

Down- town Parks and Public Realm Plan

Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge that the City of Toronto is located on the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat Confederacy, the Haudenasaunee Confederacy, the Mississaugas of New Credit First Nation, and the Métis people, and is home to many diverse Indigenous peoples. We acknowledge them and others who care for the land as its past, present and future stewards.

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What Kind of City Were We?

In the first half of the 20th century, an expanding industrial city meant that railway lands divided the Downtown from a waterfront devoted to port uses. The arrival of the automobile and, by mid-century, the building of expressways propelled an era of suburbanization. A flight to the suburbs saw many Torontonians seeking quality of life away from the Central Business District, in their own front and back yards and in low-density neighbourhood parks.

By the mid-1970s, City Council had adopted the Central Area Plan. One of its key ideas was the encouragement of residential uses alongside commerce in the Downtown, a first in North America. This led to a reversal of Downtown population decline and helped Toronto avoid the inner-city deterioration experienced in many other cities across the continent. Strong planning policies together with public and private investments set the stage for the expansion of housing, the growth of the Financial District, rapid transit expansion and waterfront regeneration.

Toronto, 1976, Year of the Central Area Plan







What Kind of City Do We Want to Be?

With today's success comes tomorrow's dilemma: How can we preserve our quality of life amid the Downtown's current explosion of growth? Toronto's Downtown in the early 21st century is increasingly defined by the vertical nature of development, its evolving skyline and its establishment as an international hub of arts, culture and creativity. Now comes the opportunity to re-imagine and re-discover the form and identity of our public realm and ultimately, the city itself. Rather than start from scratch, we look within, engaging in articulating the ever-evolving interplay between city and landscape that has shaped Toronto's history.

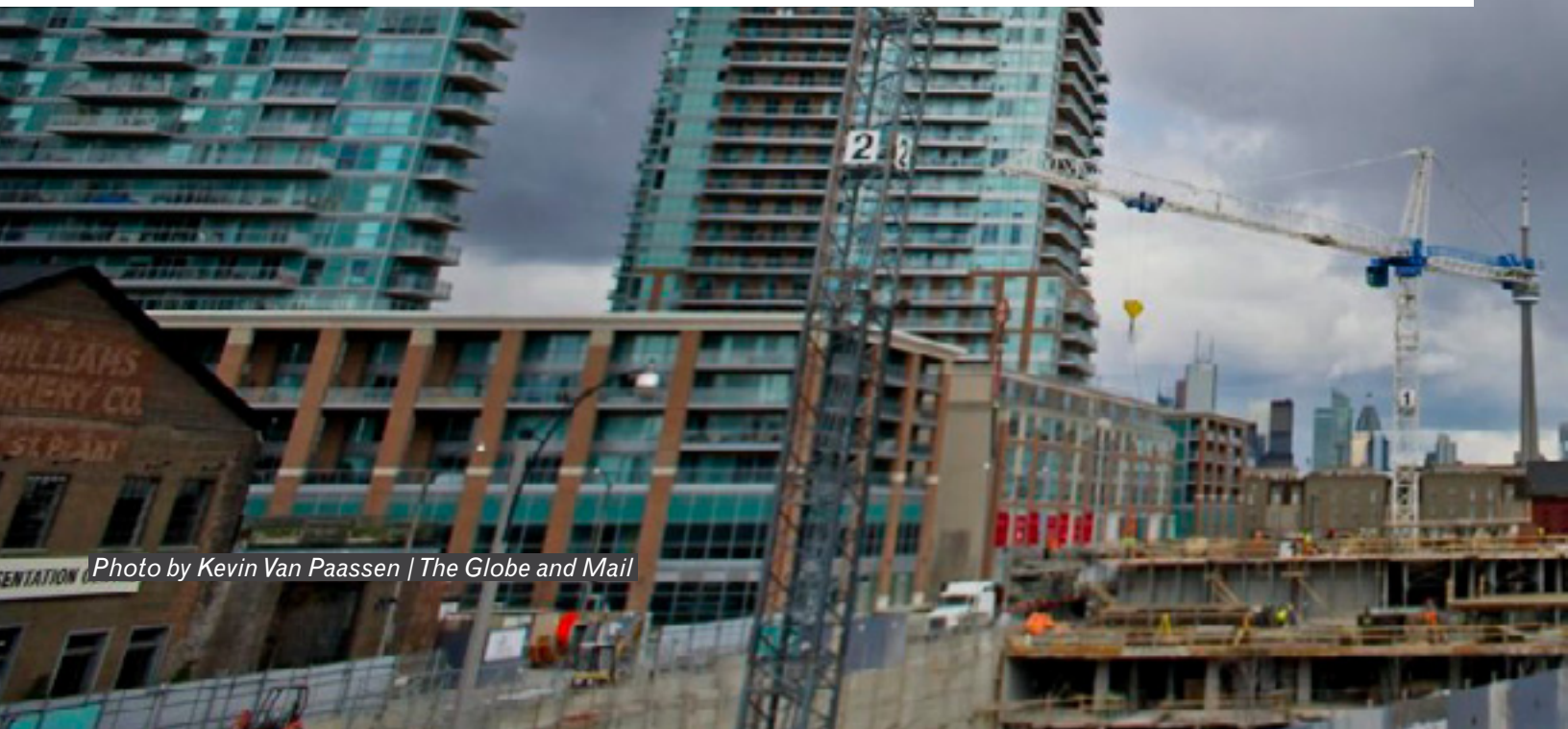


Photo by Kevin Van Paassen | The Globe and Mail



Anytime fitness



Our Civic Identity

Our distinctive skyline, our celebrated human diversity and our inclusive social aspirations; all these unique characteristics contribute to shaping Toronto's contemporary civic identity. How can we now expand this identity to include the lens of our common ground – the public realm? This plan leverages the co-existence and interplay of Toronto's urban and landscape morphology – the colonial grid of streets and historic urban fabric, and our spectacular natural setting of ravines, islands and bluffs – to bring about new connections and a significant transformation of the Downtown's parks and open spaces.







Public Spaces to Support the Heart of the City

Planning for the Downtown's future must consider the unique and diverse roles it plays for the whole of the city: the largest employment centre in the region, a cluster of world-renowned institutions, a thriving shopping and entertainment scene, a hub for arts and culture and a tourist destination. Although the Downtown only accounts for 3 percent of Toronto's land area, it is a place where 1 out of every 10 Torontonians calls home, and which contributes 25 percent of the city's overall tax base.

Downtown is Toronto's gathering place. It is imperative that the quantity, quality and variety of parks and public realm address the needs of a growing number of residents, workers and visitors. The Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan will guide the development of an expanded, improved, connected and accessible network of high-quality parks, streets and open spaces, and will promote healthier, diverse natural systems.





An aerial photograph of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, showing the city skyline, Lake Ontario, and the surrounding landscape. The city is visible in the middle ground, with numerous buildings and a dense urban core. The lake is in the foreground, and the sky is a clear, bright blue with some light clouds. The overall scene is a wide, panoramic view of the city and its waterfront.

Five Transformative Ideas

The Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan addresses one of the most pressing questions facing Toronto: how can we use public space to enhance quality of life within a rapidly growing urban core? It is organized into Five Transformative Ideas to re-imagine, grow and connect public spaces within Downtown Toronto. It has been developed to support the implementation of the Downtown Plan which, as part of the Toronto Official Plan, provides a blueprint for growth and infrastructure over the next 25 years. The Downtown Plan sets the direction for the city centre as the cultural, civic, retail and economic heart of Toronto, and as a great place to live for our current and future generations.



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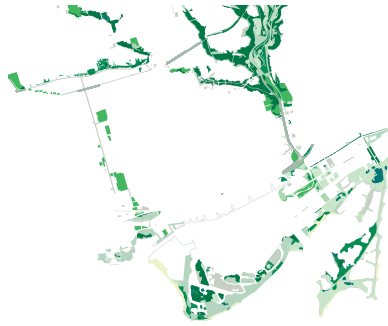
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Executive Summary



The *Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan* (the Plan) establishes a vision and framework designed to achieve an expanded, improved and connected parks and public realm network within Downtown Toronto's mature urban fabric to support future growth. It presents a shared vision to achieve a more desirable and sustainable parks and open space system, an essential component to making Downtown Toronto an attractive place to live, work and visit.

The Plan has been developed to support the implementation of the Downtown Plan (Official Plan Amendment or OPA) which, as part of Toronto's Official Plan, provides a blueprint for growth and infrastructure over the next 25 years. The Downtown Plan (OPA) sets the direction for the city centre as the cultural, civic, retail and economic heart of Toronto, and as a great place to live.

To safeguard liveability, infrastructure must keep pace with growth. Parks and other open spaces are central pieces of infrastructure and a key component of complete communities. Equitable access to parkland is crucial to support urban life, particularly in high-growth, high-density areas like the Downtown. The Plan examines the need for parkland within the context of the Downtown, having consideration for the range of parks and publicly accessible open spaces that exist within the boundaries of the area, projected population growth,

built form directions and needed expansion of the public realm. It integrates key provincial policy directions related to achieving complete communities, and specifically expanded access to an appropriate supply of safe, publicly-accessible open spaces, parks and trails.

The *Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan* serves as the 'Parks Plan' for the core of the city, providing a roadmap for acquisition, expansion and improvements to parkland to address population and employment growth over the next 25 years. It is a framework that sets out a new way of thinking about the design of parks, streets and other publicly accessible open spaces in an intensifying Downtown, to achieve a bold and lasting legacy for future generations.

The Plan is based on Five Transformative Ideas, a set of integrated spatial transformations that build on the assets of all areas in and adjacent to the core to guide how the parks and public realm network will be expanded, improved and connected.

The Five Transformative Ideas include:

- **The Core Circle:** Re-imagine the valleys, bluffs and islands encircling the Downtown as a fully interconnected landscape system and immersive experience.



- **Great Streets:** Enhance the unique characteristics of Downtown's most emblematic streets and make them outstanding civic places and connectors.
- **Shoreline Stitch:** Re-connect the Downtown to the waterfront and link the east and west Core Circle landscapes.
- **Park Districts:** Re-imagine Downtown's distinct districts with parks at their hearts by expanding, improving and connecting neighbourhood parks and public spaces to create a focus for everyday community life.
- **Local Places:** Re-imagine local public spaces to better support public life and expand the utility of our parks and public realm system.

The transformative ideas are presented in the form of an illustrative framework plan, and formalized as a set of initiatives, goals and actions. Together, the ideas establish a clear vision for the Downtown's future urban landscape and approach for moving from ideas to implementation.

Priorities, actions and delivery mechanisms for the Plan are outlined in Chapter 3: Toward Implementation. This chapter is intended to aid in assessing and where feasible implementing the ideas over time. It offers a

pragmatic and adaptable guide that can remain flexible to leverage future opportunities as they arise.

The Parks and Public Realm Plan is based on the work of a diverse collaboration and careful examination of the best available information about the Downtown's current conditions and trends. The recommendations and approaches proposed in the Plan are informed by the 'on-the-ground' experience of residents and stakeholders who shared their ideas and aspirations for the future. A comprehensive parkland provision assessment informed the Plan with an analysis of existing and future parkland need based on estimates of population and employment growth. And a Public Space Public Life (PSPL) Survey, the first of its kind in Toronto, established a baseline of how public space is being used in the Downtown and infuses the Plan with knowledge of how to better design a city for people.

1. Background Analysis and Approach

The basis for the vision

Blueprint for Downtown's Parks and Public Realm

The *Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan* establishes a vision and blueprint for parkland and public realm improvements to support anticipated population and employment growth in Downtown Toronto. It is organized into Five Transformative Ideas, a set of integrated spatial transformations designed to guide how the parks and public realm network will be expanded, improved and connected within the Downtown's mature urban fabric. The ideas build on the assets of all areas in and adjacent to the core to establish a set of goals and actions to assess and where feasible achieve the Plan's vision.

The Plan works at three scales: regional, district and local*. The regional scale addresses the overall structure of the Downtown's public realm. The **Core Circle** and the **Great Streets** operate at this scale, exploring the co-existence and interplay of Toronto's landscape features, the ravines, islands and bluffs, and the urban structure of the colonial grid of streets. The **Shoreline Stitch**, with its goal to overcome barriers associated with transportation corridors to better connect the Downtown with the water's edge and link the east and west Core Circle landscapes, is also within this scale.

FIVE TRANSFORMATIVE IDEAS

THE CORE CIRCLE

Re-imagine the valleys, bluffs and islands encircling the Downtown as a fully interconnected 900-hectare immersive landscape system.

- STRATEGIES
- INITIATIVES
- **ACTIONS**

GREAT STREETS

Enhance the unique characteristics of Downtown's most emblematic streets and make them outstanding civic places and connectors.

- STRATEGIES
- INITIATIVES
- **ACTIONS**

The district scale consists of parks, squares, streets and other public spaces that are integral to quality of life and community building in Downtown neighbourhoods. Ideas at this scale, captured in the **Park Districts**, focus on expanding and improving neighbourhood parks and public spaces, and making connections that link them into the broader parks and open space network to extend their 'reach' and create a focus for everyday community life.

The local scale is the smallest and focuses on under-utilized and sometimes overlooked spaces that

**The scales provide a conceptual framework that is distinct and complementary to the Toronto Parks Plan park classification system, which is used to guide planning and decision-making across the city-wide system of parks and trails.*

are embedded within the fabric of neighbourhoods. It includes the parkettes, laneways, schoolyards, churchyards and other spaces that we experience on a daily or weekly basis. This scale explores opportunities to re-imagine and re-design these **Local Places** to better support local public life and expand the utility of our parks and public realm network.

Together, the Five Transformative Ideas operate across the three scales to establish a fulsome approach to expanding, enhancing and connecting the Downtown's parks and public realm.

SHORELINE STITCH

Re-connect the city to the waterfront and link the east and west Core Circle landscapes.

- STRATEGIES
- INITIATIVES
- **ACTIONS**

PARK DISTRICTS

Re-imagine Downtown's distinct districts with parks at their hearts.

- STRATEGIES
- INITIATIVES
- **ACTIONS**

LOCAL PLACES

Re-imagine local public spaces to better support community life and expand the utility of our parks and public realm system.

- STRATEGIES
- INITIATIVES
- **ACTIONS**

Engagement Process

The *Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan* is based on the work of a diverse collaboration and careful examination of the best available information about the Downtown's current conditions and trends. The recommendations and approaches proposed in the Plan are informed by the 'on-the-ground' experience of residents and stakeholders who shared their ideas and aspirations for the future.

The Parks and Public Realm Plan public and stakeholder engagement process followed a three-phase process:

1. **Phase One:** Understanding Issues;
2. **Phase Two:** Testing Ideas; and
3. **Phase Three:** Confirming Directions.

Phase One focused on helping the team develop an understanding of issues and opportunities the Parks and Public Realm Plan could explore. It also helped identify the locations and evaluation criteria for the Public Space Public Life (PSPL) Survey.

In **Phase Two**, the team sought feedback on ideas, including Draft Policies and the emerging Plan and transformative ideas, which were developed, in part, with the feedback heard in Phase One. The team also

used the locations and evaluation criteria identified in Phase One to undertake the Public Space Public Life Survey in the summer and winter of 2016.

In **Phase Three**, the team sought feedback on a draft Parks and Public Realm Plan. The public consultation program was multi-faceted and focused on:

- a. Raising awareness that the City was developing the Plan;
- b. Soliciting general public feedback to inform the Plan; and
- c. Soliciting feedback from specific audiences with a keen interest in the Downtown's parks and public realm.

The team shared material and sought feedback through a range of tools, including:

- The project website (www.toronto.ca/tocore), which: describes TOcore generally and the Parks and Public Realm Plan specifically; hosts presentations, videos, and documentation of feedback shared by participants.
- An interactive map, hosted on the project website, which asked people to identify their favourite

places and places they felt had 'great potential' in the Downtown. The map received over 600 place-specific comments.

- Favourite places 'pop-ups' and intercept surveys, where dozens of participants shared their favourite places and described what drew them to those places in the Downtown.
- Lecture series, which featured guest speakers such as Jan Gehl, 'pecha kucha' style presentations and long-form presentations, and attracted 150 – 300 participants each.
- Broad public meetings, including a TOcore Expo in June 2016, a TOcore Public Event in March 2017 and a TOcore Open House in December 2018, all of which attracted hundreds of participants.
- Stakeholder focus groups and workshops, which sought feedback from: active transportation and water users, Business Improvement Areas (BIAs), environmental and park stewardship advocates, 'friends of' groups, institutions, resident associations (RAs), and schools and sports representatives.

Reports summarizing the TOcore public and stakeholder engagement process and feedback, including the

Parks and Public Realm Plan 'Highlights Booklet', are available on the project website, at this link: <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/planning-development/planning-studies-initiatives/tocore-planning-torontos-downtown/tocore-studies-reports/engagement-reports/>

From Vision to Implementation

The *Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan* provides a framework that will guide future change and investment in parks and the public realm to support growth in Downtown Toronto. The Five Transformative Ideas present a series of concepts that provide examples of the types of change or opportunities that could be explored further through a detailed planning, design and implementation process. Moving from the vision and concepts illustrated in the Parks and Public Realm Plan to the reality of implementation will happen through a number of steps, as illustrated in the graphic below.



CONSULTATION

PLAN

- Vision
- Concepts
- Goals
- Actions

PRIORITIES

- Park Need and Population Growth
- Availability of Capital Funds
- Coordinated Infrastructure Investments
- New Opportunities

AND FEASIBILITY

DESIGN AND
IMPLEMENTATION

FEASIBILITY

- Assess Feasibility
- Technical Review
- Financial Review
- Pilot Projects
- Concept Refinements
- Preferred Option

DESIGN AND BUILD

- Fund Design Process
- Procurement
- Construction and Phasing
- Ongoing Maintenance
- Monitoring

How to Use the Plan

The following is a guide to using the *Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan*. It is organized into the following sections:

Chapter 1. Background Analysis and Approach

establishes the basis for the Parks and Public Realm Plan vision. It describes how the plan is organized, summarizes the public and stakeholder engagement process that informed the vision, provides an overview of the process of moving from vision to implementation and offers a guide to using the Plan. This chapter also describes the Plan's purpose and intent. It provides an overview of the need for parkland in the Downtown, describes the role and importance of both parks and the public realm to the liveable city and presents an historical context.

Chapter 2. The Parks and Public Realm Plan is organized into Five Transformative Ideas. The ideas are presented in the form of an illustrative framework plan, and formalized as a set of initiatives, goals and actions supported by maps, renderings, precedent images and other graphic materials.

The components of the transformative ideas sections include:

- **Concept Plan:** A demonstration of the proposed spatial transformations that support the ideas'

vision. The illustrations are intended to offer recommendations and approaches that through further study and review can be adapted to the changing realities in the Downtown. They are conceptual in nature.

- **Vision:** A presentation of the outcome the ideas aim to achieve.
- **Strategies:** Outline general principles and design directions to guide a series of initiatives.
- **Initiatives:** Propose focused, site-specific interventions that support the strategic aims of the vision.
- **Goals:** Outline the goals of what the plan aims to achieve and design directions to guide future planning.
- **Actions:** Provide the next steps and recommendations to advance implementation.

Chapter 3. Toward Implementation sets out the opportunities and priorities for investment over time and identifies what planning tools the City will use to implement the Parks and Public Realm Plan. This chapter is intended to frame how implementation of the Plan will be undertaken, ranging from quick starts to

longer-term assessment and review of the more complex initiatives. It is a guide that can remain flexible to leverage future opportunities as they arise.

Chapter 4. Park Provision and Need in the Downtown provides an in-depth examination of the need for parkland in the Downtown. It sets out Ontario's legislative context for planning for parkland and summarizes relevant Official Plan policies, and then profiles the parks and open spaces that residents and employees have access to today. It employs the City's updated methodology for measuring park provision to establish the existing provision rate, and the anticipated change to provision based on growth pressures. It discusses the importance of providing a full range of parks within the system and the role that park improvements can play in increasing the functionality and utility of existing parkland.

The Parks and Public Realm Plan is a shared framework, intended to serve as a conceptual blueprint and practical, action-oriented manual to guide decision-making among individuals, institutions, businesses, organizations, neighbourhoods, and a wide range of parties participating in shaping the future of the Downtown. It calls for the sustained leadership, support and engagement of all parties to shepherd and foster the long-term vision.

A companion document, the **Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan: Public Space Public Life Survey** provides an overview of the Public Space Public Life Survey in Toronto's Downtown, including key findings and trends for the whole of the core, as well as site-specific highlights and recommendations for the 16 survey zones, which encompassed 50 survey streets and spaces in the Downtown.

Downtown's Parks and Public Realm in Context

Toronto's parks, streets and publicly accessible open spaces are among the city's greatest assets and are essential to the quality of life that Torontonians enjoy. Expanding, maintaining and improving these assets must be prioritized for the city to enhance its character and liveability as Toronto's built environment continues to intensify and as more and more people live, work and visit the Downtown.

Downtown's parks, streets and open spaces are some of the most iconic, beloved and heavily used destinations in the city. The variety of parks and open spaces offer unique experiences and a range of necessary functions that are fundamental to the city's identity and to the liveability of the Downtown. These spaces bring people together, create social bonds and set the stage for civic life. They provide places for celebration, recreation, relaxation, mobility and experiencing nature in the city. Easy and equitable access to high quality public spaces promotes mental and physical health and contributes to social cohesion in our city.

A key challenge in the Downtown is how to accommodate anticipated growth while proportionally providing a diverse range of high quality and accessible parks and other open spaces. The Parks and Public Realm Plan examines the need for parkland and seeks to ensure its provision is commensurate with growth. It establishes a vision and path to achieving an expanded,

improved and connected parks and public realm system within Downtown Toronto's mature urban fabric to significantly improve the quality of urban living, in the near term and for future generations.

The Plan emphasizes the need to create new parks, increase accessibility and improve existing parks, reclaim city streets as a series of great urban spaces and connectors and creatively capitalize on the variety of other local public spaces that are scattered throughout the Downtown. It illustrates opportunities for expansion and improvements to the parks system, both big and small, and addresses the need to better connect large-scale natural features with the Downtown's parks, streets and open space network.

Toronto has city-wide strategies related to parkland and recreational facilities: The City-wide Parkland Strategy currently in process and the Parks and Recreation Facilities Master Plan (FMP), approved by City Council in 2017.

The vision and actions identified in this Plan are aligned with the key principles emerging through the City-wide Parkland Strategy. These principles are:

- **Acquire and Expand:** Undertaking acquisitions and expansions to provide parkland concurrent with growth and address gaps in the inventory of types of parks in the Downtown;

- **Improve:** Transforming existing parks through improvements that will increase their utility and contribute to a wide range of parks users;
- **Share:** Collaborating and partnering with owners of other open spaces, such as schools and cemeteries, to ensure they contribute to the public realm and so that the existing and future population have access to these spaces; and
- **Connect:** Re-balancing and re-thinking streets, and introducing new connections, to provide better access to existing parks and open spaces, create a cohesive green network, expand the park experience and support community life.

Accommodating recreational facilities creates additional need for parkland. The Facilities Master Plan recognizes that there are both local and city-wide needs for new recreational facilities that will be located within the boundaries of the Downtown. Some of these facilities will be located within existing parks, and some may require acquisition and / or expansion of parkland.

Purpose of the Parks and Public Realm Plan

The *Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan* examines the need for parkland within the context of the Downtown, having consideration for the range of parks and public open spaces that exist within the boundaries of the Downtown area, projected population and employment growth, built form directions and needed expansion of the public realm.

The *Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan* will be used to:

- Support the policy directions of the Downtown Plan (OPA) related to creating an interconnected system of parks, open space, streets, trails and other recreational facilities and how this system will be achieved;
- Provide an overarching framework to inform and guide decision-making and investment decisions related to acquiring, enhancing and expanding parks in the Downtown and improving connections to these parks by re-imagining the role and function of some of the Downtown's streets; and
- Set out priorities and actions needed to advance the implementation of the various initiatives outlined in this Plan.

The Need for Parks

Planning Context

The *Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan* has been developed to support the development and implementation of the Downtown Plan. The Downtown Plan, as part of Toronto's Official Plan, provides a blueprint for growth and infrastructure over the next 25 years.

Toronto's Official Plan identifies that our parks and open space system will need to expand as the city grows and changes. It highlights that ongoing reinvestment in Toronto's parks and open space system is also required to support a high quality of life in Toronto. Downtown's population has grown by 64 percent between 1996 and 2016, while the city as a whole has only grown by 15 percent. This Downtown population boom has been accommodated primarily in the form of intense vertical development, generating unanticipated demand for new parkland that the City has not been able to match. As the Downtown continues to intensify, improved and expanded parks and other open spaces must be provided to address the needs of an increasing intensity of residents, workers, students and visitors.

The development of the Parks and Public Realm Plan has also considered key provincial policy directions related to achieving complete communities. The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2017) includes parks among the elements of achieving complete communities. The Provincial Policy Statement (2014)

(PPS) requires planning for public spaces and streets to meet the needs of pedestrians, foster social interaction and facilitate active transportation and community connectivity. The Provincial Policy Statement calls on municipalities to plan for a full range and equitable distribution of built and natural settings for recreation. This includes parkland, public spaces, open space areas, trails and linkages, and water-based resources, all which are addressed in this Plan.

The implementation of the Plan will involve broadening traditional approaches to providing new and improved parks. Partnerships with a range of stakeholders within and outside the City, other orders of government, public agencies and the private sector will be needed. Additionally, this Plan's implementation requires recalibrating and refreshing the City's planning and financial toolbox. Key tools that will be used to realize this Plan include:

- Parkland dedication as a condition of development approvals;
- Development Charges;
- Securing community benefits in exchange for increases in height and density under Section 37 of the Planning Act;
- Site Plan Control;
- Other legal instruments; and
- Partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders.

In the Downtown, there are 9.4m² of parkland per person, which is 67 percent lower than the city-wide average of 28m² of parkland per person.

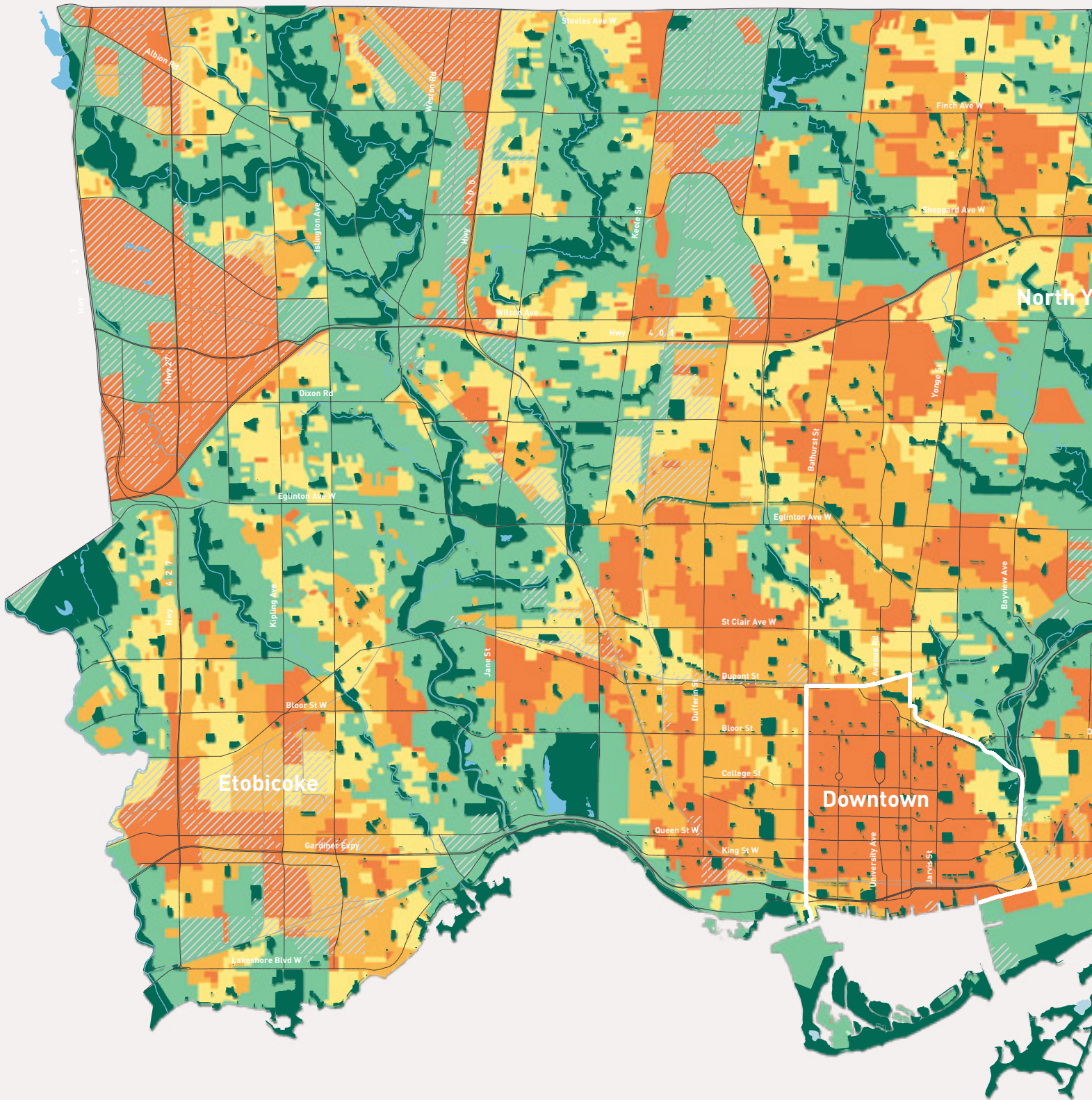
Keeping Pace with Growth in the Downtown

Toronto's quality of life and economic opportunities have made it one of the fastest growing cities in North America. Downtown accounts for approximately 3 percent of Toronto's land area, yet it makes up roughly 40 percent of the non-residential gross floor area and 38 percent of the residential units proposed in the city. It is Canada's largest employment cluster with over 500,000 jobs within the Downtown boundary area (this does not include the adjacent areas of South of Eastern and Liberty Village, referred to as 'shoulder areas'). Close to 250,000 people live Downtown, with more than 7,500 residents added annually over the past 5 years. By 2041, Downtown, in combination with its adjacent shoulder areas and work at home employment and individuals with no fixed place of employment, has the potential to reach between 850,000 to 915,000 jobs, and as many as 475,000 residents.

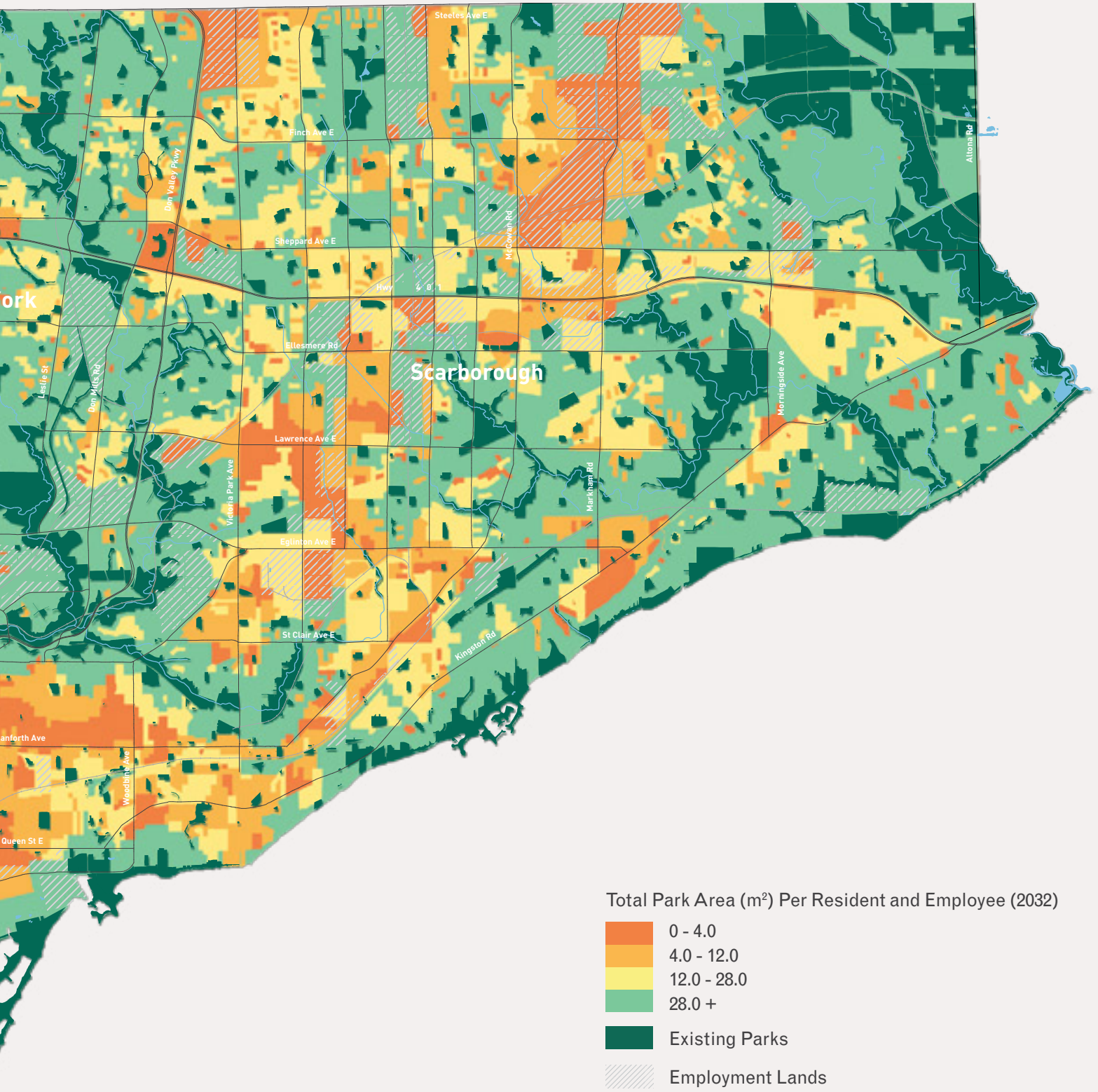
Within the Downtown and Central Waterfront the average units per hectare by project have grown steadily to an almost 100 percent increase since 2005, the year that the City's alternative parkland dedication rate was approved by the Ontario Municipal Board. During that same period, by comparison, only 19.63 hectares of parkland has been secured by the City. The impact of this pace of acquisition has resulted in a parkland provision of 9.4m² per person in Downtown, which is 67 percent lower than the city's average area of parkland per person.

The map, *City-wide Parkland Supply Per Resident and Employee, 2032 (next spread)* presents the anticipated parkland provision based on the estimated residential and employment population using the Development Pipeline. This forecasted population growth will result in an increased use and demand on existing parks and publicly-accessible open space. This will result in the need to provide additional parks and open spaces in all areas of the Downtown, including areas that are not necessarily going to experience the same levels of growth and intensification.

Maintaining provision levels is challenging in urban environments where the intensity and rate of vertical growth generates parkland demand in areas where it is difficult to acquire new parkland. The response, in a complex built-up environment like the Downtown, requires creative approaches to maintaining an adequate supply of parkland that provides the full range of park experiences enjoyed elsewhere in Toronto. The Parks and Public Realm Plan proposes measures to address the provision of parks for the current and future population within the Downtown, to provide additional parkland for existing residents and minimize the widening gap between parkland provision and our growing population. It examines the need for parkland to inform public and private investments in parks and presents a range of implementation tools that will be used to realize this Plan's vision.



City-wide Parkland Supply Per Resident and Employee, 2032 (map by O2 Planning + Design)



For an in-depth examination of the need for parkland in the Downtown, refer to Chapter 4: Park Provision and Need in the Downtown

The Value of Parks and the Public Realm

In the most memorable neighbourhoods and cities, the quality and experience of a place is directly tied to its identity. Cities are expanding their focus beyond the design of buildings in recognition of this. Toronto has many exceptional qualities and continues to be identified as one of the most liveable cities in the world. Toronto's public realm, consisting of all areas to which the public has access such as parks, streets, laneways and other open spaces, plays a pivotal role in contributing to this liveability. Together, our parks, streets and open spaces are our largest civic assets and define the image of our city.

Parks

Parks are publicly-owned land that is set aside for the enjoyment and use by people who live, work and visit our city. They have multiple roles, and are more than just green spaces between the city's hard concrete edges and its buildings. They are treasured parts of our city's heritage. They have intrinsic value in shaping the urban landscape, and will continue to do so well into the future.

Parks are an extension of the home, which is increasingly important in dense, urban settings like Toronto's Downtown. They come in all shapes and sizes, from large, signature open spaces to small parkettes, squares, hardscaped plazas, gardens and promenades. People gather, socialize, celebrate and play in parks. They are used for cultural and community events that

bring life and enjoyment to the city. In recent years, parks have also increasingly become a magnet for pet owners, providing space for our four-legged animal companions to run and play, and owners to socialize. The community building impacts of these uses are crucial to the local functions of parks. Parks also boost tourism by acting as destinations and 'people-draws'. They have a positive impact on the perception of our city to the outside world, and contribute to our economic competitiveness.

Parks have been linked to positive mental health outcomes including stress reduction. They improve the health and wellbeing of people of all ages by providing space to rest, relax and be active. They offer a diversity of recreational programming, from passive activities to sports and other types of physical recreation. They also offer a respite and reprieve from the hustle and bustle of city living, and allow people to have contact with nature and with one another.

Parks also beautify the urban landscape and strengthen the natural environment. They support biodiversity by providing habitat and food for wildlife, and are a key component of our city's green and blue infrastructure. They contribute to a healthy and robust tree canopy, filter and absorb stormwater, clean the air and reduce the urban heat island effect.

Streets

Streets traditionally functioned as meeting places, marketplaces and movement corridors. The functions of streets dramatically changed in mid 1900s, when they were largely given over to the personal automobile. Recently, there has been a paradigm shift and resurgence about the role that streets play in cities. They are once again being recognized as important civic spaces that can offer high-quality design and inviting options to move around the city or stay and linger.

Streets throughout the world are being rebalanced to align with Complete Streets objectives. There has been a shift of emphasis toward supporting pedestrians, cyclists and transit users, and for streets to be designed for users of all ages and abilities. Streets that balance competing interests and improve accessibility to destinations work to create a cohesive, connected parks and open space system.

Other Open Spaces

Downtown Toronto's parks and public realm system is supported by other open spaces that are both publicly- and privately-owned. These spaces do not replace the need for parks. They complement and supplement the city's system of parks, providing additional open space and recreational opportunities where public use of these spaces is permitted. There is untapped potential in the Downtown's laneways, schoolyards, churchyards,

cemeteries, privately-owned publicly accessible spaces (POPS) and other under-utilized local places that can be harnessed to contribute to a vibrant public realm for our current and future generations.

Evolution of Downtown's Parks and Public Realm

Since the retreat of the Wisconsin glacial, the landscape of Toronto has been significantly shaped by human forces. This transformation was set in motion at least 12,000 years ago by Indigenous peoples who established villages in river valleys and along the shores of large meltwater lakes, including the ancient proglacial Lake Iroquois and later, Lake Ontario (*Map 1*). Indigenous peoples also carved out travelling routes following the variations of the natural landscape. One such pre-settlement route connected the Humber River to the Don River along the Lake Iroquois shoreline, known as the Davenport Trail. These earliest villages and travelling routes speak to Toronto's strategic location in the Great Lakes region and set in motion its growth over two centuries.

Colonial surveyors continued to transform Toronto's landscape by laying out the framework of the grid in the late 18th century. In 1791, Toronto's first concession was laid along Queen Street, then Lot Street. In 1793, John

G. Simcoe established Fort York and, with the survey of Alexander Aiken, laid out the town of ten small blocks at the eastern end of the harbour. The town was connected to Fort York by Front Street, which ran along the northern shore of the harbour. The area of land between the first concession and the waterfront was set aside as Crown Reserve land, to protect it from development. North of the first concession, a park lot grid reached north to the second concession, Bloor Street (*Map 2*). While it is now a defining feature of the city, the grid paid little attention to the topographic, natural or Indigenous cultural features of the landscape, many of which have been lost as a result.

During the 19th century, Toronto's public realm evolved based on the subdivision of the grid. This period saw the evolution of major public landscapes in Toronto, including Allan Gardens, St James Cemetery, Normal School (St James Square), the Grange, Osgoode Hall, University Avenue and Queen's Park. In the same



1. Toronto Quaternary Geology, 11,700 BP



2. Plan of York Harbour, by A. Aitken, 1793

period, Toronto's streetcar network expanded, turning a fragmented network of east-west streets into main streets such as Dundas Street, College Street and Carleton Street. John G. Simcoe's vision to preserve the waterfront as a place for the enjoyment of nature and collective gathering, known as the 'Walks and Gardens' plan, was eclipsed by the railway in 1853. By the early 20th century, rapid growth and extensive lake-filling operations further transformed Toronto's waterfront into a centre of industrial progress (*Map 3*). Meanwhile, the focus of Toronto's public realm moved away from natural landscapes toward recreation and the provision of facilities. By 1950, the population of Toronto reached approximately 1.2 million people, propelling an era of suburbanization, with a decline in the number of people living in the core.

In the mid-1970s, Council's adoption of the Central Area Plan introduced the idea that the Downtown should include a mix of residential and commercial uses. For

the first time, policies and zoning were designed to encourage housing in the core. This was accompanied by an investment in social service infrastructure: parks, schools, community centres and other facilities were constructed to support life in the Downtown. The dynamic growth being experienced in the Downtown today continues a transformation set in motion by the Central Area Plan (*Map 4*).

On the waterfront and along the Don River, Toronto has made great strides toward expanding and improving its parks and open space system. But the transformation of the Downtown's parks and public realm cannot rely on these large site opportunities alone. As Downtown Toronto continues to develop and intensify, the Parks and Public Realm Plan proposes a framework and plan to re-imagine Toronto's public realm, to ensure our quality of life keeps pace with our rapidly intensifying urban core.



3. The Toronto Harbour Commissioners Waterfront Development Progress Plan, 1914-1918



4. Downtown Toronto, 2018

2. The Parks and Public Realm Plan

Five Transformative Ideas to re-balance the public realm



North: Davenport Road Bluff

East: Don River Valley and Rosedale Valley Ravine

West: Garrison Creek Corridor

South: Toronto Islands and Toronto Bay

Toronto's Landscape Morphology: The Core Circle

From Toronto's unique landscape features, a new figure emerges that is set within some of our city's largest open space assets. The Core Circle offers a ring of diverse open spaces encircling the Downtown and a coherent network of amenities rooted in the pre-settlement landscapes of our city. The Core Circle landscapes include the Don River Valley and Rosedale

Valley Ravine, the Lower Don Lands, the Leslie Street Spit (a constructed naturalized landscape), the Toronto Islands, the Garrison Creek corridor, and the Davenport Road bluff, former shoreline of the ancient proglacial Lake Iroquois. This extensive green system is 100 percent Toronto, and a beloved resource for many Torontonians.



Toronto's Urban Morphology: Great Streets

From our colonial grid, the pattern of streets and blocks provides the urban framework for re-conceptualizing emblematic civic streets as central public spaces, active transportation corridors and places supporting public life. Certain streets have emerged as important civic corridors, lined with public buildings and significant parks and open spaces, which connect into and beyond

the Core Circle. Together, the Core Circle and Great Streets exist as complementary layers. This large-scale contribution to the parks and public realm framework re-imagines the city's fundamental landscapes and major streets to reshape the setting of the Downtown and its largest open spaces.

The *Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan* is based on Five Transformative Ideas, a set of integrated spatial transformations that build on assets to guide how the parks and public realm network will be expanded, improved and connected.

The first two transformative ideas, the Core Circle and the Great Streets, explore the co-existence and interplay of Toronto's landscape and urban structures: the unique landscape features of the ravines, islands and bluffs and the grid of streets laid over the landscape in the late 18th century, today lined with landmark buildings, historic fabric and major public spaces. Together, the Core Circle and the Great Streets exist as complementary layers, leveraging the relationship between landscape and city to offer a new lens for imagining our civic identity, through our common ground – the public realm. This large-scale contribution re-discovers our landscapes and civic streets to bring about a significant transformation of the Downtown's parks and public realm.

The map (*right*) illustrates the relationship between Toronto's fundamental landscape features, the creeks, ravines, bluffs and shorelines that preceded the city, and the colonial grid of streets. The Core Circle and the Great Streets leverage the layering of these landscape and urban features that are 100 percent Toronto to reveal and celebrate the unique setting that defines Downtown Toronto and its largest open spaces.



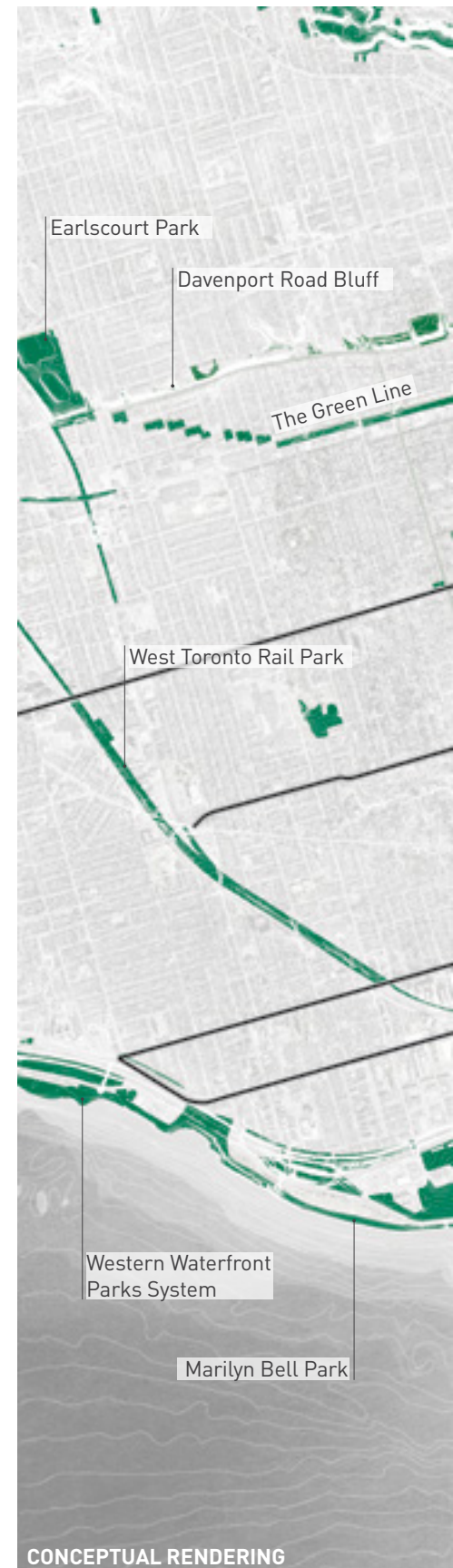


Map showing the contemporary city grid overlaid on Toronto's pre-settlement landscapes – creeks, ravines, bluffs and shorelines – circa 1790, Toronto, Canada

The Five Transformative Ideas build on the assets of all areas in and adjacent to the core to guide how the Downtown's parks and public realm network will be expanded, improved and connected.

For planning purposes, Downtown Toronto is bounded by Bathurst Street to the west, the midtown rail corridor and Rosedale Valley Road to the north, the Don River Valley to the east and the Lake Ontario shoreline to the south. The Parks and Public Realm Plan recognizes that our experience of the Downtown parks and public realm system extends beyond these boundaries, both for users who live and work in and adjacent to the core. It considers our parks and open spaces as a network that provides a diverse and complementary range of experiences, within and beyond the boundaries of the Downtown.

Some of the ideas presented in the Plan are situated outside of the Downtown boundary, such as the Davenport Road bluff to the north, and the Garrison Creek corridor to the west. These landscapes are fundamental assets and present key opportunities to connect the Downtown's parks, open spaces and active mobility networks to the broader city-wide system. The map (*right*) illustrates the Core Circle and Great Streets within the broader framework of parks, streets and other open spaces that surround the Downtown. These unique landscapes, streets and infrastructure corridors – including hydro and rail corridors – can act as critical connectors between our largest parks and open space assets.





Map showing the Core Circle and Great Streets within the broader network of parks, streets and open spaces, Toronto, Canada