



## STAFF REPORT ACTION REQUIRED

### Update on Review of Permitting Procedures for Park Events and Volunteer Activities

<b>Date:</b>	July 30, 2014
<b>To:</b>	Parks and Environment Committee
<b>From:</b>	Acting General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation
<b>Wards:</b>	All
<b>Reference Number:</b>	P:\2014\Cluster A\PFR\PE29-081514-AFS#19977

#### SUMMARY

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The purpose of this report is to respond to a request of the Parks and Environment Committee for Parks, Forestry and Recreation (PFR) to report back with additional information relating to the Division's submission of a report on permitting procedures for park events and volunteer activities, which was before them on June 23, 2014.

This report will provide information on:

- options for a permit fee multi-use discount option, including implications of lowering the permit cost cap to \$900, \$800 and \$700 for 'parks friends' groups and non-profit, charitable and faith-based groups;
- a one-year pilot project that reduces permit fees for local park volunteer groups and potential financial impacts; and
- the timeline for implementing an online permitting system with a mechanism to ensure permit holders receive permits at least one month prior to their scheduled event(s).

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

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**The Acting General Manager of Parks, Forestry and Recreation recommends that the Parks and Environment Committee:**

1. receive this report for information.

## **Financial Impact**

There are no financial impacts resulting from the receipt of this report.

## **DECISION HISTORY**

At its meeting of June 23, 2014, the Parks and Environment Committee amended Item PE28.2, titled "Review of Permitting Procedures for Park Events and Volunteer Activities," and requested the Acting General Manager of Parks, Forestry and Recreation to report back to the August 15<sup>th</sup> 2014, Parks and Environment Committee meeting on:

- a. options for a permit fee multi-use discount option for groups of parks friends and non-profit, charitable and faith-based groups and that the report include the implications of lowering the permit cost cap to \$900, \$800 and \$700;
- b. creating a one year pilot project that reduces permit fees for local park volunteer community groups; such report to include potential financial impacts; and
- c. the implementation of an online permitting system in the first quarter of 2015 and a mechanism to ensure that permit holders receive permits at least one month prior to their events.

(Parks and Environment Committee – June 23, 2014, Item PE28.2)

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2014.PE28.2>

## **ISSUE BACKGROUND**

Permits contribute to park use, programming and animation by enabling individuals and groups to reserve park space. Park permits allow users access to specific spaces or facilities on a regular or occasional basis, prevent conflict between users, provide information that park staff need in order to plan for service delivery, and can help to prevent the overuse of park lands, natural environments and facilities. The revenue generated from park permits also supports the maintenance and operation of parks.

Customer service surveys indicate that the primary reason for visiting parks is to enjoy nature, but that the popularity of participating in organized activities is growing. The more people using a space or the more events that take place, the more maintenance is required to keep parks and amenities in good condition. Permit fees that event organizers and permit holders pay go toward offsetting the increased maintenance costs of the park. The Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division will continue to provide for fair and equitable access to its facilities for organizations and individuals across the City of Toronto through priorities outlined in the Division's Parks Plan and Recreation Service Plan.

## COMMENTS

### Permit Fee Multi-Use Discount Options

Parks, Forestry & Recreation balances community use of its assets between permitted activity and casual park use and classifies its permitted use under two principles which are subject to different policies and guidelines.

1. **One-time permitted use of space:** The permits for one time permitted use mainly include special events, picnics, and wedding photography. These permits are issued as requested subject to meeting the requirements of other City Divisions and Provincial organizations for the specific type of activity permit is requested. Fees are set by Council per use, and seasonal permitting is not available; however, there are no limits to the number of permits an organization can obtain based on availability at the time of application.
2. **Seasonal use of space:** Seasonal permits are for multiple and recurring seasonal use for the same Community organization. Seasonal or multi-use permits include arenas, swimming pools, sports fields and tennis courts. As seasonal or multiple use permits may result in one group dominating the use of a facility or location and prevent other users access, all multiple use permits are guided by a number of Council-approved Permit Allocation Policies that define access criteria.

Introducing multi-use permits for special events, picnics and other park activities, with an associated policy around multi-use discounts, requires the Division to develop an Allocation Policy for Council approval on a site by site basis, which would be onerous and time consuming for staff, the applicant and Council.

Currently, there are no caps for maximum fees for Special Events and other park use permits. All user fees are approved by Council as a part of the annual Operating Budget process. Council-approved user fees can only be waived by Council subject to meeting the criteria in the City of Toronto's User Fee Policy. Parks, Forestry and Recreation has Council authority to waive up to \$1,000 in permit fees subject to meeting certain criteria. Total fees waived for organizations that have met the conditions totalled \$15,779 in 2013, \$28,029 in 2012 and \$19,721 in 2011. Reducing the Division's authority to waive permit fees from \$1,000 to \$900, \$800 and \$700 would reduce the annual fees waived by an average of \$2,000, \$3,000 and \$4,000 respectively.

Any additional User Fee waivers above \$1,000 are subject to Council approval for organizations that meet the requirements of the Council-approved User Fee policy.

### Pilot for Reduced Permit fees for Local Park Volunteer Groups

All Parks, Forestry and Recreation permitted parks and facilities use is for not-for-profit community groups. Currently, commercial special events are allowed on a small number

of parks as a part of a pilot project and are restricted to one per month, per park. A key principle of the Council-approved Permit Allocation Policy for sports fields is to provide fair and equitable access to its facilities for organizations and individuals across the City of Toronto.

The majority of Parks Forestry and Recreation user fees are not administered on a full cost recovery basis and are subsidized for economic and societal benefits. The waiving of any Council approved user fees, requires a review of eligibility criteria, criteria weight, the financial impact of the waiver, review of the waiver applicability annually, and justification for the waiver, including equity in access to services.

In addition, Parks Forestry & Recreation endeavors to ensure that the intended outcome of the Council approved Permit Allocation Policy is achieved through the manner in which permits are administered. Typical community groups that permit our parks include faith groups, community associations, charities that support local services such as community daycare centres, school groups who use the permitted space for fundraising and other volunteer activities. Reducing permit fees only for local park volunteer groups would have fairness and equity implications. The City cannot create an institutional preference for certain types of groups or users over others through reduced permit fees. To maintain equitable access for all users, the City endeavors to apply the same rules to all park users. For this reason, PFR is not recommending a pilot project to reduce permit fees for local park volunteer groups.

There are currently two options available to volunteer groups for using parks free of permit fees and insurance - through City organized volunteer activities, or Councillor-sponsored events.

## **Park Volunteers**

Parks, Forestry and Recreation recognizes that volunteerism improves and benefits the City of Toronto. Parks can support volunteers who participate in volunteer efforts that contribute directly to the improvement of park landscapes, features, amenities, and facilities and do not replace Parks staff. This can include:

- Volunteering with PFR through established volunteer opportunities (as posted on the City of Toronto Parks web site)
- Volunteering individually through community, non-profit, corporate or park Friends of Groups that have coordinated their initiatives with Parks in order to engage in such activities as:
  - Park clean-ups
  - Heritage tours
  - Community supported horticulture
  - Mulching
  - Tree planting

- Trail restoration
- Invasive species removal
- Volunteering for official City events in parks (e.g. Live Green, etc.)
- Volunteering directly through coordination with Parks staff to augment/support the work of Park staff.

Park volunteers working in these varied capacities, in coordination with the local Park Supervisor, are not required to obtain a permit and are covered under the City's liability insurance for volunteers.

Local Park Volunteer groups that would like to contribute directly to the improvement of park landscapes, features, amenities and facilities should contact Parks, Forestry and Recreation's Partnership Development Unit with proposals for City-sponsored volunteer events.

It is worth noting that while the total number of park volunteer groups and future demand for volunteer events is not known, an estimate can be made based on current permit levels for existing not-for profit group park events. In 2013 the revenues from these permits was over \$300,000. However, historical permit levels and usage may not be an accurate indicator of future demand after permit fees are reduced or waived.

## **Implementation of an Online Permitting System**

Parks, Forestry and Recreation is currently working to implement an online permitting system, as recommended in the Recreation Service Plan 2013-2017 and the Parks Plan 2013-2017. This online permitting system will allow users to book facilities and services across the Division, including permitting space in City parks or recreation centres.

It is estimated that this system will be online and operational in 2015. Until this time, the Division will pilot an online application form for Outdoor Special Event Applications. PFR will also provide more and better information on how to apply for park permits.

The Parks Forestry and Recreation's Customer Service Unit (i.e. the Permit Section) currently ensures that permit holders receive permits at least one month prior to their events by communicating with special event permit holders from the previous year in January and February to allow them the opportunity to pick a date and plan their application. Once an application is received, the Permit Section holds the space for the organization until all approvals from other City Divisions and Provincial Agencies are complete. Depending on the nature of the event, authorization may be required from other City Divisions or Provincial organizations. This could include Municipal Licensing and Standards, Toronto Hydro and the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario. Each of these organizations must be given time to conduct approvals prior to an event. Parks, Forestry and Recreation does not have any control over other Divisions' or organizations' service levels or turnaround times. A permit is issued only when the

requirements are complete, however, the date and permit location is held for the group. Information on the permit process is available on the PFR website and encourages all applicants to apply as early as possible. In order to receive a permit four weeks prior to the event date, organizations are encouraged to apply ten weeks prior to the event.

## **CONTACT**

Ann Ulusoy, Director, Management Services, Parks, Forestry and Recreation  
Tel: 416-392-8190, Fax: 416-397-4899, Email: [aulusoy@toronto.ca](mailto:aulusoy@toronto.ca)

Rick Powers, Director, Policy and Strategic Planning, Parks, Forestry and Recreation  
Tel: 416-395-6065, Fax: 416-397-4899, Email: [rpowers@toronto.ca](mailto:rpowers@toronto.ca)

## **SIGNATURE**

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Janie Romoff, Acting General Manager  
Parks, Forestry and Recreation