



September 10, 2020

**Re: GL15.14 Lease and Contract Extensions for City of Toronto Golf Courses**

Dear Members of Government Management and Licensing Committee,

The Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA) has been actively engaged in calling for a just and green recovery from COVID-19 at all three levels of government.

While the Toronto Office of Recovery and Rebuild report has not yet been published, day-to-day decisions about Toronto's recovery and rebuild are already underway. They are brought forward to committees such as yours, and include agenda items like GL15.14 regarding the lease and contract extensions for up to seven golf courses under City of Toronto management. These large City-owned golf courses are public assets that are well spread out across the city, in close proximity to highly diverse communities, and directly connected to watersheds. These fertile lands could become home to native plants, fruits and vegetables, and a biodiversity of species, rather than just golf turf. These lands could serve far more people in the surrounding neighbourhoods than just golfers, if their needs and priorities were considered. It's time to reimagine these public spaces to better serve the common good.

As we know from past City reports, Toronto communities have unequal access to green space and they also have unequal access to affordable fresh food. These disparities were further highlighted and exacerbated in the last six months as our communities responded to COVID-19. Food insecurity and lack of access to green space are major challenges disproportionately faced by Toronto's Indigenous and Black communities as well as other communities of colour and people living on low-incomes.

It is important to consider any and all opportunities to utilize City-owned land for Toronto's urban agriculture strategies including the GrowTO Urban Agriculture Action Plan and the Indigenous place-making strategy. We strongly recommend that you consider how City-owned golf courses might be repurposed for greater public benefit and environmental stewardship, in particular for community uses such as gardens, farms, as well as for Indigenous-led and Black-led agriculture and land/water stewardship programs.

We are asking the Government Management and Licensing Committee to show us your vision for a green and just recovery today. If repurposing public golf course land is possible in Toronto, now is the time to try. We can't wait another two years. Let's turn City-owned golf courses into truly public lands that are part of a resilient, equitable community-based food system and Indigenous place-making strategy.



## Background

In April, TEA joined over 20 civil society organizations to call on City Council and the Office of Recovery and Rebuild to be guided by [10 Recommended Principles for a bold, green, and just recovery for Toronto](#), which included the following recommendation that is relevant to Item GL15.14:

Principle 7: Invest in public and community ownership of land and housing to ensure everyone is permanently housed, local food production is increased, and jobs are created

Recommendation: As part of response and recovery plans, the City should purchase land and support community ownership and rehabilitation through land trusts, cooperatives, and nonprofits. This will allow Toronto to build permanent supportive and deeply affordable housing, create jobs with local equity employment targets and living wages, prioritize projects that create climate-proof housing, and **increase local food sovereignty and security by converting land and building surfaces into productive urban agriculture spaces and other food-related infrastructure**. The City should look to acquire housing assets secured during the COVID-19 pandemic, to protect existing initiatives, and to center meaningful tenant engagement in its planning.

In July, TEA joined the Toronto Climate Action Network in [submitting recommendations](#) during the Toronto Office of Recovery and Rebuild consultation process, which also included relevant recommendations:

Recommendation 20: Advance implementation of Toronto's urban agriculture strategies including the GrowTO Urban Agriculture Action Plan and launch a city-wide program for small and large-scale food production by:

a) **increasing community gardens and public growing space for local food growing on public and private lands by 50% by summer 2025, with priority implementation in neighbourhoods with less access to fresh affordable produce;**

b) increasing support for community-led initiatives that improve healthy food access and innovation in food production (e.g. farmer's markets, good food box programs, garden-sharing programs, aquaponics, and vertical or rooftop gardens);

c) **protecting, expanding and improving access to arable public land for farms** (e.g. Black Creek Community Farm and Downsview Park);

d) increasing support for teachers and organizations working on urban agriculture and food system education and programming with children and youth; and

e) increasing support for Indigenous-led and Black-led agriculture and land/water stewardship programs.

Recommendation 21: Improve Toronto’s food system resilience, local food security and community wellbeing, while decreasing environmental impact. Advance implementation of Toronto’s Food Charter, commitment to the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact and actions identified in Toronto’s Food Systems Transformation and Food Strategy 2019 Update by launching a city-wide program to:

- a) reduce food waste in both residential and commercial settings and promote a circular food economy;
- b) promote the transition to a plant-based diet;
- c) strengthen the City’s social and food procurement policies to ensure that food workers have safe working conditions, fair wages and access to workplace rights, and that all City divisions prioritize procurement from local, ethnic and diverse, and small-medium scale food suppliers.

In mid-August, Toronto Life released the Post-Pandemic Future series, which included a piece written by Paul Taylor, Executive Director of FoodShare, titled [The post-pandemic future: We’ll turn city lands and golf courses into massive urban farms](#). Here are a few highlights from his article:

“We have so much land at our disposal. For example, Toronto owns five golf courses that are losing money every year, which provide no benefit to their surrounding communities. We could establish permanent community-led urban farms and produce markets in these spaces.”

“It’s been done before: in 2005, Seattle integrated a racial and food justice lens into all their municipal departments and provided huge tracts of public land for urban agriculture activities. They launched markets for immigrant farmers from Southeast Asia and East Africa who were residing in public housing to sell their food to other residents and to stores and restaurants. It’s been hugely successful.”

“Global disruptions like Covid-19 demonstrate that our food supply chain is precarious, exploitative and unsustainable, and data shows that in Toronto, how well you eat often depends on where you live and the colour of your skin. If we have the courage to reject the status quo of a food system based on racism and corporate hoarding, and instead build a community-based public food system, we could finally grow a city where good food is accessible to everyone.”



Finally, just days ago, the Economic and Community Development Committee passed a motion requesting the Indigenous Affairs Office to explore how land-based programs can be incorporated into the City of Toronto's Indigenous place-making strategy and report back in Q2 of 2021. This decision, based on [recommendations from the Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Committee](#) on trauma-informed land-based responses to COVID-19 included lessons shared in a [presentation from the Native Child and Family Services of Toronto](#):

“Numerous families who have found themselves unable to access services also lack access to green space”.

The ‘on the land’ / land-based pilot program they developed in response to COVID-19 has had positive preliminary findings including:

“improved mental health”, “decreased parent stress”, and “increased physical exercise”.

The evidence this initiative is collecting is intended to:

“assist in advocating on behalf of Indigenous families for safe access to land and land based programming”.

Therefore it is TEA’s opinion that City-owned golf courses, in addition to parks, could be considered in the City of Toronto’s Indigenous place-making strategy.

**For further information, contact:**

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