January 17, 2023

City of Toronto 2023 budget consultation

Hello, my name is Ellen Schwartzel and I'm speaking on behalf of the Toronto Field Naturalists. Thank you, Mayor Tory and councillors for this chance to comment on the city's budget plans. The Toronto Field Naturalists have two main requests this budget cycle:

First: Ravine lands need increased investment:

We appreciate the city's recent uptick in funding for dealing with invasive weeds and restoring overused trails. It's a start: last year the city managed 450 hectares of land for invasive weeds. But the vast majority (~89%) of city-owned ravine lands still get no ongoing care, so they are degrading over time. We need to set a target, including a funding target.

For 2023, Toronto should aim for active ravine care for at least 20% of ravine lands - This care can be a mix of volunteer-led and city staff-led care. Achieving 20% would be a good first step towards meeting the city's commitments to the Ravine Strategy and the Biodiversity Strategy. For the longer term, 100% of our ravine lands need care: that should be the target.

If you're looking for dollars to pay for ravine care, let's look at the money being spent on golf course rehabilitation. The proposed budget has earmarked about $9 million on golf course rehab, (based on the City's Review of Golf Courses Report, dated Dec 17, 2021). We are convinced that money would be far better invested in ravines and parks. Please remember that the city's golf courses serve a small minority of Torontonians while ravines and parks are broadly used and accessible to all. In the longer term, we suggest that golf courses should be transformed into truly public lands and that any associated capital funding be redirected.

Second: Creative funding mechanisms are needed to fund new park lands.

With Toronto's rapidly growing population, we urgently need more parkland for a truly livable city long-term. And keep in mind that full-sized parks and connected natural corridors have much greater ecological and recreational value than fragmented parkettes. Toronto needs new approaches to funding to make this happen.

As an example, city staff should explore how other cities are paying for maintenance of large new parks: New York City's Brooklyn Bridge Park is a great example. At Brooklyn Bridge Park, 10% of the park footprint was dedicated to development, which pays for the bulk of park upkeep long-term.

Green Bonds would be another option would be to explore to finance new natural parklands. We hosted a guest lecture last month on innovative funding options for new parks, and the recording is available on our Youtube playlist. We'd be happy to share more information.

New councillors and new staff might not be familiar with the Toronto Field Naturalists, so I'm happy to share that TFN has been connecting Torontonians with local nature for 100 years. This past year we led almost 100 nature walks, all over the city's parks and ravines. Our walks offer TFN members deeply affordable ways to enjoy nature, using the TTC. We also offer the public several free guided walks every month, listed on our website. We're all volunteers, with no staff.

Our volunteers also care for ravine lands, at Cottonwood Flats in the Don Valley and elsewhere throughout the ravine system, so we have experienced eyes on the ground. We can tell you that Toronto's natural lands are widely used and busy all year long. Torontonians love their nature nearby and they need it; it's a public health "must-have" for a 21st century city. We can also tell you that Toronto's natural lands and biodiversity hotspots are heavily stressed by invasive weeds, litter, erosion and heavy use. They need better care.

In summary, please ensure Toronto's 2023 Budget dedicates more funds to care for ravine lands. Please also ensure that Toronto develops more effective ways to fund new parklands, especially more natural areas.

Thanks very much for your time, and I'd be happy to answer questions.

Ellen Schwartzel
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