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Parks and Environment Committee
c/o Carol Kaustinen
10th floor, West Tower, City Hall
100 Queen Street West
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

September 17, 2015

RE: PE.5.3 Parks, Forestry and Recreation Service Levels

Dear Members of the Parks and Environment Committee:

City Staff's report on service levels within Parks, Forestry and Recreation points out a number of key issues and areas of opportunity to improve both our park system and our engagement with Torontonians in their local parks. Specifically, it outlines a lack of resources and staff to support community engagement in the Parks Branch as well as a lack of funding for maintenance and horticulture.

The Parks Plan was envisioned as a five-year service plan that would take our parks to 2017. It was strongly supported by Park People and unanimously approved by City Council in 2013. We are now coming up to the year 2016, and no new operating money has been allocated to move many of its key initiatives forward, despite requests being submitted by City Staff for consideration in past budgets. While progress has been made within the Division's existing budget, new investments are necessary if we are to meet the commitments in this Council-approved plan.

Among other goals, the Parks Plan was centered around increasing support for community engagement, raising the bar on park maintenance, and including more support for urban agriculture and horticulture.

While we recognize the City is facing budget pressures in areas such as affordable housing and transit, investing in our parks is a relatively low-cost investment with a high return of social, environmental, economic, and health benefits. An investment in city resources to work with

communities has an even higher return as it not only builds strong communities but helps City Staff unleash the potential of community volunteers and energy.

A recent Toronto Public Health report, *Green City: Why Nature Matters to Health*, points out that maintaining high-quality green space is important, particularly for lower income communities, to “fully realize the health benefits of green space.” Allocating more funding to increase park maintenance in high-use times and maintaining horticulture within our parks is not a frill, but a crucial aspect of creating a healthier, more equitable city.

As a charitable organization working throughout the entire City of Toronto to build strong neighbourhoods by improving and animating parks, Park People understands and promotes the benefits of well-maintained, active, high-quality parks and open spaces that become the heart of communities. We have seen firsthand in communities across the city how bringing people out into parks can increase physical activity levels, build connections between neighbours, increase civic engagement, and make our parks more beautiful, safe, and inclusive.

Communities across Toronto gave their time and energy to work with City Staff to develop the Parks Plan. As we near 2016, it’s time to put that plan’s key initiatives into action by making the investments necessary to provide City Staff with the resources they need to work in partnership with communities and organizations like Park People to make our park system the best it can be.

Sincerely,

Dave Harvey
Executive Director, Park People