

Centennial Park Master Plan

Date: October 12, 2021

To: Infrastructure & Environment Committee

From: General Manager, Parks Forestry and Recreation

Wards: Ward 2 - Etobicoke Centre

SUMMARY

At 526-acres (213-hectares), Centennial Park is one of Toronto's largest parks and an integral part of the parks and open space system. The park currently hosts an incredibly diverse range of activities, programs and amenities that serve a wide range of users from across the city and region while functioning as an important component of the area's ecological system. However, changing user expectations, growth pressures, aging facilities, and a greater recognition of the need to protect and enhance the ecology of the park necessitates a holistic reimagining of the park.

Given the size and complexity of Centennial Park, a Park Master Plan was developed to guide this reimagining. A Park Master Plan is a long-term planning document that acts as a blueprint to guide decision-making around future infrastructure and capital improvements, programming, and management of a park. The Centennial Park Master Plan, Attachment 1 to this report, will serve as a guide to decision-making over the next 20 years and beyond.

Taking its cues from the Toronto Parkland Strategy, The Ravine Strategy and the Parks and Recreation Facilities Master Plan, the Centennial Park Master Plan seeks to find a new balance between the natural environment and the recreational facilities, and addresses the existing fragmentation of the site. It also reveals the unique features that should be cherished and preserved as the foundation for park improvements. Through an in-depth public consultation process, four Principles emerged to guide this work: Activate, Connect, Protect & Enhance, and Collaborate & Evolve.

The transformational moves and improvements identified in the Master Plan will increase the prominence of Centennial Park as one of Toronto's largest 'Legacy' parks, ensuring it will continue to play a central role as part of the City's parks and open space system for generations to come. Highlights include a new district playground and water play area, the addition of a new cricket pitch, improved sports fields and other facilities as part of the City's Facilities Master Plan, a re-imagining of the Centennial Park Hill that will follow the eventual winding-down of Ski Centre operations, a destination skate trail, a skateboard park, improvements to the network of trails and pathways, opportunities

for Indigenous Place-making and Place-keeping, improvements to park wayfinding, and strategies for the long-term enhancement of the park's water courses and natural areas.

Given the size of this park, achieving the final park vision will require time and the prioritization of certain projects considering available budget, importance, level of impact, and the ability to implement as part of other initiatives and as opportunities arise.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The General Manager, Parks, Forestry & Recreation recommends that:

1. City Council adopt the Centennial Park Master Plan in Attachment 1 as the general direction in which improvements to Centennial Park shall be undertaken over the next 20 years;
2. City Council request that the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation advance the implementation of priorities identified in Attachment 1 to this report as part of the 2022-2031 (and beyond) Capital and Operating budget processes;
3. City Council direct the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation to seek funding from other orders of government in order to advance the implementation of the improvements outlined in the Centennial Park Master Plan, as described in Attachment 1;
4. City Council request that the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, coordinate with the General Manager of Transportation Services, General Manager of Toronto Water, the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, and other City Divisions as required, to implement various components of the Master Plan outlined in Attachment 1; and
5. City Council request the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, and the General Manager, Transportation Services, working in partnership with the Indigenous communities, and in alignment with the Parks Wayfinding Strategy and TO360, to explore opportunities to celebrate Indigenous cultures, languages and histories through Indigenous place-keeping and place-making as part of the implementation of the Centennial Park Master Plan in Attachment 1.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

Some of the priority projects identified in the report as part of the first phase of implementation and Facilities Master Plan will be undertaken through the existing Parks, Forestry and Recreation's 10-Year Capital Budget and Plan.

To fully achieve the vision of the Centennial Park Master Plan, there are a number of unfunded new priority projects that need to be further reviewed, scoped, and assessed in terms of their financial impacts and funding requirements within the approved debt affordability framework.

The full implementation will require longer-term reviews, more strategic capital planning among City Divisions, public and stakeholder engagement, and collaborative efforts in exploring intergovernmental funding opportunities, where applicable.

Where these priority projects align with other divisional priorities, the appropriate City Divisions will include these new priority projects as well as operating impacts associated with the improvements in the future budget processes for consideration, subject to affordability and achievability.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has been advised of the financial impacts associated with the Centennial Park Master Plan to be considered along with other priorities in future budget processes.

DECISION HISTORY

The development of the Centennial Park Master Plan has been informed by several City strategies, most notably PFR's three Council-approved foundational strategies.

Parkland Strategy

The Parkland Strategy, adopted by City Council on November 26, 2019, is a 20-year plan that guides the planning of Toronto's park system – including new parks and expansions, improvements and enhanced access to existing parks. It supports decision-making and prioritization of investment in parkland across Toronto. The vision and actions identified in the Centennial Park Master Plan are closely aligned with three of the four Parkland Strategy principles:

- Improve the function of existing parks to promote community cohesion, ecological sustainability, and health and wellbeing through active living, access to nature, and the provision of spaces for rest, relaxation and leisure.
- Connect parks and other open spaces, physically and visually, and leverage opportunities so that people, communities and wildlife have abundant access to parks and can seamlessly navigate to and through the parks and open space system.
- Include everyone by removing barriers so that parks and other open spaces are inclusive places and equitably accessible for people of all ages, cultures, genders, abilities and incomes.

Parks and Recreation Facilities Master Plan and Implementation Strategy

The Facilities Master Plan (FMP), adopted by City Council on November 9, 2017, and the Implementation Strategy, adopted by City Council on October 29, 2019, guide investment in parks and recreation facilities such as community recreation centres, ice rinks, and sports fields. In developing the FMP, consideration was given to demographics, the use and conditions of current facilities, recreation trends, facility best practices, and legislative changes together with public, stakeholder and staff input.

The FMP identified a number of facility gaps specific to Etobicoke Centre and to Etobicoke more broadly. The Master Plan provides an opportunity to address these gaps, as well as several City-wide needs identified in the FMP, through improvements and additions to Centennial Park.

Ravine Strategy

Toronto's Ravine Strategy, adopted by City Council on January 29, 2020, helps to support a ravine system that is a natural, connected sanctuary essential for the well-being of the city, where enjoyments support protection, education and stewardship.

Five guiding principles for Toronto's ravines were developed through extensive consultation with the public, interest groups, staff and key stakeholders. The principles represent the core set of ideas and values that will guide the City in future decisions for ravine management: protect, invest, connect, partner, and celebrate.

As two ravines intersect with Centennial Park (the Etobicoke Creek ravine on its western boundary, and the Elmcrest Creek ravine near the centre), these principles and associated actions greatly informed the development of the Centennial Park Master Plan.

COMMENTS

1. Background and Context

Opened in 1967 to celebrate Canada's centenary, the 213 hectare Centennial Park is one of the largest parks in Toronto. Over 1.5 million people from across the city visit the park annually to take advantage of the numerous and diverse recreational facilities and its extensive natural areas.

With nearly twenty sports fields, a sanctioned indoor aquatic centre, a stadium and a twin pad arena – active and organised recreation is one of Centennial Park's key strengths. It also offers a wide variety of opportunities for unstructured recreation, including its four playgrounds, BMX park, disc golf course, model aircraft flying circle, wading pool, and more. The size of the park lends itself well to large-scale events, while its passive areas create opportunities for smaller gatherings and respite.

Centennial Park is also an important component of the ecological system in the area. Approximately 25 percent of the park is natural habitat, including wetlands, forests, aquatic habitat, and grasslands, supporting several rare plant and animal species.

However, Centennial Park's amenities, trails, and park ecosystem require reimagining and investment to meet the needs of today's users, respond to growth pressures, and enhance its ecological function. The arena, ski hill, conservatory, and many other existing components date from the original construction of the park and require investments to both be reimagined and continue to operate in a way that meets today's standards and user expectations. Some of these amenities see significant use and are good candidates for upgrades to meet the demands of a growing city. Others amenities have seen declining use for years, and the space they occupy may be better suited to other purposes and to address new pressures and preferences of park users. Additional facilities have been added over the years without an overarching plan, meaning the park feels disconnected, certain amenities conflict (e.g. overlapping sports fields), and maintenance is difficult. Natural areas are fragmented and degraded despite making up a significant area of the park and playing an important role in the regional natural

heritage system. Further, its current form fails to recognise the Indigenous presence in the lands that now form the park that dates back more than ten thousand years. In fact, the name of Etobicoke Creek, passing along the southwest portion of the park, originates from "Wah-do-be-kaug" in Ojibwe Anishnaabemowin, meaning "the place where the alders grow" and the waterways through the park would have been essential for carrying goods.

The importance of undertaking a holistic reimagining of Centennial Park is compounded as Toronto's population grows, and pressure for park space increases. Neighbourhood and city-wide growth has placed greater demand on Centennial's most popular amenities and programming. Increased use also results in greater environmental impacts and operational demands.

In 2008, the City developed a Master Plan for Centennial Park to guide improvements to the Park, however it was not presented to City Council and has not been implemented in systematic way. Since then, the park itself has evolved with the addition of the Pan Am BMX Centre, a disc golf course and other minor changes. The City has also developed new policies and frameworks, including the Parkland Strategy, Ravine Strategy and the Parks and Recreation Facilities Master Plan, and the engagement approach has also shifted to prioritize more accessible and inclusive consultation to inform Master Plan development.

For these reasons, in 2019 Parks, Forestry and Recreation launched the Centennial Park Master Plan Update. Developed with the input of park users, local residents, institutional stakeholders, and an Indigenous Advisory Circle, the new Centennial Park Master Plan is a dynamic and long-term planning document that provides a vision, objectives and implementable action items to guide decision making for ongoing improvements to Centennial Park over the next 20 years.

Context

Centennial Park is situated in Toronto's west end, bounded by natural areas to the west, employment areas to the north, and residential neighbourhoods to the west and south. Anchoring the southeast portion of the site are several institutions, including the Etobicoke Olympium, Centennial Stadium, and two schools.

Park ownership is divided in half, with the western portion made up of Provincially-owned lands leased to the City, and City-owned lands to the east. Etobicoke Creek and wooded areas of the park are part of Toronto's Natural Heritage System and are regulated by the Toronto Region Conservation Authority. There is also a hydro corridor and pipeline easement to the north. The Centennial Park Golf Centre, which is located on provincially-owned lands to the immediate west of Centennial Park Boulevard, was not included in the scope of work for the Master Plan.

As Toronto grows, Centennial Park will play an increasingly important and unique role as one of the City's 'Legacy' parks, serving both local and regional users.

2. Process and Engagement

Building on previous consultation work from November 2019 that laid the groundwork for the Master Plan refresh, the process provided opportunities to engage a diverse range of users—residents, stakeholders, Indigenous Community members, and youth to collaborate with the City and give insight into how the park can better serve the local neighbourhood as well as needs from across the City. This took place across all five stages of the study:

- In Stage 1 the project team inventoried existing site conditions and gathered initial input from the public.
- At Stage 2, a visioning workshop was held to identify current needs and priorities.
- In Stage 3, input from the workshops and reports was integrated into preliminary concept options and presented, with the aim of co-developing and fine tuning various options into a preferred concept. This stage incorporated the findings of the Centennial Park Facilities and Services Planning Assessment (CPFSP), a study focused on the facility planning and investments within Centennial Park and how these fit within the broader city-wide park and recreation system.
- At Stage 4, a preferred concept design was established and presented to the community for further feedback.
- In Stage 5, the final plan was presented to the public.

The inaugural stakeholder and public workshops were held as in-person consultations and subsequent events transitioned to an online format to respond to COVID-19.

Community feedback was sought through several avenues, including:

- Three Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC) workshops. The SAC consisted of individuals from local organizations, park permit holders, agencies, environmental groups, local schools and invested residents.
- Two public workshop meetings. The first workshop was focused on recalibrating the vision for Centennial. In the second workshop, participants provided input on site-wide strategies and site-specific recommendations.
- An interactive online workshop with youth to discuss similar topics from the public workshops.
- Social Pinpoint and an online survey were used to gather feedback on areas of concern, things people liked about the current park, and feedback used for design.
- Public Life Studies, which were conducted to learn how people are using the park throughout the year. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Public Life Studies transitioned into in depth interviews with key stakeholders and park users.

Indigenous Engagement

Indigenous engagement in planning processes is central to fulfilling the City's commitment to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action. Further, an understanding of Indigenous land-based histories and traditional ecological knowledge can offer great value in protecting and restoring Toronto's natural environments.

For the Centennial Park Master Plan Update, an Indigenous engagement specialist was retained to lead engagement with Indigenous communities with the aim of building long-lasting partnerships. As an initial step, the project team and Stakeholder Advisory Committee members underwent cultural competency training to learn about Indigenous history and its importance to Centennial Park's revitalization. On two occasions, a group of Indigenous community leaders were invited to offer their recommendations for the inclusion of Indigenous components and partnership opportunities for the park. Their recommendations were integrated into design ideas within the Master Plan and additional engagement will be undertaken as each component of the overall Master Plan is implemented.

3. Plan Highlights

Through the course of consultation with stakeholder members, the public, members from the Indigenous communities, and City staff, a vision statement for Centennial Park emerged:

Centennial Park is envisioned as a welcoming, inclusive, safe and walkable open space that balances recreational activity with the park's natural features. Enhanced community accessibility and ecological connections will provide visitors with improved access to nature, recreation, park programs, land stewardship and educational opportunities year-round.

Four principles were developed to support the vision for Centennial Park and inform recommendations for park improvements and programming:

- **Activate:** Centennial Park should be an active, safe and inclusive space for all to enjoy across the seasons.
- **Connect:** Centennial Park should be linked to its community and enable all visitors to enjoy the park's features through accessible, pedestrian-centered design. It should be a place that connects people to each other, to the land, and to local history.
- **Protect & Enhance:** Centennial Park should promote the preservation, rehabilitation and restoration of natural systems throughout the park, as well as enhance its cultural and recreational uses.
- **Collaborate & Evolve:** Centennial Park should foster partnerships that bring together a diverse community and should evolve over time.

The following six objectives were used as a basis to develop and finalize the Master Plan:

- **Consolidate Spaces:** The Park's recreational areas and natural features are disconnected from each other. A concerted move towards consolidating the park's recreational areas and natural features is needed.
- **Enhance Programming:** Although the park offers a range of active recreation opportunities it lacks diversity of programme or inclusivity of age and abilities. Active, cultural and passive programming must be enhanced to welcome more users.
- **Improve Connectivity:** The existing circulation networks in the park are disjointed and occasionally inaccessible. A new pathway hierarchy is needed to improve access and better connect people to park amenities and the adjacent community. This

network will be clearly identified on park mapping as the wayfinding strategy is eventually implemented across the park.

- **Celebrate Water:** Restoration of the park's watercourses is key to the revival of self-sustaining ecological systems. Considering the park's waterbodies and streams as an essential life-giver - literally, narratively, and experientially - can create unique opportunities to connect people with nature and promote environmental stewardship.
- **Foster Inclusion:** Cultivating inclusivity begins with listening and soliciting input from local community groups and individuals as to how spaces, recreational programming and interpretive signage or names can be made more meaningful to them.
- **Build Identity:** Building an authenticity of place relies on programming, in restoring habitat and connecting water courses, in broadening the catchment of users and sense of ownership for the local community and ensuring fluid connections from the community to the park.

The following Priority Projects are proposed to help turn the vision, principles, and objectives into reality. These projects represent a first phase of implementation that will roll-out over the next ten years, although some of these initiatives, such as wayfinding and natural areas and water course restoration, will require more detailed study and design and the identification of funding sources prior to implementation over a longer period of time.

New district playground with a water play component

The Master Plan recommends improving the park's play areas. Currently, the park's playgrounds consist of limited play equipment and they are dispersed across the site and inaccessible. The main water play component dates back to the park's opening over 50 years ago. A highlight of this plan is a new district playground proposed for the south end of the park to replace an existing play and water play facility. Developing more accessible areas and new water play experiences will create a more inclusive environment for children of different ages and abilities. The playground and associated water play components will become a destination for park visitors and be designed to enhance the park's identity.

Improved playing fields and other recreational facilities

The Master Plan recommends the consolidation and improvement of several of the park's sports fields and introducing new recreational opportunities. All consistent with the approach identified in the Parks and Recreation Facilities Master Plan and the findings of the Centennial Park Master Plan Facilities and Service Planning Assessment (Centennial Park FSPA) some of the highlights include:

- the addition of a new destination ice skating trail in the area of the hill and chalet;
- the addition of a new cricket pitch adjacent to the existing pitches along the hydro corridor in the north of the park;
- longer-term consolidation of baseball diamonds in the centre of the park;
- consolidating and improving soccer and multi-purpose fields in the south-east portion of the park, adjacent to the stadium (where they currently overlap with baseball);

- a potential future bubble at the stadium to enable year-round use of the sports field and track;
- the identification of a potential site for a future skate park as identified in the Parks and Recreation Facilities Master Plan; and
- opportunities for a multi-use sport court in proximity to both the stadium and Olympium.

A Reimagined Centennial Park Hill and Destination Skate Trail

To assess the various facilities in Centennial Park, Monteith Brown Planning Consultants were retained to undertake a Facilities and Service Planning Assessment. Having authored both the city-wide Facilities Master Plan and the Implementation Strategy, Monteith Brown reviewed all of the Centennial Park facilities through that lens. This included a review of ski facilities and operations at both Centennial and Earl Bales Park.

Highlighting challenges such as Toronto's warmer winters, declining use, infrastructure replacement requirements, and slope-settling issues stemming from the original landfill use, the Monteith Brown report recommended against the continued operation of the Centennial Park Ski Centre and to the consolidation of Toronto's Ski Centre operations at Earl Bales Park. As the most recent example of challenges, weather conditions in 2019-2020 season resulted in the Centennial Ski Centre not opening until two weeks after the planned opening with only 40 days of skiing, and 1100 visitors in total, or 23 per day. The Monteith Brown report also recommended the reimagining of the Centennial Park Hill and the adjacent chalet building for year-round programming and event uses. Further information on the Centennial Park FSPA can be found on the project website <https://www.toronto.ca/CentennialPark>.

The extensive public consultation undertaken as part of the Master Plan provided several opportunities to openly discuss these challenges and to move towards a reimagining of the hill. A reimagined hill will expand upon the range of existing uses already taking place throughout the year and consider new ones. This includes expanding on use of the hill as a fitness hub for hiking, running, cycling, community events and more. A new recommended focal point for the park will come in the form of a destination skate trail at the base of the hill adjacent to the chalet, providing an opportunity for all-access winter use. The hill will accommodate associated winter uses such as tobogganing and snow-shoeing and other components such as fire pits and space for outdoor performances, programs and events in an effort to animate the space as a hub in the winter and throughout the year.

The multi-use trail network will bring park users to the hilltop and will be structured to frame significant views, create lookout points and opportunities for temporal art installations, programs and events. The steep slopes currently used for skiing and ski lifts will be repurposed as part of the trail network, incorporating fitness trails of different challenge levels and actually making more of the hill available for park users.

The Master Plan recommends the development of a destination skate trail as priority project, with funding currently planned in 2022-2024. Detailed plans for the hill and chalet area will be developed as part of the skate trail design and will be implemented

incrementally as funding and opportunities arise. The Centennial Park Ski Centre will remain open, as is operationally feasible, until the skate trail and other improvements are ready for implementation.

Improved natural areas and watercourses

The overall ecological strategy is one of reclamation and renewal based on the consolidation of natural areas, the creation of links between natural areas, enhancements to existing habitats through activities such as invasive species removals, designing new elements for resiliency, and ongoing stewardship. A key proposed element of this plan includes the revitalization of Elmcrest Creek. Staff have initiated discussions with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority regarding potential improvements in key areas of the park. This is a longer-term strategy that will be implemented as funding and opportunities arise.

An improved trail and pathways network

To improve accessibility, remove barriers, and connect gaps, significant improvements to the park's circulation networks are proposed. A pathway and trail "hierarchy", consisting of new and improved paths, will be introduced to provide access to all areas of the park while signalling to the user how to use each pathway. Primary multi-use pathways for example, are finished with asphalt and are intended to be shared with a number of different users. In contrast, tertiary pathways are finished with 'natural material (e.g. gravel) to signal to the user that it is not a primary route in the park.

Other proposed improvements include the addition of sidewalks or multi-use trails where routes are currently perceived as park service roads, new sidewalks along Rathburn Road and Centennial Park Road where none exist at-present, and crosswalks at the intersection of Rathburn Road and Elmcrest Park, and the crossing at Centennial Park Boulevard at the path down to the Etobicoke Creek.

Parks Forestry and Recreation staff and Transportation Services staff have initiated discussions on some of these potential projects, with some as priorities to be completed within the next 5 years and some longer-term.

Wayfinding strategy

To further improve wayfinding across this large park, implementation of a wayfinding program across the park is proposed. Building on the City's TO360 Parks Wayfinding Strategy, the program will be designed in a way that contributes to Centennial Park and Etobicoke's unique identity. It will include improved entrance, directional, and interpretive signage. Implementation of the overall signage strategy, along with the consideration of specific place-names within the park, will provide opportunities for Indigenous place-making and place-keeping. A first phase will focus on main park gateways, with overall implementation taking place over a longer period of time.

4. Next Steps

The Centennial Park Master Plan is a long-term planning document or a 'blueprint' that will guide decision-making around future infrastructure and capital improvements, programming, and management of the park over the next 20 years.

Achieving the final park vision will require time and an approach that focusses on advancing the Priority Projects identified within the plan, as well as seeking opportunities to implement the variety of other proposed projects as funding allows and as opportunities arise. It is important to note that the phasing has been prioritized based on budget, importance, and immediate impact, and that many of the initiatives require working closely with internal and external partners.

If approved, staff will continue to advance projects which require collaboration and coordination with City divisions such as the City's Transportation Services Division and with partners such as the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority.

Implementing several of the priority projects identified will be undertaken through the existing capital budget, specifically in the case of some of the items related to the Facilities Master Plan.

5. Conclusion

Centennial Park is one of Toronto's largest and most important parks, used by well over a million locals and visitors from across the City each year. However, as this report outlines, there is a demonstrated need to invest holistically in improvements to the park to secure its future. Taking its cues from the Council-approved Parkland Strategy, Ravine Strategy and the Parks and Recreation Facilities Master Plan, the Master Plan will serve as a dynamic and long-term planning document that provides a vision, objectives and implementable action items to guide decision making for the ongoing improvements and management of Centennial Park over the next 20 years.

The transformational moves and improvements identified in the Master Plan will increase the prominence of Centennial Park as one of the City's largest 'Legacy' parks, ensuring it will continue to play a central role as part of Toronto's parks and open space system for generations to come.

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Appendix 1: Centennial Park Master Plan Update