

Access to Outdoor Ovens in Toronto Parks

Date: March 24, 2025

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

From: General Manager, Parks and Recreation

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report responds to City Council's direction ([MM20.11](#)) to review the 2011 Outdoor Ovens in City Parks Policy to identify opportunities, if any, and to reduce administrative or financial barriers to the community use of outdoor ovens, while also ensuring public health, safety, and liability considerations continue to be met.

Toronto maintains the largest outdoor public oven network in Canada and facilitates public enjoyment of these amenities both through City-delivered programming and opportunities for individuals and groups to book the ovens for their own use. This review finds that Toronto's outdoor ovens are not used as much as they could be and recommends opportunities to reverse that trend with the recommended removal of booking fees and other administrative processes that may serve as barriers for communities to self-activate these amenities, while continuing to mitigate risk appropriately.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The General Manager, Parks and Recreation recommends that:

1. City Council amend Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 441, Fees and Charges, Appendix E – Schedule 1, Parks and Recreation by amending fees to read as set out in the table below:

Ref No.	Service	Fee Description	Category	Fee Basis	Fee	Annual Adj.
1.6787	Parks	Outdoor Oven Use - Not-for-Profit / Res	City Policy	Per Day	REVISED \$0	Yes

2. City Council approve the revised Outdoor Ovens in City Parks Policy, as detailed in Attachment 1.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

This report recommends that City Council amend Municipal Code Chapter 441 "Fees and Charges" by amending the existing permit fee for the outdoor oven resident / not-for-profit user category to \$0. This change will result in an estimated annual revenue loss of less than \$1,000. This revenue impact is minimal, and the implementation of these changes will be managed within the existing Parks and Recreation's Operating Budget.

No additional funding is required.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the information as presented in the Financial Impact Section.

DECISION HISTORY

On July 24-25, 2024, City Council direct the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, to review the 2011 Outdoor Ovens in City Parks Policy and related procedures from a customer service and equity perspective and to identify opportunities, if any, to reduce administrative or financial barriers to the community use of outdoor ovens, while ensuring that public health and safety and liability considerations continue to be met, and report back to Economic and Community Development Committee by the first quarter of 2025 with proposed recommendations and rationale for updates to the policy, such report to include: annual amount collected by the City from park volunteer groups to access Outdoor Ovens; and the total cost to the City to administer park volunteer groups permit applications and process their fees.
<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.MM20.11>

On Nov 29-Dec 1, 2011, City Council approved the Outdoor Ovens in City Parks Policy.
<https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2011/pe/bgrd/backgroundfile-41502.pdf>

On June 24, 2011, Parks and Environment Committee directed the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation to develop a policy on public bake ovens in parks and report back in September 2011.
<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/report.do?meetingId=4475&type=decisions>

On May 9, 2011, while reviewing the Toronto Food Strategy: 2011 Update, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to consult with Parks, Forestry and Recreation on a policy for the construction and use of community bake ovens.
<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/report.do?meetingId=4493&type=decisions>

COMMENTS

Outdoor public ovens are wood-fired brick or cob covered ovens designed for communities to bake bread, pizza, and other foods outdoors. Across many cultures, outdoor ovens have served as hubs for community connection and food sharing. Toronto's network of outdoor ovens is the largest in Canada. Most of Toronto's outdoor

ovens are standard wood-fired masonry in design. In addition, there is one tandoor oven, which is a higher temperature clay oven traditionally used for Middle Eastern and South Asian cuisine. Several of Toronto's ovens were built in parks by and for community members. See the full list of ovens in Attachment 3.

Members of the public can enjoy the ovens by participating in community-led programming or in City staff-delivered programming that is offered at some locations, often in association with Community Recreation camps and other Community Recreation Centre outdoor activities, such as movie nights, cooking workshops, and community pizza days.

As interest in outdoor ovens grew, City Council approved a policy to guide how ovens may be established in a city park, and to guide how members of the public can access these amenities safely (Outdoor Ovens in City Parks Policy, 2011). Under the policy, Parks and Recreation is responsible for managing public access to ten outdoor ovens through a permit booking system. To be eligible for a day permit, an applicant must demonstrate proof of safety training, public health training related to food preparation if serving or selling food to the public, and proof of insurance. Parks and Recreation staff are expected to provide onsite support to permit-holders, including unlocking and locking the ovens, supplying necessary tools, and addressing operational issues. Permits are issued on a first-come, first-served basis and there is no limit on the number of permits that can be issued to an applicant.

The 2011 policy also allows the City to enter into agreements with Not-for-Profit organizations for the longer-term use of an outdoor oven in a park; however, this mechanism has rarely been used. The General Manager of Parks and Recreation is not authorized to enter into such agreements without City Council approval and this type of agreement is not available for any other single-purpose park amenity. There are currently no individual agreements in place for an oven. There have been a few instances where the City has entered into agreements with Not-for-Profits related to ovens, but these have generally been part of broader park revitalization efforts. One example is an agreement currently in development between the City of Toronto and the Fred Victor Centre, a registered charity. This agreement will authorize Fred Victor Centre to manage and facilitate programming for the oven as part of a broader management arrangement for Regent Park that includes the greenhouse and community garden complex.

In July 2024, City Council directed staff to review the 2011 Outdoor Ovens in City Parks Policy to identify opportunities, if any, to reduce administrative or financial barriers to the community use of outdoor ovens, while ensuring public health and safety, and liability considerations continue to be met. This report summarizes results of the review and recommends updates to the policy and procedures to strengthen community animation of the ovens in City parks.

1. Research and Engagement

To respond to Council direction, the policy and process for members of the public to book outdoor ovens in parks were reviewed through the lenses of fees and costs to operate, health and safety, and customer service and equity. A jurisdictional review was

conducted, and user feedback was collected from recent permit holders and local outdoor ovens 'champions'.

Fees and Program Administration Costs

The current permit fees to book an outdoor oven are: \$16.29 for Resident/Not-for-Profit; and \$32.53 for Commercial/Private/Non-resident. In 2024, four of the ten outdoor ovens available for permit were booked by twelve different groups or members of the public and used a total of 57 times. The total revenue generated from the Resident/Not-for-Profit user category was \$488.64. The cost to the City to administer these bookings is a small proportion of Parks and Recreation's business operations and is absorbed within the Parks and Recreation operations budget.

Health and Safety

Requirements for the operation of an outdoor oven are addressed in the Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608-10: Parks – Campfires, Barbecues, Bake Ovens, and Tandoor Ovens and in the 2011 policy. Toronto Public Health, Toronto Fire Services, and the City's Insurance and Risk Management Office have confirmed that (i) oven use training; (ii) food preparation training, if food will be served or sold to the public; and (iii) general liability insurance training required for an outdoor oven permit, as outlined in the 2011 policy, continue to be appropriate.

Jurisdictional Review

To understand how public access to outdoor ovens is supported elsewhere, staff reviewed ten municipalities across North America (see Attachment 2). Only three - Calgary, Ottawa, and Wolfville - offer outdoor oven use to the public. Each of these cities has a single oven, which is directly managed by the municipality through a permit system or an agreement with a community agency. Toronto's network of more than ten outdoor ovens that are directly available for the public to use, is a unique resource to celebrate.

Users' Perspectives

A survey of Toronto's outdoor oven permit holders from 2024 was conducted to better understand the user experience related to financial and administrative barriers, customer service and equity. To supplement this survey, staff conducted one-on-one interviews with "oven champions" - individuals and community organizations that use the ovens regularly and deliver outdoor ovens-related programming in parks. Results of this user engagement confirmed that Toronto's outdoor ovens are well-loved park amenities that bring residents together for cultural events, food sharing, and community programming. To improve customer service and equity and address barriers to using the ovens, oven users recommended that the City:

- Reduce fees, especially for individuals and grassroots organizations;
- Provide onsite information about the ovens, including how to book them;
- Build community confidence and skills by refreshing current training;
- Enhance customer service by providing consistent, high-quality onsite staff support and reducing the administrative burdens associated with booking online; and
- Work collaboratively with community-based groups to celebrate Toronto's unique outdoor ovens network, animate parks that provide these amenities, and increase their year-round use and value for communities.

2. Proposed Improvements

This review finds that Toronto's outdoor ovens are well-loved park amenities but are not used as much as they could be. The Outdoor Ovens in City Parks Policy (2011) and related procedures continue to deliver public access to the use of the ovens, while mitigating risk appropriately through requirements for insurance and health and safety training. Some policy changes and procedural updates are proposed that will improve customer service and equity by removing financial and administrative barriers. In addition to removing barriers, the City can also be proactive and encourage greater public enjoyment of the ovens, by building stronger relationships with community-based groups and leaders who are Toronto's "outdoor ovens champions".

a) Introduce a Zero Dollar Outdoor Ovens Permit Fee

As part of the 2025 Budget, City Council approved a No-Fee park booking program that removes financial and administrative barriers for community-led, non-commercial park activities. Outdoor ovens were excluded from the program because of health, safety and insurance considerations. To address users' concerns, the goals of this Council direction, and to align with the 2025 park booking program, this report recommends that City Council amend the City of Toronto Municipal Code 441 "Fees Charges" to establish a \$0 fee for outdoor oven permits for the Resident/Not-for-Profit user fee category, effective April 30, 2025. Annual revenue loss associated with this change is anticipated to be no greater than the \$1,000 - \$5,000 range. Due to the fire risk associated with outdoor ovens, general liability insurance is required to ensure proper risk management. Permit holders must obtain coverage either privately or through the City's insurance program, which offers coverage at a cost of \$33.48 for events with up to 25 attendees and \$65.88 for 26 to 100 attendees. The establishment of a \$0 outdoor oven permit fee for the Resident/Not-for-Profit user fee category removes financial barriers within the City's control, while ensuring proper liability protection.

b) Remove Long-Term Use Agreements for Outdoor Ovens

The 2011 Outdoor Ovens in City Parks Policy includes consideration for Not-for-Profit organizations to enjoy long-term use of ovens under agreement with the City. Reserving long-term use for specific organizations may conflict with the goal of encouraging public access to the ovens and is not a mechanism that is used for any other park amenity. To clarify that public use of the outdoor ovens is delivered through the permit mechanism, and to bring the policy into alignment with permitting the use of other park amenities, this report recommends that the long-term use section of the policy should be removed (see Attachment 1). No organizations will be affected by this change as no oven-only agreement is currently in use. In future, organizations that seek only to use the oven on an extended basis will be supported by staff to book multiple permits. Organizations that seek to use the oven in concert with other park amenities for longer-term park programming will be supported through Parks and Recreation's partnerships office as usual.

c) Procedural Improvements

Parks and Recreation will also implement these procedural improvements in 2025-6:

- Update the online outdoor oven training video to ensure accuracy of instructions and provide more community advice;
- Identify opportunities and dates for community-led, onsite/hands-on training events;

- Remove administrative burdens and provide consistent customer support for grassroots groups to book multiple permit dates at one time in order to deliver ongoing community programming (e.g. Wednesday Night Pizza in the Park);
- Provide a trained staff contact for each oven to provide consistent, helpful onsite support (e.g. unlocking/locking the oven, provision of tools, and advice as needed);
- Provide QR codes at all ovens to access booking information, training, etc.; and
- Improve the outdoor ovens webpage to include, as possible, information about community events and available booking dates.

d) Promote Park Animation, with Local Ovens Champions

Toronto's outdoor ovens 'champions' have years of experience and park animation ideas to increase public enjoyment and use of the ovens. The City can encourage these community leaders to further activate parks in relation to the outdoor ovens. In part, this encouragement can be provided by reducing financial and administrative barriers described above. For example, Parks and Recreation will work with Parks People, who continue to support community-led activations in our parks and ravines and create a "Bake Ovens Champions Reference Group" to know that these changes are proving effective, share success stories, and continue to improve the opportunities to activate these amenities. A first step will be to co-host a 2025 summer learning event, at a city park to be determined.

3. Conclusion

Toronto's outdoor ovens network is unique in Canada, but the ovens are not used as much as they could be. By removing administrative and financial barriers and with continued collaboration with community leaders, there is significant potential to further activate these spaces and expand the public's enjoyment of these valued assets.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Updates to the Outdoor Ovens in Parks Policy
Attachment 2: Review of Public Access to Outdoor Ovens in North America
Attachment 3: Outdoor Ovens in Parks Locations