



Budget Committee c/o Jennifer Forkes
10th floor, West Tower, City Hall
100 Queen Street West
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

January 9, 2017

RE: 2017 Operating and Capital Budgets

Dear Members of the Budget Committee:

This year was an exciting one for public spaces in Toronto. There was the announcement of the Under Gardiner (now The Bentway), Rail Deck Park, a renewed Grange Park, a “super park” in the Lower Don Valley, and strong support for The Green Line.

Toronto is booming in population and we are finally beginning to match that boom by seeding some much-needed investment in new and renewed parks in neighbourhoods across the city. But we risk falling behind if we don’t ensure that our budget to maintain those parks keeps pace. Despite all of this growth, the proposed budget would actually cut maintenance funding in our parks this year—and during their busiest use times.

As an independent charity that builds stronger communities by animating and improving parks in all corners of Toronto, Park People believes strong public funding is crucial for a great park system.

This year the proposed operating budget for Parks, Forestry, and Recreation includes a cut of 0.3% from last year. This may seem like a small number, but included within that reduction is maintenance, horticulture, and urban agriculture funds—totalling \$636,000—that were approved in the 2016 budget. The maintenance funds specifically went towards enhanced weekend and evening maintenance in high-use times like summer.

Cutting these from the budget also means we are reversing the first investments the City made towards operating initiatives in the City’s Parks Plan, which was a five-year plan that was meant to take us to 2017. While improvements like new social gathering spaces have been funded from the Plan, City staff note: “funding for operating has been a challenge.” It’s more than a shame to reach the end of the Parks Plan’s lifespan by reversing some of its vital initiatives.

The price of maintaining parkland is rising, too. More people using parks, more activities, and more complex designs means steadily higher costs. In the last three years the cost of maintaining parks has risen about \$600 per hectare. By 2019, it will have increased \$1,000 per

hectare since 2014. All of this makes a 2017 budget that proposes to reduce, or even flat line our investment in parks maintenance, concerning.

This year also saw positive interest from philanthropy in our parks. There was the \$25 million gift to the City from Judy and Wil Matthews for The Bentway and a number of other gifts to projects like the Lower Don Valley “super park.” Since it was launched in early 2013, the Weston Family Parks Challenge, which Park People administers, has invested nearly \$4.5 million in projects around Toronto—almost all outside the downtown.

But let’s be clear: while private donations towards public space can be an important and welcome component of creating a great park system—just like donations to hospitals or public libraries—it is no substitute for a strong base of public funding. Philanthropy should add, not replace. Philanthropy is also not likely to step up and fund such critical core services such as grass-cutting and gardening. Nor should it. If parks are our common grounds, then we must invest in them as such—together.

Since there are no service levels mandated by the Province, the parks operating budget often feels the squeeze come budget time. Cutting funding for maintenance and garden renewal is also not an immediately visible cut—no walking to your favourite park only to find it closed because of budget cuts—but the effect it has on our city is just as real.

Well-maintained, beautiful parks are not a frill, but a crucial component of the social and environmental infrastructure of our city. Research has shown that attractive, clean parks encourage more people to use them and instill a sense of neighbourhood pride, bringing both health and social benefits—benefits that are particularly important in our more underserved neighbourhoods and support the City’s Poverty Reduction Strategy.

We are excited and invigorated by the renewed focus on parks and public spaces in Toronto, by the announcements from Mayor John Tory, and the support from City Councillors across the city. If we are to build a livable, resilient, and socially connected city as we continue to grow in population and density, then we must invest in our parks—and not just by building new parks, but in the money and City staff to keep them as beautiful as the day the ribbon was cut.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D Harvey', written in a cursive style.

Dave Harvey
Executive Director, Park People