



To members of the City of Toronto Executive Committee:

Friends of Guild Park is pleased to support the proposal for improved funding at Guild Park & Gardens as put forward by our local Councillor Paul Ainslie.

The issue of allocating appropriate funding for Guild Park has remained unresolved for a decade. This letter describes the benefits of this approach, why Guild Park requires such funding, the broad support from Guild Park stakeholders and ways to ensure this proposal becomes a viable process.

Background

Our group began as a community initiative in 2012. The City Parks and Environment Committee first recognized our efforts in January 2013. We've since become an incorporated not-for-profit that organizes activities, provides stewardship and collaborates with those using Guild Park.

For our work, Friends of Guild Park has earned multiple certificates of achievement from Councillor Ainslie, honours from all three levels of government, prizes from Heritage Toronto and, most recently, the 2024 City of Toronto award for creating the City's Best Community Garden. We bring a valuable understanding of the site's legacy, operations and potential to issues affecting Guild Park. Our experience is directly relevant to decisions about the park's funding.

Benefits of this Simple Funding Concept

This new funding model proposed for Guild Park is simple: allocating onsite revenue for onsite projects. It supports two sets of improvements that benefit public use of the park:

- The series of improvements already recommended by Parks, Forestry & Recreation (PFR). These projects are contained in PFR's three strategic plans for Guild Park, published in 2014 and 2018 (details below);
- Expanded park infrastructure to support arts and cultural programs already provided on-site by Economic Development & Culture (EDC), Guild Festival Theatre and others. These improvements will also encourage hosting additional special events, such as Nuit Blanche and celebrations in 2032 to mark the 100 year anniversary of the historic Guild of All Arts.

Why New Funding? # 1: Ten Times More Visitors

Those familiar with the park's current conditions recognize the urgent need for additional funding. One reason for this urgency is to better serve a dramatic increase in visitors. In 2013, fewer than 20,000 people visited the park. At that time, every building on-site was closed, and few public events took place.

Since then, people now enjoy coming to three significant buildings at Guild Park, which the City of Toronto has had restored and reopened:

- the original Guild Inn (operating as a private events facility under a City sublease);
- the Clark Centre for the Arts, a City-run exhibition and art programs space; and
- a hand-built artist's cabin, which volunteers operate seasonally by agreement with the City.

At the same time, Guild Park activities have exploded thanks to:

- The popular annual weekend arts festival organized by Councillor Ainslie;
- The public events that our group hosts and organizes in collaboration with Doors Open, Jane's Walk, Heritage Toronto and Arts in the Parks.

- The summer-long seasons of live performances at the park's Greek Theatre, produced by the award-winning Guild Festival Theatre; and
- The year-round private events, including weddings and corporate meetings, held at the Guild Inn Estate. This is the private business that restored the original Guild Inn and now operates it as a municipal capital facility under a 40-year sublease with the City.

Visitor numbers at Guild Park now exceed 200,000 a year, ten times more than in 2013. To serve so many more people and groups from across the City and world-wide, the park requires substantially more infrastructure and resources. However, the budget allocated to Guild Park by PFR in the past decade hasn't kept pace with this 10-fold increase in public use.

Funding to Meet Visitors' Expectations

At events hosted by Friends of Guild Park, people tell us how Guild Park lacks the type of facilities available at comparable parks in Toronto and elsewhere. To improve the visitor experience, Guild Park urgently requires large- and small-scale improvements, including:

- more year-round public washrooms,
- on-site food service,
- more accessible trails & more benches
- better interpretative/ directional signage,
- upgraded outdoor theatre facilities, and
- safer connections to the park's waterfront.

The Toronto Arts In The Parks-funded poetry group, Tender Possibilities, identifies many of the same enhancements for Guild Park in its separate support letter to the Executive Committee.

Why New Funding? # 2: To Implement PFR's Long-Delayed Plans

PFR has long recognized that Guild Park requires significant improvements. But without adequate funding, none of PFR's comprehensive plans for Guild Park can proceed. Ensuring funds for PFR's plans is another reason why Friends of Guild Park strongly supports Councillor Ainslie's proposal.

In 2014, PFR completed its far-reaching **Management Plan for Guild Park**. The 97-page report was prepared by a cross-functional team of City personnel, as well as top park/landscape consultants, with public input. PFR's plan notes that Guild Park's special features provide "a unique character that needs to be protected, preserved and enhanced... [to] create a rare park visitor experience." For that, the plan recommended 17 priority initiatives.

Within four years, PFR and its team of private experts had completed two more detailed studies for the site: **The Trails Master Plan for Guild Park & Gardens**; and the **Guild Park & Gardens Horticulture Plan**. Each plan, which also benefited from public input, contains specific recommendations, plus prioritized timetables to implement the projects.

PFR's three plans outline a systematic, long-term framework so the City of Toronto can manage Guild Park at its full potential. The plans' recommendations address park issues that have now gained urgency due to Guild Park's increasing use. In 2018, PFR officials responsible for Guild Park stated that funding was unavailable to implement any of its existing plans. A separate proposal to build additional public washrooms on-site, which PFR described as high priority, was also delayed due to lack of finances. The new washroom project at Guild Park was later postponed to 2028.

Volunteers Bring Funds to Improve Park

As volunteers with a passion for Guild Park's future, we have a strong vision for the major projects well-suited to this location. We've repeatedly raised concerns by PFR's inability to move ahead on its plans. City officials explain that the existing funding process is the problem. Without PFR funding, Friends of Guild Park, in collaboration with other organizations, sought new sources of money and resources to improve the site. We obtained grants for two volunteer-led gardens. We partnered with Heritage Toronto to fundraise for Guild Park's first official heritage plaque installed in 2020. This joint effort has also funded a second Heritage Toronto plaque, to be installed in 2025.

2024 Marks 10 Years of PFR's Unfunded Plans

Our concerns about PFR's lack of funds continue. Earlier this month, after a volunteer asked about PFR's progress on its 2014 Guild Park Management Plan, a City official gave the following reply: "Project work has not been initiated and remains unfunded." Under current conditions, PFR's major plans from 2014 have remained unfunded for a decade, without any indication of future work.

Broad Consensus For This Innovative Step

For members of the Executive Committee who'd like to see Guild Park become a prime asset for Toronto, a first step is to proceed with Councillor's Ainslie proposal. This innovative approach ensures City revenue generated at Guild Park gets invested in Guild Park – in ways that will benefit all Torontonians who visit this spectacular site.

Councillor Ainslie's plan has gained support from a wide-ranging group of park stakeholders:

- The private business that operates the site's commercial events venue (Guild Inn Estate)
- A national charity that champions city parks (Park People)
- An organization for local residents who use the park (Guildwood Village Community Assn.)
- An arts group that recognizes the park's potential to inspire visitors (Tender Possibilities)

Such broad-based consensus is rare on public issues. It indicates the strong support for allocating appropriate resources to Guild Park in a new way, and without adding to the City's financial strain.

Next Steps: From Concept to Pilot Project

To put this new funding approach into action, Guild Park will benefit from a cross-functional team. Other cities have adopted this approach to prioritize how best to invest limited resources at popular destination parks that face competing demands.

Friends of Guild Park recognizes that a group of knowledgeable park stakeholders can best adapt this new funding concept into a workable process appropriate for Guild Park. We recommend a project team with members from the Guild Park Resource Group, including senior personnel from PFR, Corporate Real Estate Management, EDC and active community representatives. The team's mandate is to design and implement a funding process as a pilot project. Its goal is to deliver funds for Guild Park in 2025, then continues for at least five years, when its future can be evaluated.

During the pilot, the team will allocate City revenue generated at Guild Park to fund on-site improvements that provide long-term public benefits. With a site as complex as Guild Park, it's important that future spending is coordinated across the departments active at the park and stays aligned with the site's priorities for:

- long-term environmental protection / sustainability.
- public safety
- cultural heritage / history
- delivering a superior park experience to its visitors

Friends of Guild Park looks forward to playing an active role in how new funds are invested, continuing our advisory role in improving Guild Park and providing further support to Councillor Ainslie's important initiative.

Sincerely,

John Mason, BScF, BJ, MBA
President, Friends of Guild Park