Parks, People, and Participation:
The Toronto Experience

A Research and Policy Report Written By

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines existing Toronto parks groups' governance models, identifies emerging trends and challenges to the everyday operations and community engagement capacities of these groups, and offers best practices recommendations for making these groups as democratic and accessible to all community members as possible. The report builds upon and adds an important local perspective to our preliminary report on parks governance and community engagement models published in May 2012 and available for download from the TPSI website: publicspaces.ca.

Parks, People, and Participation: The Toronto Experience begins with a short review of the recent socio-economic and health literature examining the value of urban parks. We consider the subject from a broad perspective, delineating arguments for the aesthetic, ecological, social, physical and mental health, and economic value of parks. Of course, we are referring here to parks that are maintained, respected, and utilized by local (and perhaps also foreign) residents for recreational, relaxation, social capital building, and/or transportation purposes, amongst others, and not those that have been abandoned, neglected, or left in a derelict state.

To avoid the latter and foster the former, community members mobilize around their local parks and parks groups to champion their cause(s). These range significantly from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and run the gamut from simple park clean up and beautification efforts (often in tandem with generational demographic change and/or neighbourhood gentrification), ecologically motivated park habitat stewardship and restoration activities, the creation of dog-free and off-leash areas, to the organization of community programming, park festivals, and special events. Whatever their motivation, parks groups operate independently and tend to be governed by volunteer leaders willing to put the requisite time and effort into their initiatives. As such, governance processes ensuring community engagement, access, and democratic participation not only within parks groups but within parks themselves are often overlooked. As a generality, this is not the result of conscious ideologies from those in "power" but simply an effect of how volunteer groups come together. Group are not regulated by an outside

authority—nor de we suggest they should be—and there are few available guidelines or practical 'how to' manuals for community groups to follow. Given this, even groups categorized as similar entities (i.e. *Friends of the Park groups*) have diverse missions, visions, and values and operate under distinctive governance structures.

The report identifies several encouraging and discouraging trends, including the following:

- Toronto parks are vibrant public spaces that contribute to healthy communities, municipal pride, and city building
- Parks with organized community and/or advocacy groups tend to get results
- Gentrification of neighborhoods affects parks: new parks groups and beautification projects increase use by new populations (mainly families) while traditional users are pushed further into the margins (i.e. homeless)
- Antagonistic 'us' vs. 'them' relationships exist among different groups of parks users (i.e. yoga and tai chi practitioners vs. children vs. dog walkers)
- Upwardly mobile English-speaking (upper) middle class residents with specific agendas are highly represented as parks groups decision makers

Based on these and other trends explored and identified in the report, we put forth the following series of best practice recommendations for parks groups:

- Ensure parks groups are represented by diverse multiple stakeholders with potentially opposing views, skills, experiences, and expectations
- Whenever possible, impose mandatory term limits on group volunteer leadership positions in an effort to foster new ideas and allow for involvement of new residents and new generations

- For the City, provide a long-term planning vision for City parks as well as support staff so groups understand what priority areas and parameters they are working within

1. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

As advocates for the maintenance and creation of accessible urban public space, we have identified and monitored emerging public space trends in order to research and promote evidence-based policy options. An environmental scan on the state of contemporary urban parks identifies efficient management and meaningful community engagement processes as major challenges. The two are, of course, interconnected as poorly managed parks seldom benefit from high community engagement either in terms of recreational use or administrative involvement. As such, we contend that the most efficient management models are those that actively and meaningfully involve the communities in which individual parks are located. To be sure, because particular socio-economic indicators pose different challenges within individual communities, we do not believe one universal management model is applicable to all parks.

In 2010 Toronto City Council endorsed the development of a citywide Parks Plan based on a number of principles, including community engagement and partnerships. We conducted our own research into parks governance and community engagement models simultaneously to the development of this Plan in an effort to influence the Plan by sharing preliminary results and consulting with willing councilors and stakeholders. In our preliminary report, published in May 2012, we defend the value of urban parks before examining "good governance" criteria and comparing management models currently in use in public and private national, state, municipal, and community parks. We steer away from the governance discussion in the present document in an effort to focus more on actual practices of engagement and less on theoretical reasoning. Thus, alongside new findings and results, we reiterate key research findings about the value of parks and recommendations for promoting parks as open, accessible, and democratic public spaces.

The City of Toronto *Parks Plan 2013-2017* was approved by City Council in May, 2012 and maps out a five-year course of action for improving City parks through a combination of capital and operating investments that would result in better amenities, increased community use and engagement, and improved on-line services for users. We were pleased to see a commitment to public engagement processes in the City's *Parks Plan* but, based on previous failures to follow-through on approved strategic plans, we remain somewhat skeptical that this report will indeed result in changes to the way parks are governed in our City.

The present report should be read as a critical companion to the City's *Parks Plan* insofar as it presents important theoretical research on the value of urban parks and governance practices as well as primary research into what is happening on the ground in the City and the challenges faced by several City of Toronto parks. The purpose of the research is threefold:

i) To outline the social, economic, ecological, and health value of urban parks

ii) To strengthen the role of community engagement vis-à-vis the abovementioned values

iii) To categorize and identify issues and challenges facing several Toronto parks groups not only to understand the landscape but also to make recommendations as to how to improve the parks experience for all Torontonians

1.1 METHODS

This research report has been informed by a review of the literature on the value of urban parks and citizen engagement therein as well as primary case studies of seven Toronto parks groups (four 'Friends of' groups, one non profit, and two advisory committees). Despite the current push for the creation of 'Friends of the Park' groups throughout the City, there was no advantage to confining our research to 'Friends of' groups specifically given the lack of definition around the functions, duties, and responsibilities of such groups (versus conservancies, adopt-a park groups, committees, etc). Moreover, while we understand and appreciate that case studies are exploratory and thereby somewhat limited in

scope, we chose this method for the holistic and detailed contextual data it could garner on the real-life conditions and challenges facing Toronto parks groups.

In conducting this research it became evident that the topic is politically charged in some circles. Tensions exist as much within members of some individual parks group as among parks groups and parks stakeholders. To avoid igniting tensions even further, and at the request of several of our interviewees, we have decided to keep all survey participants and groups anonymous.

2. VALUE OF URBAN PARKS

That parks add "value" to urban communities and their residents is neither a suspect nor contentious statement. To be sure, since the late 19th century, parks have been perceived as special places of relaxation and recreation (Cranz, 1982), thus bearing a particular "social" value. Of course, while all parks and green spaces have the potential to serve and benefit their respective communities and municipalities, typically only those that are maintained and thus utilized actually achieve this standing. Neglected, derelict, and low-density parks, on the other hand, are seen as dangerous sites of violence and illicit behaviour. As municipalities continue to cut budgets and implement so-called austerity measures, the fear is that more and more parks and green spaces will either be abandoned or end up in private hands (for private use), heightening the extreme disparities characteristic of our urban communities.

Over the years, our understanding of the value of parks has evolved. This is due in large part to social and community-led initiatives to beautify neglected parks and create new green spaces that foster recreation, community engagement and social and economic capital (i.e. farmers' markets, outdoor fairs, food trucks, etc.). We have also witnessed a renewed interest in utilizing or "occupying" existing parks and public spaces as a means of political demonstration. In addition, the environmental movement has staked a claim over urban parks, advocating for ecological integrity through hands-on greening and sustainability initiatives.

Today's parks are thus much more than sites of pleasure and recreation; they are also potential sites of physical, social, political, and cultural engagement; community and civic participation; sustainable environmental practice; and economic capital. In other words, the value of urban parks has moved beyond the recreational and physical aesthetic to incorporate broader health, socio-cultural, ecological, and economic values. We outline each in turn below.

2.1 AESTHETIC VALUE

Aesthetically, parks and green spaces have the power to beautify public and private spaces in cities. As Isabella M. Mambretti (2011) points out, aesthetic perception is a complex, complicated, and ambiguous concept (p. 43). Studies have shown that individual aesthetic judgments regarding the beauty or ugliness of a park correlate largely to their overall preference for a space expressed simply in terms of likes and dislikes. Not surprisingly, this preference concurs with the perceived security of space and feelings of personal safety at local levels (Mambretti, p. 45-46). Though some aspects of a built park environment such as the permeability or impermeability of vegetation space may at first glance appear to facilitate or hinder crime, we accept Mambretti's argument that ideal urban park landscapes should address two key yet potentially opposing needs: i) to provide a space for individuals to come together and meet other people and ii) to provide intimate spaces for private use and personal contemplation (p. 51).

Notwithstanding the important discussion taking place within the landscape architecture and planning fields around the aesthetics of safety and the evaluation of spatial typologies vis-à-vis perceived personal and objective safety of municipal parks, we do not engage in this exchange in the present policy report. Instead, in this report we recognize and refer to the physical aesthetic in its most ordinary definition as pleasing or characterized by beauty. Although we certainly understand that aesthetics refers specifically to that branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art, and taste or, in more scientific terminology, to "the study of sensory or sensory-emotional values [... and the science of]

critical reflection on art, culture and nature" (Roslan & Nurashikin, 2012, p. 187), for our purposes, we take as a given that both organic and built green space is aesthetically pleasing in and of itself, some qualitatively or subjectively more so than others. Though admittedly reductive, this is the very definition the City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry and Recreation Services utilizes in its mission to provide Torontonians with "equitable access to ... clean and beautiful parks, open spaces, ravines and forests."
(http://www1.toronto.ca/wps/portal/contentonly?vgnextoid=037ee03bb8d1e310VgnVCM10000071d60f89RCRD). Though the traditional pastoral view of municipal parks as visual assets that add an aesthetic-as-beauty quality to metropolitan neighbourhoods is indeed both accurate and legitimate, a new twenty-first-century view calls attention to parks' broader contributions to the urban social fabric, including ecological, social, and economic value (Walker, 2004). These contributions are considered in more detail below.

2.2 ECOLOGICAL VALUE

The continued interest and call for action on global environmental sustainability for the twenty-first century has accorded parks a relatively new role as sites of ecological integrity and urban sustainability. This environmental turn has led to a new understanding of the aesthetic value of the natural or "wild" habitat as autonomous and worthy in itself, thus paving the way for planners and authorities to preserve not only the aesthetic beauty of a park but the aesthetic value of nature itself (Roslan & Nurashikin, p. 188). In this vein, as Michael Boland (2001) correctly notes, the ecological park stands in contrast to the traditional pastoral urban park, which often requires high water, fertilizer, and pesticide input to landscape non-indigenous plant species. In his words, "Parks aren't [necessarily] sustainable, self-replicating, or ecological landscapes, though they may look natural to our eyes" (Ecological Parks). In contrast, ecological parks recognize the need to look beyond mere aesthetic appeal to consider questions of "biodiversity, environmental justice, climate change, [and] habitat protection" (Ecological Parks).

Though Boland places ecological parks in a category all their own (citing such examples as Alcatraz and San Francisco's National AIDS Memorial Grove in Golden Gate Park), ecological considerations that attempt to unify the dichotomy between nature and culture have begun to inform

the construction and/or maintenance of more traditional municipal parks. In his Forward to *Large Parks*, Corner (2007) notes how parks are valued for their ecological functions--storing and processing storm-water; providing natural habitats for birds, plants, animals, and microbial life-- which essentially clean, refresh, and enrich life in the metropolis (p. 11). In this way, even without being an ecological park per se, all parks have the potential to aid our urban environments' ecological sustainability.

2.3 SOCIAL VALUE

Social value of parks is perhaps the most accepted and widest-reaching of the four values identified in this report (aesthetic, ecological, social, and economic). As outlined above, urban parks were traditionally regarded as sites of passive recreation and relaxation. Though common knowledge has expanded beyond this limited paradigm to include considerations of economic capital, ecological sustainability, and aesthetic values, the social context remains paramount to our understanding of municipal green spaces. To be sure, the social benefit of parks has itself expanded beyond the recreational to include participatory community engagement, volunteerism, and health outcomes. As such, in his 2004 policy brief "Beyond Recreation: A Broader View of Urban Parks," the Urban Institute's Chris Walker perceptively states:

> This new view [of parks] goes well beyond the traditional value of parks as places of recreation and visual assets to communities and focuses on how policymakers, practitioners, and the public can begin to think about parks as valuable contributors to larger urban policy objectives, such as job opportunities, youth development, public health, and community building. (p. 1)

Parks programs designed specifically for youth help young people choose more rewarding paths to adulthood by fostering and developing their physical, intellectual, emotional, and social strengths (Walker, 2004 p. 2). Whereas some parks programs such as Chicago's Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance's Empowering Youth Initiative offer volunteer-based opportunities for youth to participate directly in parks maintenance projects, other programs include paid internships and work experience programs. The same Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance runs a two-year

docent program aimed at developing teenagers' leadership and social skills in preparation for life after high school. Select docents are paid to explain exhibits to park visitors, an experience that can help them develop the skill sets needed to hold down a paying job in a difficult economy. Of course, parks also provide similar work experience opportunities for adults, which we detail below in section 2.4.

2.3.1 SOCIAL CAPITAL

Just as parks provide a physical space for youth skill building and work experience programs, they also serve as important hubs for social capital and community building projects. Individual communities have their own needs, and parks can and do serve these needs to varying degrees. An international case in point is noted in a recent study out of the Netherlands that claims that urban parks promote social cohesion and intercultural interaction within and among different ethnic groups, decreasing social isolation and creating a feeling of belonging and a sense of place for non-mainstream users (Peters, Elands, & Buijs, 2010). Likewise, that parks provide important spaces to bring together newcomers and other at-risk groups (i.e. those suffering from depression and social isolation) is a recurring theme in the Australia's Parks Forum 2008 report The Value of Parks, which states that "this immense social value is part of the 'glue' of a healthy society" (p. 10). Given our focus on park governance and community engagement and the potential for parks to play an increasingly fundamental role in fostering increased public participation in municipal areas, the most relevant part of the Parks Forum report signals a link among social engagement, volunteerism, and citizen participation in parks management, all of which support community well-being while building a strong sense of civic pride (p. 10). The studies are also illustrative of the role that parks may play in facilitating both bonding (within communities) and bridging (between communities) subsets of social capital, both of which may be important for the achievement of optimal social capital benefits and a more tolerant democratic society (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001).

For Walker, parks "empower people to tackle community-wide problems, embark on collective actions, and advocate effectively for their community" (p. 3). This type of connection-making and partnership-building among citizens increases a neighbourhood's collective efficacy--

"people's connections with one another and their capacity to work together" (p. 3)--, which has been linked to numerous outcomes from decreased crime and isolation to increased health and well-being. In addition, other outcomes include increased voter turnout, volunteerism, and potentially improved economic activity (Walker, 2004; Putnam, 1995; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001). It has also been suggested that the unique naturalistic environment of parks leads to different types of communal interaction as differences in social hierarchy can disappear, thus permitting more sharing and openness. This shift alone exposes the unique ability of parks to help develop social capital (Ewert et al, 2003). Even so, we concur with Walker and others, who call for further research into this matter.

2.4 PHYSICAL AND MENTAL VALUE

Given that physical inactivity and obesity i) cost Canadians more than $8 billion/year in both direct and indirect costs (ARPA, 2006), ii) increase Canadians' burden of physical and mental disease, and thus iii) undermine the quality of life and well-being of Canadians, more must be done to foster physical activity and healthy lifestyles in the population. Maximizing parks usage is one relatively simple and obvious solution. In fact, in terms of public health, because they serve as popular arenas for a range of recreational activities, parks are commonly connected to health outcomes, particularly for young children, youth, and the elderly. While some parks and recreational associations organize sport and recreation activities for paying participants, public parks provide ample space, opportunities, and free programming for all citizens to engage in healthy exercise. Walker cites a 1998 Cleveland study that shows that parks users aged 50 and older who used the city's parks systems "were found [to be] significantly healthier than non-park users and reported feeling 'renewed' after using the park, with greater frequency of use linked to better health. These active users also reported fewer physician visits" (p. 3). There is no reason to believe that the same tangible health benefits so evident in the Cleveland study would not be reproduced in other urban populations. Indeed, a significant amount of research on the self-reported benefits of recreation in parks has identified positive outcomes relating to health and fitness. Although most of this research has been conducted on national parks and not urban parks, the results hold in both types. (Shultis, 2003).

Another important public health outcome related to the usage of parks is connected to their ability to foster psychological rest, relaxation, and stress relief, even with short exposure (Shultis). There are two significant theories on the matter. The first posits that natural settings allow visitors a psychological 'escape': By taking them out of their normal settings and circumstances and immersing them in a space where they can passively engage in nature, parks have the power to relieve mental fatigue associated with sustained directed attention, or 'attention fatigue'. The second theory suggests that humans have a built-in positive connection to natural environments for evolutionary reasons (Shultis).

Numerous therapeutic programs serving different needs have been developed to take advantage of the public health values of parks. These programs are often referred to as wilderness therapy, outdoor behaviour health care, experiential therapy, and adventure therapy. Benefits include improved self-concept, diminished drug abuse, lower recidivism, and more pro-social outcomes. These benefits are attributed to the escape from normal settings/everyday life, the appeal of natural environments, which help to maintain participation rates, and the action required by recreation and its relatively immediate results (Shultis).

Importantly, it has been suggested that the unique psychological benefits of parks are increasingly under threat due to increasing levels of commercial activity in parks, which makes 'escape' and relaxation more difficult. In particular it has been suggested that trends favouring fiscally conservative policies such as decreasing park funding, increasing user fees, turning to corporate sponsorship, and privatizing parks and/or parks maintenance and management may shift natural/protected areas into areas of consumerism, diminishing if not eliminating some of their unique health benefits (Shultis). Indeed, we have witnessed this trend in Toronto with the recent reform to the City's naming and sponsorship policies, which now allow for corporate naming of park facilities, as well other forms of advertising in parks.

2.5 ECONOMIC VALUE

Finally, parks can provide cities and communities with quantifiable economic benefits (beyond those associated with increased social capital, or reduced health and social costs) through job opportunities, tourism benefits, and as spaces for economic activity.

As noted above, existing parks programs in North America offer job training opportunities for youth through both volunteerism opportunities and paid internship programs. Parks may also help at-risk and unemployed and underemployed adults access the labour market through similar work experience programs. New York City's Prospect Park runs a welfare-to-work program that trains recent welfare recipients as parks maintenance workers (Walker, p. 3), and the highly participatory model of community engagement in Toronto's Dufferin Grove Park has helped at risk youth through skill building opportunities (Friends of Dufferin Grove Park, 2011).

The role of parks in the tourist industry may be significant as well, as parks may be tourist destinations in and of themselves or home to events and activities that attract and appeal to tourists as much as they do to locals. While it is difficult to estimate the exact tourism value in parks, one estimate suggests that the collective benefit of parks' tourism value in San Diego was approximately $40 million in 2006 (Harnik & Welle, 2009). Another estimate from the Trust for Public Land, a US based non-profit, suggests that Seattle parks added over $30 million in collective benefit to the city in 2009 due to their tourism value alone (Trust for Public Land, 2011).

Parks can also act as spaces for certain types of economic activity, with farmers' markets being a prominent example. Most interestingly, a 2006 University of British Columbia study led by David Connell suggests that there are highly local economic benefits to farmers' markets. At the time, the study found that British Columbians spent $65.3 million at farmers' markets, as well as $53.2 million at businesses located near the farmers' markets during operational days, representing a significant value to local economies ("Impact of Farmers Markets Pegged at 118.5 Million", November 9). In addition, these types of markets may act as incubators of small businesses by allowing new producers and products entry to

markets with low costs and minimal barriers to entry, as well as networking opportunities (Sanderson et al., 2005). While not all farmers' markets are held in city parks, many seasonal take advantage of parks space to bring local growers and consumers together. So, while the above figures are more comprehensive, we can extrapolate from them urban parks' farmers' markets economic value.

2.6 RELATIONSHIP AMONG VALUES, PHYSICALITY OF SPACE, AND COMMUNITY NEEDS

The realization of any of these various park values requires the availability of park space and design elements to facilitate them, as well as communities to utilize them. This is particularly evident with public health values, which we use as an example below, but generally applies to all park values.

Ask any urban planner or design architect and he or she will most certainly concede to the importance of design in the creation of healthy cities. As the Lancet Report Shaping Cities for Health (Rydin et al, 2012) outlines, urban health advantages must be actively created through planning and policy interventions around such considerations as transit, education, health services, sanitation systems, and green infrastructure. As such, parks and green spaces provide much more than opportunities for relaxation, enjoyment, and recreation, but also, in today's parlance, for active living and social integration. Indeed, there is strong evidence to support the claim that access to parks and green spaces increases frequency of exercise, thereby decreasing levels of obesity and its associated problems.

A 2006 report out of Alberta asks why the majority of Albertans do not engage in physical activity despite understanding the health, social, and economic benefits of doing so: "Studies show that physical, social, economic and cultural environments strongly shape our potential to make the changes necessary for health." (ARPA, 4). In other words, environmental factors such as access to safe and affordable sites for leisure activity affect Albertans' activity levels, or lack thereof. In terms of physical infrastructure, the report concludes that "[p]eople and communities need well designed, safe, functional, inviting facilities, parks and trails. There is a direct correlation between physical activity levels and access to a

well-kept system of indoor and outdoor recreation facilities that meets local, community and regional needs" (5).

Access and community needs are the key determinants in this equation: parks users are more apt to engage in a park if it is not only easily accessible but also if it meets their needs. A paucity of parks exists in poor North American neighbourhoods, and there is a correlation among poverty, obesity, and poor health outcomes. Beyond the question of access, a needs assessment of any particular community will likely reveal differences at the level of design, location, management structure, and programming, amongst others. According to Leonard E. Phillips (1996), the urban park is very class conscious (6). Successful middle class recreation programs are not always so easily replicated in poorer, inner city neighbourhoods due to varying socio-cultural interests and economic factors. This is precisely where options for open community engagement processes must be considered. Furthermore, for Phillips, community consultations on design and parks management processes are essential not only for determining appropriate facilities and programming but, perhaps more importantly, to facilitate access and a sense of local pride among community members and parks users (7).

In addition to the socio-demographic differences among community members that may impact their needs, as noted above, there are also organizational differences. Community engagement in parks can be found in at least two main forms: i) a community of individual 'casual' users and ii) an organized community of associations, clubs and groups. An organized community may at times be able to exert different and greater political influence and garner more consultation opportunities than casual individual users, impacting the design and programming of the park and the availability and distribution of values. Obviously, certain socio-demographics may have higher levels of civic engagement and organization than others. Our own research, outlined below in Section 3, reveals a high representation of middle and upper middle class members of active parks groups.

14

Organized community engagement has the potential to grow organically over time, bringing in more organized (vs. individual) park users due to its own internal logic. For example, a tai chi or walking club is likely to promote itself to some degree and can be expected to expand over time. This potentially increases the realization of social, economic, and health values accruing to participants and broader society. Thus, organized community engagement has the potential to increase regular usage and attract new users. In contrast to individual engagement, organized group engagement also facilitates the realization and unique benefits of social capital values.

As the city's population grows we expect to see increases in individual and organized community engagement in Toronto's parks. In addition to this growth factor, as organizations such as Park People,[1] and even the city's media, push for more organized community engagement, we would expect organized community engagement to grow in the near term.

3. PARKS AND THE TORONTO LANDSCAPE

Throughout 2012, we formally interviewed active members of four Toronto Friends of the Park groups, one non profit, and two advisory committees. Interviews were conducted in person and follow-up questions and discussions took place via email. Though we spoke informally to many other groups and stakeholders, only the formal interviews will be considered in this section. As mentioned above, all respondents and affiliated groups will remain anonymous. We compile our data and general findings in the chart below and make best practice recommendations based on our analysis of said data.

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[1] Park People is a local charity working to improve parks across the City: http://www.parkpeople.ca/.

3.1 INTERVIEW FINDINGS

The following chart outlines the major themes discussed with and by interviewees.

	PARK 1 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 2 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 3 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 4 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 5 NON PROFIT	PARK 6 ADVISORY COMMITTEE	PARK 7 ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Physical Description	Parkette; fire pit; playground	Urban wilderness /wetland; bird watching; hiking, cycling, rollerblading, and fishing; no pets policy; educational programs; 500 ha	Baseball diamonds, multi-purpose sports field, tennis courts, volleyball court, dog off leash area, wading pool, children's playground, and ice rink; community workshops and programming; art festivals and events; weekly summer farmers' market; 8.5 ha	City destination for recreation and leisure; music & art festivals; weekly summer farmers' market; baseball diamonds, tennis courts, wading pools, multi-use fields, outdoor hockey pad and jogging trails; 1.5 ha	Baseball diamond, sports field, dog off leash area, natural ice rink; weekly summer farmers' market; sports association; food coop	City destination for recreation and leisure; ball diamonds, dog off leash area, pool, wading pool, splash pads, playgrounds, outdoor rinks, and sports fields; wildlife and rare plant species; natural areas and walking trails, gardens, pond, zoo, restaurant; 161 ha	Picnic area, wading pool, and children's playground; officially owned by an external organization and run by the City; various community programs; 1.8 ha

	PARK 1 **FRIENDS OF GROUP**	**PARK 2** **FRIENDS OF GROUP**	**PARK 3** **FRIENDS OF GROUP**	**PARK 4** **FRIENDS OF GROUP**	**PARK 5** **NON PROFIT**	**PARK 6** **ADVISORY COMMITTEE**	**PARK 7** **ADVISORY COMMITTEE**
Park Demographic	Young families with children, who displaced drug users, criminals, and prostitutes as the neighborhood gentrified,	Urban wilderness explorers; school groups; families;	Multiple users from within and without neighborhood	Young parents and children; dog walkers; local residents; youth; 20-somethings; 30-somethings; urban visitors	Parents and young children; diverse neighborhood population	Diverse users from around Toronto and beyond	Multiples users within and without neighborhood; lunch and respite destination for nearby office and retail workers
Group Demographic	Upwardly mobile families with children	Data unavailable	Adults (ages 30-50) with children up to age 12	Young parents; upper middle class	White middle class	Older adults	Upper middle class; business types

	PARK 1 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 2 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 3 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 4 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 5 NON PROFIT	PARK 6 ADVISORY COMMITTEE	PARK 7 ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Decision Making /Governance Processes	Data unavailable	Advocacy group run by 2 co-chairs plus a committee of concerned citizens	One person is in charge of the group while others sign on to lead individual initiatives; some individuals leading park initiatives are not members of the group but do have open lines of communication with the group	Steering Committee with a rotating Chair elected informally; non-hierarchical collective decision-making processes guided by ideals of equity, negotiation, and inclusion	Not for Profit group led by seven directors—participation determined by current directors; interested in historical lands surrounding park and does not get involved in programming, which is taken up by other groups and individuals	Initially, the group included numerous stakeholders and was formally structured with bylaws; over the years, one stakeholder group took over, narrowing the decision making process to best suit one specific agenda; the resulting advisory group is smaller and has less power vis-à-vis the City	Group of official community stakeholders chaired by local Councillor; involved only in larger governance decisions, not programming in the park, which is organized by other groups

	PARK 1 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 2 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 3 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 4 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 5 NON PROFIT	PARK 6 ADVISORY COMMITTEE	PARK 7 ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Community Engagement /Communica-tions Strategy	Facebook; community flyers; recognition of limited outreach success due in part to major language and cultural barriers to engagement (and therefore decision making)	Membership program; information sent to members through the mail, website, and email campaigns; published nature resources on land stewardship; lead activities such as walks and tours	Group galvanized by one incident that saw the City respond by fencing off the park—residents fought against fencing and formed to continue engagement with the park; informal bi-annual meetings attended by approx. 15 people; blog; listserv; Facebook; communication to local schools	3-4 community meetings/year; communication via website, Twitter, Facebook, and targeted outreach to community groups; awareness of limited diversity within group	1 monthly meeting and an annual general meeting open to the public; two websites; newsletters; Twitter	Highly involved core volunteers work with the City and other park groups/ stakeholders to offer a variety of activities (i.e. tours, public education, signage, tai chi, habitat restoration and stewardship) and participate in policy discussions; closely engaged with nearby Residents' Associations; communication via email	Dissemination of flyers in both English and Chinese; communication at local schools and educational institutions; word of mouth; limited participation of minority groups in decisions making processes, despite their participation in park events and programs

	PARK 1 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 2 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 3 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 4 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 5 NON PROFIT	PARK 6 ADVISORY COMMITTEE	PARK 7 ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Fundraising	No fundraising--is interested in learning more about how to fundraise	Membership fees pay cost of communica-tions; no other fundraising efforts	No fundraising	Targeted fundraising for large-scale projects organized through councillor's office or through community or non-profit groups involved in the park; donations and filming crew fees provide limited and unreliable source of funds	Numerous fundraising initiatives: donor wall, community campaign, on-line donations, City Parks and Trees Foundation funding, external grants, and a project reserve fund set up through local City Councillor	One park component is a charity and raises funds mostly for its own operations and on occasion for other park groups' activities; because the land is City-owned and leased to private businesses, no other fundraising is permitted in the park	All fundraising conducted by an external yet related institution

	PARK 1 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 2 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 3 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 4 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 5 NON PROFIT	PARK 6 ADVISORY COMMITTEE	PARK 7 ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Other /Concerns /Recommen-dations	Feels an absolute benefit from engagement, including community cohesion, social capital and "cross pollination" among local stakeholders, as well as physical park clean-up and upkeep; suggests the City look ahead and create a transparent 20 year long range plan for the park to guide on-the-ground planning;	N/A	Increased engagement has brought physical improvements and increased support and attention from local Councillor and City Parks and Recreation Department; acquiring permits for larger events is not only expensive but bureaucratic and time-consuming;	Definite improvements to green space and programming have resulted from group's work; effective working relationship with City Parks and Recreation Department lessens potential pain of permits required for programming and events	Since its inception, this group has noticed an increase in community bonds and connections, alongside increased support and participation in park-related programming and events	Constant concern for volunteer safety, knowledge, and training (particularly around habitat stewardship activities); volunteer model seems untenable as key players are hard to replace; recommend term limits to inspire involvement from younger generation	Difficulties engaging park user population given the park's use by organized outside groups (i.e. yoga in the park, film crews, art groups, etc.)

	PARK 1 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 2 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 3 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 4 FRIENDS OF GROUP	PARK 5 NON PROFIT	PARK 6 ADVISORY COMMITTEE	PARK 7 ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Other /Concerns /Recommen- dations (con't)	recommend City or organization create a resource guide for park groups with template outreach and event flyers, funding options, stakeholders engagement, and a policy kit detailing City policy and processes (i.e. permits) for park events		recommend a parks "point person" at the City to liaise directly with parks groups to streamline regulation and permit processes				

3.2 DATA ANALYSIS

Though we have included only a limited number of parks in this study, the themes that emerged through these in-depth conversations reflect similar themes, challenges, and concerns identified by the many other parks stakeholders (leaders, users, community and not for profit groups, City staff, City councillors, etc.) with whom we consulted on for this and other on-going community engagement projects and discussions over the past number of years. The data reveals the following mix of encouraging and discouraging trends:

3.2.1 ENCOURAGING TRENDS

- City parks are vibrant public spaces utilized by a variety of users for a variety of free activities and events
- Public events held at City parks contribute to healthy communities, municipal pride, and city building by bringing diverse audiences together to share in common experiences
- City parks provide essentially unlimited access to increased biodiversity and recreational opportunities, contributing thus to public and social health outcomes
- Families are introducing young children to parks at an early age, seemingly combating the trend towards increased and damaging screen time (i.e. television, tablets, smart phones) and inactivity amongst our youngest generations
- Gentrification of neighborhoods is leading to gentrification of neighborhood parks as new residents with resources and time take on park beautification, community engagement, and neighborhood safety projects
- Engagement in parks groups, and to a lesser degree in parks activities and events, builds social capital through the development of relationships and networks that extend beyond the park experience
- Parks with organized community and/or advocacy groups tend to get results, even if these may be smaller victories than originally sought/anticipated

3.2.2 DISCOURAGING TRENDS

- Park users create and/or propagate antagonistic 'us' vs. 'them' relationships among different groups of parks users (i.e. yoga and tai chi practitioners vs. children vs. dog walkers)

- Gentrification of neighborhoods is affecting traditional park users, forcing so-called 'undesirable' users further into the margins

- Because parks groups tend to be volunteer-run, upwardly mobile English-speaking (upper) middle class residents with specific agendas are typically the ones making decisions, making groups less democratic despite apparent internal democratic processes

- It is unclear what the advantages/disadvantages of different types of parks groups (i.e. Friends of Groups, Advisory Committees) are as roles, duties, responsibilities, and membership are not clearly defined

- Fundraising appetites and abilities vary tremendously from park group to group and often come down to councillor or other City staff support

- Groups develop different kinds of relationships with City employees, particularly councillors, giving those with better relationships a financial and organizational advantage over those whose councillors are less involved

- City policy requirements such as permits often hamper community plans for potential community engagement events

3.3 BEST PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings, we recommend the following for making Toronto (and other district) parks and parks groups more equitable, engaging, and accessible to a wider and more diverse audience:

- Ensure parks groups are represented by multiple stakeholders with potentially opposing views

- Whenever possible, group volunteer leadership positions should impose mandatory term limits to foster new ideas and allow for involvement of new residents and new generations

- Engage diverse audiences by decreasing barriers to access such as language; provide training to potential leaders

- For residents unable to make on-going volunteer commitment, hold annual meetings and/or public consultations on long term plans and high priority or contentious issues

- The City should provide a long-term planning vision for City parks so groups understand what priority areas and parameters they are working within

- The City should provide all parks groups with a "parks point person" who can help them resolve conflicts and navigate through permit requirements

- Ensure groups have democratic channels while avoiding overly formalized structures, which can get in the way of action

4. CONCLUSION

It is clear that parks have many interrelated values to parks users and society in general, including but not limited to:

- Aesthetic values

- Ecological values and environmental protection

- Youth programs and other social program values

- Public health values through active and passive use, as well as therapeutic programming

- Social capital value

- Economic values through job creation opportunities, work experience programs, tourism benefits and as spaces of economic activity

While parks on their own can carry ecological values, the remaining values accrue to people and necessarily require engagement. Insofar as 'public space' is a physical social construct, it requires planning and design work, which in turn influences the potential values and outcomes achieved. Some space may, for instance, favour certain recreational health outcomes, while others are designed for more passive aesthetic and/or psychological benefits. Generally, select values may only be realized when design and availability also meet community needs, which can in part be assessed via consultation processes. To be sure, given the inherent physicality and limits of public space, tensions arise when different stakeholders hold and advocate for competing values. Depending on your point of view, corporate sponsorship and business activity in parks, for example, can be seen as either detracting from a key health, aesthetic, or therapeutic value of parks or advancing the economic value of the same.

These kinds of competing visions both among and within parks necessitate the push for fair and democratic grassroots community engagement in parks groups. It is important to remember that democracies are potentially contentious precisely because they open up space for competing ideologies, opinions, and viewpoints. As democratic entities, parks groups should be open and willing to accept and follow the ebbs and flows of debate and discourse. To this end, we recommend that parks groups be as open and inclusive as possible, engaging diverse stakeholders with potentially competing visions for parks space. To facilitate accessibility and inclusion of diverse groups, we recommend decreasing language barriers by providing translations/interpretation and/or simply speaking in and disseminating information in plain English in communications and at meetings and community consultation events. In addition, we believe strongly that imposing mandatory term limits on park group leaders is necessary to avoid creating autocracies.

Of course, as parks are open public spaces owned and operated by the City, parks groups require the assistance of City staff and officials to turn their park plans into reality. We reiterate the abovementioned recommendation for a parks "point person" at the City available to liaise directly with grassroots parks groups to inform groups on permitting processes and regulations, and, when appropriate, to connect groups to councillors and other City staff.

Finally, we make these recommendations for the purpose of enhancing the parks experience for all Torontonians. Individuals involved in parks groups perform a valuable public service for their community with proven economic, ecological, and social health outcomes. We would like to thank all those individuals who generously shared their experience as parks leaders and volunteers with us and salute the many other parks volunteers who make Toronto a truly wonderful world-class city.

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