

Alcohol in Parks Pilot: Evaluation Findings

Date: March 15, 2024

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

From: Acting General Manager, Parks, Forestry & Recreation

Wards: All

SUMMARY

In response to City Council direction ([2023.EC5.1](#)), this report presents the evaluation findings of the Alcohol in Parks Pilot Program, as implemented from August 2, 2023 to October 9, 2023 in 27 parks.

Overall, the Alcohol in Parks Pilot Program was implemented with a high level of satisfaction among park visitors, few issues arising, and minimal operational impacts. The vast majority (92 per cent) of those who visited a pilot park and responded to the experience survey shared that they were satisfied with their visit. Respondents felt safe, and people who chose to drink at the park were considerate.

There were minimal increases in service requests to 311 for noise, behaviour or garbage/recycling bins at pilot parks, but not all of these are attributable to the pilot, given other activities taking place in the parks, including special events. Further, there was no increased need for police response at the vast majority of pilot parks, and no increase in hospital emergency department visits due to alcohol, compared to the preceding year (2022).

The general public sentiment about alcohol in parks was assessed through a public opinion survey, representative of the Toronto population. The results indicate that 46 per cent of respondents were supportive of allowing drinking in parks, 23 per cent were neutral and 30 per cent were opposed.

Given the findings of the pilot evaluation and adhering to the guiding principles approved by City Council for the program, should Council wish to maintain the pilot parks and/or expand the program, this report provides a path forward for Council's consideration, including transitioning all pilot parks to permanent locations, and directing staff to work with local Councillors to expand the number of parks where drinking is permitted to include at least one park in every ward that meets Council-approved public health and safety criteria. If approved, staff will continue to monitor implementation and provide ongoing updates to local Councillors regarding issues arising in parks where alcohol consumption is allowed as well as report back with a status update in Q2 2025. As part of implementation, this report also recommends implementing an administrative process to streamline the addition and removal of park locations where personal alcohol

consumption is allowed through amendments to Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608, Parks.

In the development of this report, Parks, Forestry and Recreation consulted Legal Services, Municipal Licencing and Standards, Toronto Public Health, Solid Waste Management Services, Customer Experience - 311, Toronto Paramedic Services, Toronto Fire Services, and Toronto Police Service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. City Council approve the transition of the 27 pilot parks into park locations where personal alcohol consumption is allowed on a permanent basis with restrictions for health and safety, by amending Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608, Parks, substantially as set out in Attachment 1, subject to such stylistic or minor substantive changes as are deemed necessary or appropriate by the City Solicitor:

Park Name, Address

Campbell Avenue Playground and Park, 225 Campbell Ave
Cedarvale Park, 443 Arlington Ave
Christie Pits Park, 750 Bloor St W
Corktown Common, 155 Bayview Ave
Dovercourt Park, 155 Bartlett Ave
Dufferin Grove Park, 875 Dufferin St
Earlscourt Park, 1200 Lansdowne Ave
East Toronto Athletic Field, 175 Main St
Eglinton Park, 200 Eglinton Ave W
Greenwood Park, 150 Greenwood Ave
Hillcrest Park, 950 Davenport Rd
June Rowlands Park, 220 Davisville Ave
Lee Lifeson Art Park, 45 Princess Ave
McCleary Park, 755 Lake Shore Blvd E
Milliken Park, 4325 McCowan Rd
Monarch Park, 115 Felstead Ave
Morningside Park, 390 Morningside Ave
Neilson Park - Scarborough, 1555 Neilson Rd
Oriole Park - Toronto, 201 Oriole Pkwy
Queen's Park, 110 Wellesley St W
Riverdale Park East, 550 Broadview Ave
Roundhouse Park, 255 Bremmer Blvd
Sir Winston Churchill Park, 301 St. Clair Ave W
Skymark Park, 3500 Don Mills Rd
Trinity Bellwoods Park, 790 Queen St W
Underpass Park, 33 St. Lawrence St
Withrow Park, 725 Logan Ave

2. City Council approve the administrative process outlined in Attachment 2 and amend Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608, Parks, substantially as set out in Attachment 1,

subject to such stylistic or minor substantive changes as are deemed necessary or appropriate by the City Solicitor, in order to delegate authority to the General Manager to add and remove parks to Schedule A of Chapter 608 provided the criteria listed are satisfied and the local Councillor provides approval.

3. City Council confirm that a minimum of one park in each City of Toronto ward shall be designated for personal alcohol consumption, with consideration for sensitive uses, health and safety.

4. City Council direct the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, in consultation with local Councillors, to identify and designate at least one park location where alcohol is permitted for personal consumption in every City of Toronto ward, in accordance with the criteria, restrictions and process set out in Attachment 1 and 2 by September 2024, and support Councillors' community consultation efforts, as requested.

5. City Council direct the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, in consultation with the Executive Director, Municipal Licensing and Standards, and other appropriate Division Heads, to continue to monitor and evaluate park locations where alcohol is permitted for personal consumption, and report back to Economic and Community Development Committee in Q2 2025 with a status update.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial impacts resulting from the adoption of the recommendations in this report.

The transition of pilot parks to allow personal alcohol consumption on an ongoing basis and implementing the administrative process to designate additional parks for personal alcohol consumption and to remove parks can be accommodated within existing resources. Operational impacts of allowing alcohol in parks will continue to be monitored by Divisions and any new or emerging financial impacts will be addressed through future budget processes, as needed.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial implications as identified in the Financial Impact section.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on November 8, 2023, City Council amended Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608, Parks, to prohibit alcohol consumption within two metres around artificial and natural ice rinks for the Alcohol in Parks pilot extension.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.CC12.15>

At its meeting on October 11, 2023, City Council approved an extension of the Alcohol in Parks Pilot Program; and directed the Interim General Manager, Parks, Forestry and

Recreation to consult with Councillors who are part of the current pilot program on their interest in opting out of the extended pilot and report to City Council at its November 2023 meeting on amendments to Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608, Parks, to implement an updated pilot park list based on consultations conducted and additional safety restrictions for winter.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.MM11.22>

At its meeting on July 19, 2023, City Council approved a time-limited Alcohol in Parks Pilot Program, from August 2, 2023 to October 9, 2023, in 27 parks; requested the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation to prepare a "no alcohol" sign, to be deployed upon request of a local Councillor; and directed the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation to report to the Economic and Community Development Committee on the evaluation results of the pilot program in the first quarter of 2024.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.EC5.1>

At its meeting on May 10, 2023, City Council directed the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation to: (1) consult interested councillors on hosting a pilot park in their ward and, (2) consult the Executive Director, Municipal Licensing and Standards, the City Solicitor and the Medical Officer of Health, to report to the July 6, 2023 meeting of the Economic and Community Development Committee with a recommended approach, including required by-law amendments, for a pilot from August 5, 2023 to October 9, 2023, that is informed by experiences of Canadian jurisdictions and considers public health, public safety, enforcement, operations and cost; (3) consult the Medical Officer of Health and report on harm reduction, treatment or education programs that should be in place prior to the approval and implementation of any pilot location; and (4) provide Councillors with a list of parks most suited to be in the pilot in each ward. <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.DM6.5>

COMMENTS

The City Council-approved Alcohol in Parks Pilot Program has allowed people aged 19 and over to consume their own alcoholic beverages at 27 Toronto parks since August 2, 2023. The program focused on the responsible, personal consumption of alcohol in parks; events that included the sale or serving of alcohol continued to require the appropriate permits from the City of Toronto and the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario.

This report responds to City Council's direction to evaluate and report back on impacts of the program for park visitors and neighbouring communities.

Given the findings of the pilot evaluation and adhering to the guiding principles approved by City Council for the program, this report provides a path forward for Council's consideration should Council wish to maintain the pilot parks and/or expand the program. This report is organized as follows:

1. Alcohol in Parks Pilot Program Design
2. Implementation

- 3. Evaluation
- 4. A Path Forward for Alcohol in Parks

1. Alcohol in Parks Pilot Program Design

Toronto's Alcohol in Parks Pilot Program was developed by Parks, Forestry and Recreation (PFR) in collaboration with an interdivisional team with expertise in municipal law, by-law enforcement, public health and public communications. The program design, approved by City Council in July 2023, was developed based on a set of guiding principles and park selection criteria and was informed by public health guidance, public safety and parks operations considerations, and the experiences of other Canadian municipalities that have implemented alcohol in parks programs.

The pilot program allowed personal alcohol consumption anywhere in a park with restrictions for safety and/or sensitive use areas, including: outdoor swimming pools or decks, playgrounds, wading pools, splash pads, skateboard parks, and ice rinks.

1.1 Park Selection Process

Pilot parks were selected following a three-step process:

1. Data-driven review of all City parks against technical criteria (e.g., minimum park size, washroom and drinking water access) which identified 171 parks across Toronto.
2. Staff review of eligible parks in each City ward to short-list the most suitable parks from an operational perspective.
3. Consultation with local Councillors to determine optimal parks in their ward, based on staff assessment and the local Councillors' community knowledge. All pilot parks were confirmed by the local Councillor.

Through this process, 27 parks in 13 wards were identified for the pilot and are included in Schedule A to Municipal Code Chapter 608, Parks.

2. Implementation

2.1 Costs

The total additional expenditure to implement and evaluate the program was \$61,000, which was managed within Divisions' existing budgets. No additional staffing resources were required, although staff were occasionally reassigned from other duties as needed. Table 1 summarizes the expenses incurred during the evaluation period.

Table 1. Alcohol in Parks Pilot Program Expenses

Item	Expenditure
Opinion Poll (October 2023)	\$12,850.00
Social Media Promotion of Public Experience Survey	\$1,966.20
Signage	\$27,995.00
Garbage Bins	\$6,879.40
Portable Washrooms	\$11,000.00
Total	\$60,690.60

2.2 Interdivisional Oversight and Issues Tracking and Response

An interdivisional staff team convened weekly to review and address 311 service requests, field observations from staff and inquiries from City Councillors. Customer Experience - 311 Division received and responded to public inquiries about the pilot program through its established channels.

Participating City Councillors were able to raise issues related to the program directly with Park Supervisors, through the 311 Councillor Escalation Line, and by email to an account monitored by project staff.

2.3 Park Safety and Enforcement

Toronto Paramedic Services, Toronto Fire Services, and Toronto Police Service responded to calls for service as part of their regular service. No issues in relation to the program were raised to Toronto Police Service command during the pilot period.

By-law Enforcement Officers (BEO) conduct visits on a proactive and reactive basis and do not have a stationary presence in parks. During the evaluation period, By-law Enforcement did not issue any charges related to alcohol consumption in the pilot parks. BEOs conducted approximately 405 proactive visits to pilot parks and no alcohol-related disturbances were observed. BEOs did not have to conduct any reactive visits due pilot-related complaints.

2.4 Park Maintenance and Solid Waste Management

Twenty-nine additional portable washrooms were installed in pilot parks to increase washroom access. Fifty-nine additional garbage bins were installed, as well as 299 beverage container recycling bins that were part of part of a separate pilot. There were minimal increases in service requests for maintenance during the pilot (e.g., increased litter pick-up) and bins were picked up as part of general services.

2.5 Public Education and Communication

Information about the pilot and health resources were provided using park signage, the City website and social media account, and brochures handed out by BEOs to pilot park

visitors. A QR code to participate in the park experience survey was included in park signage and the brochure.

3. Evaluation

Based on learnings from other municipalities, multiple data collection methods and sources were used to assess the impact of the program on park users and neighbouring communities and businesses. The evaluation also assessed public opinion on the future of the program. The evaluation included:

- Two **Public Opinion Surveys** conducted by a third-party, The Strategic Counsel, before and after the pilot to understand Torontonians' sentiment about alcohol in parks. These surveys were designed to represent the general Toronto population based on age, gender, and region. The report on the post-pilot survey, conducted in October 2023 (n=1,200), is included as Attachment 4.
- An online public **Park Experience Survey** (n=9,677) designed to collect feedback from park users and adjacent neighbours and businesses about their experience of the pilot. The survey was featured on the project webpage and signage and promoted on social media, targeting people who live and work in the pilot park areas.
- Administrative data, including 311 service requests, hospital emergency department visits, service calls from Toronto Police Service and field observations by staff.

3.1 Key Evaluation Findings

The full Evaluation Report is available as Attachment 3. Key evaluation findings include:

- More than a third of Torontonians (35 per cent) said they visited a pilot park, based on the Public Opinion Survey.
- The vast majority (92 per cent) of people who visited a pilot park and responded to the Park Experience Survey (> 8,000) said that they were satisfied with their visit.
- Park Experience Survey respondents primarily visited a pilot park because it was their usual park and to socialize and enjoy nature. The majority (91 per cent) visited the park either by foot, bike or bus.
- Overall, pilot park visitors felt safe (92 per cent) and welcomed (90 per cent), and 88 per cent of park visitors said people drinking in parks were considerate.
- The majority (90 per cent) of park visitors who responded to the Park Experience Survey said parks were clean.
- Concerns anticipated by Torontonians before the pilot, such as increased disruptive behaviour and litter, largely did not materialize at pilot parks. There were few increases in 311 service requests for noise, behaviour, and garbage/recycling bins at pilot parks, no increased need for police response at the vast majority of parks,

and hospital emergency department visits due to alcohol were comparable to the preceding year (2022).

- The number of business respondents was small (48) in comparison to the overall number of survey respondents, and satisfaction among business owners was lower (72 per cent) compared to park visitors (92 per cent). Where concerns were expressed by business owners, staff will engage with them to review issues and identify mitigation options.

Opinions on the Future of Alcohol in Parks

In general, people who experienced pilot parks were more supportive of maintaining or expanding the program. Pilot park visitors who responded to the Park Experience Survey strongly support maintaining or expanding the program (90 per cent). Just over half of Torontonians (53 per cent) who responded to the Public Opinion Survey, and may have not experienced a pilot park, support maintaining or expanding the program in some form. The level of support was highest in Toronto and East York, an area that had the largest number of pilot parks.

4. A Path Forward for Alcohol in Parks

Given the findings of the pilot evaluation and adhering to the guiding principles approved by City Council for the program, should Council wish to maintain the pilot parks and/or expand the program, this report provides a path forward for Council's consideration, including transitioning all pilot parks to permanent locations, and directing staff to work with local Councillors to expand the number of parks where drinking is permitted to include at least one park in every ward that meets Council-approved public health and safety criteria.

To date, other large Canadian cities that implemented alcohol in parks pilots have transitioned their pilots to permanent alcohol in parks programs, with expanded access.

Based on the evaluation findings and the experience of other Canadian cities, a measured approach to maintaining and expanding the program is most appropriate for Toronto. Expansion to every Toronto park is not recommended. There is, however, an option to make all existing pilot park locations permanent and to move forward with a measured expansion across all wards, to parks that meet Council-approved criteria for health and safety, and that have the confirmation of the local City Councillor.

Should City Council approve this direction, City staff will continue to:

- Monitor implementation at local parks to identify and address issues and update local Councillors.
- Maintain parks and manage solid waste at existing service levels.
- Enforce Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608, Parks, including alcohol regulations.
- Respond to calls for service to first responders, as normal (Toronto Paramedic Services, Toronto Fire Services, and Toronto Police Service).
- Use the City website, social media and standard park signage to communicate information about the program, focus on positive social behaviour and responsible

consumption of alcohol, and provide access to health information on safer drinking and harm reduction resources.

4.1 Next Steps

Should Council wish to maintain the pilot parks and/or expand the program, the following steps are recommended, including amendments to Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608, Parks, as set out in Attachment 1.

- Allow personal alcohol consumption at all pilot parks on a permanent basis.
- Approve the following criteria for any additional park to be designated for personal alcohol consumption with the restrictions identified:

Criteria:

- Permanent or temporary washroom onsite
- Seasonal drinking water onsite
- Park size at least 1.5 hectares
- Not adjacent to schools, if park is smaller than 3.0 hectares
- Not situated on the waterfront
- Local Councillor's approval and written confirmation

Restrictions:

- No alcohol consumption allowed at outdoor swimming pools and decks or within 2 metres around playgrounds, wading pools, splash pads, skateboard parks, BMX parks, and artificial and natural ice rinks.
- Expand the number of parks where personal alcohol consumption is allowed to include at least one park in every ward that meets the Council-approved criteria set out in Attachment 1, and is identified by the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, in consultation with the local Councillor. Parks, Forestry and Recreation will support Councillors' community consultation efforts as part of this process, as requested.
- Establish an administrative process to allow the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation to receive requests from Councillors to add parks to Chapter 608, Schedule A list of parks where personal alcohol consumption is allowed, by applying Council-approved criteria and authorizing the City Solicitor to submit the Bill directly to City Council, without the need for a staff report. A park may be removed from the park list upon written confirmation from the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation that the local Councillor has provided written approval of the removal. A description of this process is provided in Attachment 2 and the proposed amendments to Municipal Code Chapter 608, Parks, are set out in Attachment 1.
- Continue to monitor and evaluate alcohol in parks, ensuring that each Councillor receives a regular update about any issues emerging in their respective wards, and provide a status report back to Economic and Community Development Committee in Q2 2025.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Proposed Amendments to City of Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608, Parks

Attachment 2: Proposed Administrative Process to Designate and Remove Parks for Personal Alcohol Consumption

Attachment 3: Evaluation Report for the Alcohol in Parks Pilot Program, 2023

Attachment 4: The Strategic Council Report: Responsible Alcohol Use in City Parks - Survey 2

Attachment 1: Proposed Amendments to City of Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608, Parks

Proposed amendments to section Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608-8 are highlighted in **bold text**.

§ 608-8. Liquor.

A. While in a park no person shall:

- (1) Have in their possession an open container of any liquor, unless in a designated area, authorized by permit and with the approval of the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario;
- (2) Provide, supply or in any way make liquor available to persons who on the basis of age are not permitted to be supplied with liquor under the Ontario Liquor License and Control Act, 2019; or
- (3) Consume, serve or sell liquor unless in a designated area, authorized by permit and with the approval of the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario.
- (4) Despite Subsections A and C, a person may possess an open container of liquor and consume liquor in the parks listed in Schedule A between the hours of 5:30 a.m. and 12 a.m. without a permit or the approval of the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario, provided that this exception does not apply to a person in possession of an open container of liquor or consuming liquor:
 - (a) within the boundary of an outdoor swimming pool or deck; or
 - (b) within the boundary of and a two-metre radius surrounding a:
 - (i) playground safety surface or playground equipment;
 - (ii) wading pool basin or splash pad;
 - (iii) skateboard or **BMX park**; or
 - (iii) a natural or artificial ice rink

B. The City Solicitor may submit, for enactment by Council, amendments to add parks to Schedule A of this Chapter upon written confirmation from the General Manager that:

- (1) **The local Councillor has provided written approval; and**
- (2) **The park meets all of the following criteria:**
 - (a) **Permanent or temporary washroom in the park;**
 - (b) **Seasonal drinking water is available in the park;**
 - (c) **The park is at least 1.5 hectares in size;**
 - (d) **Not adjacent to a school if the park is smaller than 3.0 hectares; and**
 - (e) **The park is not situated on the waterfront.**

C. The City Solicitor may submit, for enactment by Council, amendments to remove parks from Schedule A of this Chapter upon written confirmation from the General Manager that the local Councillor has provided written approval of the removal.

Attachment 2: Proposed Administrative Process to Designate and Remove Parks for Personal Alcohol Consumption

Legislative Authority

City Council's legislative power under the *Liquor Licence and Control Act* to designate by by-law public places for alcohol consumption, cannot be delegated.

However, City Council may approve an administrative decision-making process, which can be delegated to staff. In this case, staff suggest that City Council delegate authority to the General Manager of Parks, Forestry and Recreation to apply the criteria to be used to determine at which parks the personal consumption of alcohol may be allowed, and upon written confirmation from the General Manager that the criteria have been met, authorize the City Solicitor to process an amendment to Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608, Parks, to add the park to the park list in Schedule A. The City Solicitor would then submit the Bill directly to City Council for enactment, without a requirement for a staff report.

A similar process would be implemented for the removal of parks from Schedule A and would require written confirmation from the General Manager of Parks, Forestry and Recreation that the local Councillor has provided written approval of the removal.

Proposed Process to Designate or Remove Park for Personal Alcohol Consumption

In consultation with City staff, the local Councillor approves selection of a park(s) in their ward that meets the criteria and operational considerations and provides written approval.

To process the change to add a park:

- i. General Manager of PFR receives requests from the local City Councillor to add a park(s) where personal alcohol consumption is allowed, applies Council-approved criteria, and consults with the Councillor;
- ii. General Manager of PFR sends written confirmation to the City Solicitor advising that a park is to be designated for personal alcohol consumption in Schedule A of Chapter 608 and confirming that the criteria, including local Councillor approval, have been met;
- ii. City Solicitor processes an amendment to Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608, Parks which is tabled for approval by Council as part of the Bills at the next scheduled City Council meeting, or as soon thereafter as possible; and
- iii. General Manager of PFR informs the local Councillor that the designation has been made, informs Divisional partners as needed, and updates the City website and onsite signage as required.

To process the change to remove a park:

- i. General Manager of PFR receives requests from the local Councillor to remove a park(s) where personal alcohol consumption is allowed and consults with the local Councillor.
- ii. General Manager of PFR sends written confirmation to the City Solicitor advising that a park is to be removed Schedule A of Chapter 608 and confirms local Councillor approval;
- ii. City Solicitor processes an amendment to Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608, Parks, which is tabled for approval by Council as part of the Bills at the next scheduled City Council meeting, or as soon thereafter as possible; and
- iii. General Manager of PFR informs the local Councillor that the designation has been made, informs Divisional partners as needed, and updates the City website and onsite signage as required.