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To: Chair Michael Thompson and Members
Economic and Community Development Committee

Improving Access to Recreation for Regent Park Residents in Local Facilities

Background:

In 1999 the City of Toronto approved two strategies of increasing equitable access to recreation. Firstly, a fee-based subsidy known as the Welcome Policy and secondly, a place-based subsidy known as Free Centres.

The policies complement one another in order to meet the Park, Forestry and Recreation (PFR) objectives to achieve the following: 1) increase equitable access, 2) reduce financial and administrative barriers, 3) encourage social inclusion, 4) enable local access and 5) increase overall participation in recreation.

The two subsidy initiatives were instrumental in setting the foundation for equitable access, however, new challenges emerged which require a more streamlined demographic-based policy and the offering of recreation services in other local facilities, including schools and other non-profit centres.

The newly constructed Regent Park Community Centre and the Pam McConnell Aquatic Centre are high-quality recreation facilities and Free Centres, built largely as a result of the Regent Park Revitalization Plan. They have been promoted city-wide and are in adjacent proximity to other high-density downtown neighbourhoods. Regent Park is in itself a rapidly growing neighbourhood as the entire 69 acres are being redeveloped and a significant increase of new residents have moved in and will continue to do as the final Phases of 4 and 5 get underway.

As a result of the surging demand for recreation services in a growing city and across the downtown neighbourhoods, Regent Park residents have experienced tremendous difficulty in accessing programs offered in their own neighbourhood, in particular camps and swimming lessons. An informal poll conducted at the aquatic centre revealed that 70% of the users traveled from outside of the neighbourhood to use the swim programs there. Other reasons for obstacles to recreation access for local residents include:

Capacity - There are long waiting lists for swimming lessons and camps in Regent Park, and this is the case in many other communities, particularly where programs are free. Also, the City cut more than 100 full-time jobs out of Parks, Forestry and Recreation in the 2017 budget process and they have not been reconstituted.

Registration Process - The current registration process presents barriers for low-income Regent Park families without access to high-speed Internet, multiple devices, sufficient time dedicated to the registration process due to child care, elder care, work and other obligations. Language and the lack of familiarity with the recreation programs and the registration process present additional barriers. This creates inequities in terms of who can and can't access recreation programs - including the free programs.

City-Wide Access vs Equitable Access - Low-income, racialized families in Regent Park compete with other residents to register for programs that are free of charge in these facilities that are also in close proximity to other more affluent downtown neighbourhoods.

Among the core pillars in the Multi-Year Strategic Plan developed by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), among the core pillars of that strategy are:

1. Provide Equity of Access to Learning Opportunities for All Students
2. Allocate Human and Financial Resources Strategically to Support Student Needs
3. Build Strong Relationships and Partnerships within School Communities to Support Student Learning and Well-Being

In order to achieve the TDSB's strategic plan and the City of Toronto's objectives of increasing equitable access to recreation, an opportunity emerges to partner with one another to provide swimming instructions for students attending close to centres where programs are free.

Recommendations:

1. City Council direct the General Manager of Parks, Forestry and Recreation to consult with Access to Recreation, the Regent Park Neighbourhood Association, Youth Gravity, Communities for Zero Violence and other stakeholders to create a demographic-based policy for the existing 39 Free Centres, to measure equitable impact and increase equitable access and participation, and to report back to April 2019 meeting of the Economic and Community Development Committee.
2. City Council direct the General Manager of Parks, Forestry and Recreation to consult with community stakeholders including Access to Recreation, the Regent Park Neighbourhood Association, Youth Gravity, Communities for Zero Violence and work in partnership with the Toronto District School Board to explore the feasibility of creating a localized recreation programs in Regent Park public schools, such as Lord Dufferin Junior and Senior Public School and Nelson Mandela Park Public School for a pilot period of two years, beginning in July 2019.

Sincerely,

Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam
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