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April 16, 2013

Councillor Norm Kelly, Chair
Parks & Environment Committee
100 Queen Street West, Suite C43
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

Dear Councillor Kelly:

Re: PE 20.1 Parks Plan 2013 – 2017 Report

The purpose of this letter is to express my support for the proposed Parks Plan, which is being considered by the Parks and Environment Committee on April 22, 2013. The Plan's mission is to enrich communities and lives of Toronto residents by designing, building and operating quality parks. This is well aligned with Toronto Public Health's (TPH's) mission to reduce health inequalities and improve the health of the whole population. Abundant, high quality and accessible parks and trails support the health of our city as a whole and can contribute to the reduction of health inequities. The Plan incorporates many aspects of the Healthy City approach outlined in the TPH report, *Healthy Toronto by Design*¹ and the recommendations in my November 2011 report to the Board of Health, *Improving Health and Health Equity through the Toronto Parks Plan*.²

A key priority of the Plan is to encourage the public's use and involvement in parks, while at the same time preserving these spaces for future generations. This is important because Toronto's parks have a key role to play in reducing many of the risk factors for chronic disease, including physical inactivity, poor air quality, lack of access to healthy foods and exposure to ultra-violet (UV) radiation. In particular, parks and trails provide opportunities for sport, recreation and active transportation such as walking and cycling. Numerous studies link access to local parks and greenways with increased physical activity and physical fitness. Access to green space has also been found to benefit mental health.²

Parks also support inclusive and safe communities. The Plan includes a number of recommended actions to increase resident, community group and stakeholder engagement in the parks system, including development of an urban park ranger program, a community engagement framework and a centralized volunteer management system. Such community involvement builds social cohesion and community capacity by bringing together people to share knowledge and skills to achieve common goals. Social environments and support networks are key determinants of health.³

The Plan also recognizes and addresses high public demand for amenities such as community shade. Shade, whether natural or constructed, protects people, especially children, from

exposure to UV radiation, and decreases the risk of skin cancer. Vegetation in parks, especially trees, also improves air quality, which benefits respiratory health.² Parks, Forestry and Recreation (PF&R) and TPH collaborate in the application of the City's Shade Policy and Guidelines. PF&R leads implementation of the Guidelines through their ongoing development of design standards that prioritize shade provision in areas where the risk of exposure to UV radiation is high.

While Toronto's parks and trails are beneficial to the health of all residents, some communities have greater needs than others. Compared to people with a higher income, Toronto's lower income residents are significantly more likely to have diabetes,⁴ and to experience hospitalization or death due to heart disease.² Lower income individuals also have lower participation in physical activity and other recreational activities⁵ and are more likely to report having 'fair' or 'poor' mental health.⁶ Toronto researchers have also shown that lower income neighbourhoods have the highest prevalence of diabetes and often have fewer health supporting services such as parks and recreation resources.²

In the report *Improving Health and Health Equity through the Toronto Parks Plan*, I encouraged PF&R to consider the needs of individuals and communities that experience higher rates of chronic disease and other health risk factors when developing the Plan. I am pleased to see that principles of equity will be incorporated in park design initiatives and system planning, including standards for shade provision, an updated parkland acquisition strategy, a new communications and outreach strategy, enhanced reporting standards, improvements to the permitting system, and facilities planning. Specifically, the proposed 20 year PF&R facilities plan will provide an opportunity to incorporate equity considerations in the distribution and development of new parks facilities such as playgrounds, sports fields and ball courts.

Toronto Public Health staff would be pleased to continue to work with PF&R staff to maximize the Plan's contribution to the reduction of health inequities in Toronto. We can provide PF&R with data regarding health outcomes and related health risk factors. This research will assist in determining priorities and targeting investments for parks acquisition and programming across the city such that the Parks Plan provides opportunities to improve health outcomes for those with greatest need.

I commend PF&R for their leadership in promoting health and reducing health inequities through the Parks Plan. Toronto Public Health has a long history of working in collaboration with PF&R and welcomes the opportunity to strengthen this partnership. If you have any questions related to these comments, please contact Monica Campbell, Director Healthy Public Policy at mcampbe2@toronto.ca or 416-338-0661.

Sincerely,

Dr. David McKeown
Medical Officer Of Health

copy: Councillor Joe Mihevc, Chair, Board of Health
Jim Hart, General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division
Richard Ubbens, Director, Parks Branch, Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division

¹ Toronto Public Health (2011). *Healthy Toronto by design*. Available at www.toronto.ca/health/hphe/pdf/healthytoronto_oct04_11.pdf

² Toronto Public Health, (November 2011). "Improving Health and Health Equity through the Toronto Parks Plan", Toronto.

³ Public Health Agency of Canada. What Makes Canadians Healthy or Unhealthy? Accessed April 11, 2013 at: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ph-sp/determinants/determinants-eng.php#unhealthy>

⁴ Toronto Public Health. (2011). Surveillance Indicator Series: *Diabetes*. Available at: <http://www.toronto.ca/health/map/indicators/pdf/diabetes.pdf>

⁵ Toronto Public Health. (2011). Surveillance Indicator Series: *Physical Activity*. Available at: www.toronto.ca/health/map/indicators/pdf/physicalactivity.pdf

⁶ Toronto Public Health. (2011). Surveillance Indicator Series: *Self-Reported Mental Health*. Available at: http://www.toronto.ca/health/map/indicators/pdf/mental_health.pdf