



CITY OF TORONTO

Updating Policies for Infrastructure and Utility Projects in Parks and Open Space Areas: Draft Official Plan Amendment

Engagement Summary
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Attachment 5a – Engagement Summary – Dillon January 2024

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1 Introduction

The City of Toronto's Green Space System, made up of Parks and Open Spaces and the Natural Heritage System, is integral to the quality of life and social well-being of Toronto's residents and visitors. It provides opportunities for recreation, relaxation and experiencing nature, and contributes to Toronto's competitive advantage as a place to invest. As the City intensifies and grows, Toronto's Parks and Open Spaces will need to expand to serve the needs of a growing and changing city. At the same time, locating infrastructure projects is becoming more complex in an intensifying city, and the number of requests for Official Plan Amendments (OPA) to permit the disposal of land for infrastructure and utility uses in the Green Space System has increased.

The Parks and Open Space Areas designation generally prohibits development within these areas except for recreational and cultural facilities, conservation projects, cemetery facilities, public transit, and essential public works and utilities where supported by an appropriate assessment. The Official Plan states that disposal of publicly owned lands in Parks and Open Space Areas and the Green Space System is discouraged and no City-owned lands in Parks and Open Space Areas and the Green Space System will be sold or disposed of. As such, while certain land uses to facilitate infrastructure are permitted under the Official Plan, the enabling transaction (disposal of land) to bring about the use is prohibited.

The City of Toronto is seeing an increase in requests for disposals of land in Parks and Open Space Areas and the Green Space System because of infrastructure projects and utility upgrades. Staff are seeking a new balanced approach that would enable certain disposals that are consistent with the intent of the Official Plan, while still maintaining strong protections for Parks and Open Space Areas and the Green Space System. The potential policy changes (OPA 528) introduce additional protection criteria, which if met, would eliminate the need for a utility provider or public agency undertaking a conservation project to seek an OPA as a precondition to them undertaking a land transaction to construct various types of utilities.

The City engaged Dillon Consulting to assist with the outreach, facilitation, and engagement on this project. The project team (the City and Dillon) consulted on the potential policy changes with key stakeholders, the public, and engaged First Nations communities to understand issues and perspectives on the potential changes. The purpose of engagement was to gather feedback to refine the proposed policy amendment and process. This report provides an overview of the engagement process and what we heard.

2 Engagement Activities

Engagement activities were designed to give key stakeholders, the public, and Indigenous rights holders information on the potential policy changes (OPA 528), and to answer their questions and gather feedback and input that will inform the draft policies.

The following section outlines the engagement activities completed.

2.1 Communications

Communications and outreach materials were designed for the general public and key stakeholders to inform them of the project and invite them to the engagement events. Communications materials included the project website, social media posts, and an outreach letter sent to key stakeholder groups by City staff.

2.2 Stakeholder Meetings

The project team held two online stakeholder meetings to present the draft updated policies for the OPA 528 and gather input. The meetings began with a presentation overview of the project and draft policies and were followed by a Q+A and discussion. The first meeting was on October 17, 2023, from 1:30 to 3:30pm and included utility and infrastructure stakeholders. The second meeting was on October 18, 2023, from 10:00am to 12:00pm, and included key community stakeholders interested in parks and open spaces. Overall, 19 utility and infrastructure stakeholder attendees and 10 community stakeholder attendees joined the meetings.

2.3 Public Meetings

The project team held two online open houses on November 1, 2023, from 1:30pm to 3:00pm, and 6:30pm to 8:30pm, to present the draft policies for infrastructure projects in parks and open space areas, including the Draft OPA. The meetings began with a presentation overview of the project and draft policies, followed by a Q+A and discussion. Overall, 31 attendees joined across both meetings.

2.4 Indigenous Engagement

The project team sent outreach letters informing First Nations Rights Holders of the project and inviting them to participate in a meeting to discuss the draft policies. The following First Nations Communities were contacted:

- Alderville First Nation
- Beausoleil First Nation
- Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation
- Chippewas of Rama First Nation

- Curve Lake First Nation
- Hiawatha First Nation
- Huron-Wendat First Nation
- Kawartha Nishnawbe First Nation
- Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation
- Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation
- Six Nations of the Grand River First Nation

The project team met with Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation on November 29 2023, and Six Nations of the Grand River on January 11, 2024 to present the draft policy changes and gather feedback.

Hiawatha First Nation responded via email and noted that they have no questions or concerns regarding the OPA at the current stage.

3 What We Heard

3.1 Highlights of Overall Input Received

Table 1 highlights the key themes of input received during engagement.

Table 1: Themes of Input

Theme	Examples of Topics Raised
Feedback on draft policy changes	City Staff noted the OPA must conform with existing Official Plan policies that protect the function and use of Parks, Green Spaces, and Open Spaces, and protect environmentally sensitive areas
Concern for greenspace	Concern that the natural environment and urban forests could be compromised
Policy language	Concern around the use of 'reasonable alternative', and understanding how the approval criteria will work
Review criteria	Understanding how the potential risks of the project were identified

3.2 Input by Theme

The following sections summarize the input received within several key themes:

- Feedback on the draft policy changes
- Concern for greenspace
- Policy language
- Approval process
- Review criteria

The points documented below summarize the input, feedback, and discussions from stakeholder meetings, public open houses, and meetings with First Nations communities. The key questions section outlines points of clarification sought by participants. This is intended to be a summary of all the input received and doesn't reflect the input from one group or organization.

3.2.1 Feedback on the draft policy changes

- There is a need to conform with policies that guide Environmentally Significant Areas and Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest

- Ensuring the policy is well communicated to allow people to have a good understanding of what is happening and to build awareness and understanding through the use of infographics, social media, video, etc.
- Ensuring the policy addresses the size and scope of the project requesting disposal
- Ensuring the function and use of the parks, green space, and open spaces are maintained as such and not converted to infrastructure use
- Ensure the policies retain benefits to the communities when lasting changes take place in parks, natural areas, and open spaces
- Concerns about the potential loss of park land over time to infrastructure and utilities

3.2.2 Concern for Greenspace

- Ensuring that important ecological functions are preserved in Parks, Natural Areas, and Greenspaces
- Important that Environmentally Significant Areas are protected and are not subject to infrastructure projects
- Concern around balancing greenspace with growth, it was noted that greenspace should be prioritized
- Ensuring that Provincially Significant Wetlands are also protected from infrastructure improvements
- Ensuring that land is restored and enhanced when infrastructure / utility projects occur
- Ensuring that there are protections for biodiversity in place when permitting infrastructure / utilities in parks and natural areas
- Need to ensure that accommodating growth doesn't lead to a reduction in greenspace areas

3.2.3 Policy Language

- Clarification was needed whether leases or easements would also require an Official Plan Amendment under the current policies
- Desire to see criteria on restoring and enhancing land that goes above and beyond the minimums
- A definition of what constitutes essential public works and utilities was sought
- Concern regarding the term reasonable alternative, greater definition of what this would look like is needed to avoid inconsistency
- Ensure that there are guidelines for finding a reasonable alternative, where environmental protection is maintained as the priority, and there is a meaningful search for an alternative

- Better description of the approval process from start to finish was desired

3.2.4 Review Criteria

- Concern that there would be inconsistent review criteria across staff
- Desire to understand the demand and need that led to undertaking the project
- Identification on potential risks or impacts of adopting the policy in Parks and Open Spaces was desired

Key Questions

In addition to the comments above, key questions are summarized below for staff consideration as the policies are finalized. Key questions asked during the consultation process included:

- Will there be a fee associated with the proposed new process?
- What would the new approval timeline be?
- How would emergency work (e.g., responding to flooding) be addressed?
- What would the review process look like for applications?
- Would staff be trained on using the new criteria?
- How would community members and stakeholder be educated on policy changes?
- Do the criteria consider the size and scope of the project?
- Is there an opportunity for public engagement to be part of the new process?

4 Next Steps

City staff will use feedback received during the engagement process to finalize the draft policies.

For more information please visit: <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/planning-development/planning-studies-initiatives/infrastructure-improvements-in-parks-open-space-areas-the-green-space-system/>