drive change at PF&R and City Hall.
- Monitor the city's budget-making exercise and fight for parks budget and staffing.
- Reach out to new Canadians and assist them in better connecting with our parks and communities.
- Be a clearinghouse for best ideas and best practices for parks and community park groups.
- Act as a liaison to promote better understanding and more productive relationships between local park groups and the City. The group could also help find a resolution when there are differing community visions for a park and help overcome the frustration over a lack of progress sometimes being a "two-way street" between the City and local groups.
- Help with fundraising expertise for local parks groups.
- During elections, ensure ward and citywide candidates are well informed on park issues and highlight park issues during their campaigns.
- Advocate and advise on the creation of new parks.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Metcalf Foundation for their support of this project, in particular the Foundation's President Sandy Houston. Sandy and the team at Metcalf never get complacent and are continuously investigating new trends and opportunities for furthering a socially progressive agenda. I am grateful that the Foundation believed that this effort on urban parks had merit and could contribute to their social agenda.

I would also like to thank all the people who took time out of their busy lives to talk with me about parks and who provided me with critical input on the paper. Special thanks to Philippa Campsie for her very smart editing. The background research for this paper came from a review of literature and articles, but the key information was provided in confidential interviews with parks leaders and advocates from Toronto and the United States. I wish I had the opportunity to talk to more people – there are so many great people dedicated to improving their communities through better parks and so many great ideas.

Fertile Ground for New Thinking: Improving Toronto's Parks
Toronto: September 2010

This report was prepared by: David Harvey

Published by:
George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation
174 Avenue Road
Toronto, Ontario M5R 2J1

Phone: (416) 926-0366
Fax: (416) 926-0370
E-mail: info@metcalffoundation.com
Website: www.metcalffoundation.com

Permission is granted to use this material, in whole or in part, for any non-commercial purpose, provided that credit is given to the Foundation. Permission for any other use must be obtained from the Foundation. Copies of this report can be downloaded from our website.