

Towards a Beautiful City - A Path Forward

Date: March 31, 2025

To: Executive Committee

From: Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning; General Manager, Parks and Recreation; and General Manager, Transportation Services

Wards: All

SUMMARY

City Planning, Transportation Services, and Parks and Recreation Divisions have plotted a path forward to achieve improved beautification of the public realm in Toronto. This work was in response to the City Council Member Motion 2024.19.26 - Towards A Beautiful City. The path forward includes 5 Priority Actions:

- Develop an internal governance model for oversight, leadership and coordination with respect to achieving design excellence in the public realm, including parks, public spaces and buildings;
- Undertake an inventory and review of current procurement processes (e.g. Request For Proposals, design competitions) and identify any changes, additional processes, and best practices that should be considered moving forward;
- Develop a "Considerate Construction" guideline to advance best practices for the design and aesthetics of construction setups and take downs on City streets;
- Review City maintenance, service-level and operational practices across impacted divisions to identify opportunities and costs required to improve the quality and care of the public realm; and
- Review and enhance a "Toronto Clean and Beautiful" campaign to raise public awareness, and bring together multiple partners, stakeholders and private landowners in enhancing the public realm.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, General Manager, Parks and Recreation, and General Manager, Transportation Services recommend that:

1. City Council direct the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, the General Manager, Parks and Recreation, the General Manager, Transportation Services, in consultation with all relevant City Divisions, to report back to Executive

Committee in the fourth quarter of 2025 with an update on the five priority actions outlined in this report that seek to increase beauty in the public and private realms and continue to advance design excellence in Toronto.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no immediate financial impacts resulting from the recommendation in this report.

Resources required to support the preliminary analysis and planning work for the five priority actions outlined in this report are included within the 2025 Operating Budget. Staff will assess any future incremental resource requirements and present them to City Council through the recommended report back in the fourth quarter of 2025.

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

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on June 26 and 27, 2024, City Council requested staff to report back with a plan for the overall beautification of the public realm in Toronto, including the feasibility of interdivisional design standards and the feasibility of creating an Office of a City Designer and Architect, responsible for the design, coordination and implementation of these design standards.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.MM19.26>

COMMENTS

A Path Forward

In response to City Council Member Motion 2024.19.26 - Towards A Beautiful City, senior staff in City Planning Division, Transportation Services Division, and Parks and Recreation Division are proposing a path forward in the pursuit of improved beautification, safety and function of the public realm and advancement of design excellence in Toronto.

Cities with vibrant, well-designed, and well-maintained public spaces are more livable, attractive, and resilient. As Toronto's population continues to grow, its parks and public realm need to be expanded, enhanced, and better maintained to serve residents and visitors, as they face an increased intensity of use. The quality of design in architecture and public spaces plays a crucial role in shaping the lived experience and quality of life of a city's residents. Well-designed spaces are not just visually appealing; they foster a

sense of belonging, identity, and community among citizens. Thoughtfully designed architecture and public spaces can enhance people's emotional and psychological well-being by creating environments that promote connection, safety, and interaction. Spaces that are accessible, functional, and aesthetically pleasing encourage social engagement and contribute to a greater sense of inclusion and pride in one's surroundings, helping to establish a shared identity among residents and reflect the diverse cultural and historical fabric of the community.

In addition to its cultural and social significance, high-quality public realm is a key driver of economic growth. Attractive, well-designed environments can draw local shoppers, tourists, businesses, and investors, boosting local economies and creating job opportunities. Design that prioritizes sustainability and innovation improves the long-term resilience of cities, making them more adaptable to changing needs and challenges and ensuring the well-being of future generations.

While there are many City programs that already provide public realm beautification such as Transportation Service's Neighbourhood Improvement and Street Art Toronto that are relevant to improved beautification and advancement of city streets, staff are proposing, as an initial strategy, a recommended path forward that focuses on two themes, and within those themes, identifies five priority actions.

Theme 1 - Governance, Oversight and Leadership for Design Excellence

- Develop an internal governance model for oversight, leadership and coordination with respect to achieving design excellence in the public realm, including parks, public spaces and buildings. (Lead: Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning).
- Undertake an inventory and review of current procurement processes (e.g. RFPs, design competitions) and identify any changes, additional processes, and best practices that should be considered moving forward to achieve design excellence in the public realm, including parks, public spaces, elements within the public realm, and public buildings. (Leads: Chief Planner and Executive Director and Chief Procurement Officer).

Theme 2 - Maintenance of the Public Realm

- Develop a "Considerate Construction" guideline, intended to advance best practices for the design and aesthetics of construction setups and take downs on City streets. The guidelines will minimise the impact of construction on the public realm, and inform both private development and public projects. (Lead: General Manager, Transportation Services).
- Review City maintenance, service-level and operational practices across impacted divisions to identify opportunities, and costs required to improve the quality and care of the public realm. This includes ensuring design, maintenance and operational impacts are considered key factors in designing a high-quality public realm. (Leads:

General Manager, Transportation Services, General Manager, Parks and Recreation, and Executive Director, Corporate Real Estate Management).

- Review and enhance a “Toronto Clean and Beautiful” campaign to shift culture, raise awareness, and bring together multiple partners, stakeholders and private landowners in enhancing the public realm. This could be launched with the City's annual interdivisional spring clean-up (Clean Toronto Together) (Leads: General Manager, Transportation Services, and Executive Director, Environment, Climate and Forestry).

Theme 1 - Governance, Oversight and Leadership for Design Excellence

Currently, the City has multiple roles, across many divisions, that are responsible for ensuring design excellence and beautification in the and private realms. These staff are focused on studying best practices, creating standards and guidelines, and implementing them through the procurement process and the delivery of Capital projects, the review of development applications, and working with partners such as Waterfront Toronto. The City also benefits from the expertise of Design Review Panels which provide professional advice and commentary on both public and private projects. Generally, City staff have employed a collaborative inter-divisional/agency approach to ensuring City goals and objectives (strategic and operational) are considered in the design process. This multi-divisional/agency approach may also include external organizations such as Business Improvement Areas and considers many factors such as constructability, carbon footprint and ongoing maintenance as well as capital costs.

The design of new parks seeks to balance the distinct character of each neighbourhood, corporate priorities, and other guiding strategies (e.g. accessibility, climate resilience, Reconciliation Action Plan, Public Art Strategy) with functional requirements for effective maintenance over the park's lifecycle to ensure parks remain safe, beautiful, and functional. While there are standard designs for certain elements such as pathways, benches and drinking water sources, there is often a desire for bespoke designs especially in signature or destination parks. Other items, such as play structures and recreational facilities, vary in response to local character and needs.

Through Corporate Real Estate Management, the City designs and delivers numerous types of public buildings and addresses state of good repair needs across a portfolio of over 450 City-owned properties. The design of significant capital projects may be delivered through design competition processes to ensure design excellence. Recent projects include substantial completion of the St. Lawrence Market North Redevelopment, ongoing work on the new Etobicoke Civic Centre, the Spirit Garden at Nathan Phillips Square and five new and/or renovated sites which are/will be operational in 2025 including a fire station, paramedics station, fleet maintenance garage, and the Mount Dennis Net Zero Early Learning and Childcare Centre.

Urban Design is integral to the advancement of the City's strategic priorities and implementation of the built form and public realm policies of the Official Plan related to well designed buildings and urban spaces. From the largest-scale plans down to the smallest site and building details, City Planning Urban Design strives to create beautiful, sustainable, vibrant, safe, and inclusive places. Urban Designers contribute to planning

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studies, policy development related to public realm and built form, and ensure implementation through the development application review process in terms of urban design comments and design workshops. Through the development review process, staff secure space for new parks, public art, new public streets, privately owned publicly accessible spaces (POPS) and work with developers and design teams to ensure these spaces serve local communities and connect to a broader public space system.

The design of public spaces and private developments in Toronto is guided by a variety of guidelines and interdivisional standards. Urban Design Guidelines for Low-rise, Mid-rise, and Tall Buildings provide design directions to ensure cohesive, well-designed, comfortable and robust public spaces framed by attractive buildings. The design of the public right-of-way is guided by documents such as Toronto's Streetscape Manual, Complete Streets Guidelines, Vision Zero - Curb Radii Guidelines, Walking Strategy, Cycling Plan and Green Infrastructure Technical Guidelines. A list is included in the Attachment of this report, and a few of the more significant standards are discussed below.

Having clear and ambitious City standards, and dedicated professional City staff, including architects, landscape architects, urban designers, and planners to deliver public projects and review private development applications are critical to achieving high quality design outcomes, and they have achieved a number of important successes across the City. That said, staff are proposing two areas for review that can further advance the goals set out in the Council direction. These relate to oversight, leadership and coordination with respect to design excellence, and the procurement process for public projects.

Oversight, Leadership and Coordination

Priority Action - Develop an internal governance model for oversight, leadership and coordination with respect to achieving design excellence in the public realm, including parks, public spaces and buildings. (Lead: Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning).

To further improve design focus and design outcomes in City decision-making, staff will develop an internal governance model to provide oversight and leadership with respect to achieving design excellence in the public realm, including new parks, public spaces, and buildings. The process of developing the governance model will examine existing roles and responsibilities, further review best practices from other jurisdictions, and identify any new internal processes, governance structures, or roles that are needed to continue to advance design excellence within the city.

Many cities around the world have a single leadership position or department that ensures consistent high-quality design of architecture and landscape architecture. In Toronto, design excellence is delivered through the collaboration of many divisions, including City Planning Urban Design, Parks and Recreation, Transportation Services, Development Review, and Corporate Real Estate Management. The Toronto and Waterfront Toronto Design Review Panels provide an additional layer of design review by design professionals from the private sector and academia. A thorough review of

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these internal processes, combined with an in-depth jurisdictional analysis, will play a crucial role in shaping a Toronto-specific strategy that not only aligns with local needs, but also incorporates best practices from similar jurisdictions. By integrating insights from both local and global perspectives, we can develop a governance model that elevates the city's built environment, promotes sustainability, and enhances the quality of life for its residents. Following are a few examples of cities with different governance models to advance and advocate for design excellence and a brief description of their approaches:

City of San Francisco

The City Architect in Public Works is an honorary role that has influence over the design and renovation of public structures, especially historic and civic buildings. The position was originally established in 1907 to help contribute to the rebuilding of the city after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. The position was created to uphold the highest standards in design and construction for the City's public structures, ensuring resilience and excellence in the wake of the earthquake's devastation. The City employs over 65 architects and other staff who design a large variety of civic projects such as fire stations, health centers, libraries, homeless shelters, transportation and public utilities facilities, recreation centers, police stations, public parks and more.

New York City

New York City's Design and Construction Excellence Program establishes expectations and goals for quality and innovation in architecture, engineering, and project delivery. The program utilizes strategies and practices that balance functionality, cost, constructability, and durability to bring form and meaning to public space. The program encompasses all aspects of project delivery, from planning through design, construction, and completion. Integrated practices include enhanced project initiation and management tools, Quality-Based Selection, best value procurements, performance evaluation and management, knowledge sharing, and continuing education.

City of London, UK

Good Growth by Design is the Mayor of London's programme to shape a better city by promoting quality and inclusion in the built environment. The programme comprises projects and policies promoted across the Greater London Authority Group, but also a call to action to architects, urban designers and other built environment professionals working in London. The Six Pillars of the program are: setting standards and informing delivery; ensuring quality; building capacity; supporting diversity; commissioning quality; championing and learning.

City of Edmonton

In 2009, the Mayor created the position of a City Architect, with a clear mandate to demonstrate architecture's vital role in the growth and transformation of the city. The City Architect has since facilitated the design and construction of public spaces and facilities that have improved the daily lives of many Edmontonians, and in doing so, Towards a Beautiful City - A Path Forward

garnered excitement and respect for what good architecture can mean for a growing city.

City of Montreal

The Bureau du design is part of Montréal's Service du développement économique. Its mission is to improve city planning together with designers and architects; to provide support and guidance to municipal departments and the boroughs in experimenting with processes that favour quality and promote the emerging generation of design and architecture practitioners (competitions, workshops, panels); and to develop the market for Montréal-based designers and architects (incentives, projects) while promoting their talent (locally and internationally). The Bureau du design initiated and is in charge of implementing the Montréal Agenda 2030 for Quality and Exemplarity in Design and Architecture, a policy document adopted in 2019 that sets out guidelines and leverages the creativity and innovation of designers and architects, in partnership with other fields such as engineering and urban planning, to carry out Montréal's green and social transition. The department is led by the Design Commissioner.

City of Markham

A former position of a City Architect reported directly to the Commissioner City Planning. The role provided advice, mentoring and leadership, and was responsible for establishing Markham's Design Review Panel. Originally established as a "control architect" to ensure that consistent approved architectural details were used in emerging subdivisions. This position no longer exists.

City of Toronto

The City of Toronto has undertaken previous efforts and initiatives around the governance and oversight of design in the public realm.

In 2004, The Clean and Beautiful City initiative was informed by a Roundtable which included stakeholders and City design professionals and practitioners. The goals of the initiative were to bring consistent and upgraded approaches to a broad spectrum of design and maintenance issues that became apparent in the post-amalgamated City. The list included: establishment of a Design Review Panel; required competitions for major City-owned public buildings and parks; expansion of the Toronto Urban Design Awards; Street Art Toronto and Graffiti Management Plan; Clean Toronto Together and the 20-minute Makeover; and Coordinated Street Furniture Program with dedicated funding to invest in public realm projects across the city (and enhanced maintenance standards).

In 2011, as part of the Street Furniture Agreement, funding was provided to support the Council approved Graffiti Management Plan (2011) and StreetARToronto Program (2012). The Graffiti Management Plan established a new centralized graffiti function to be responsible for coordinating, benchmarking and reporting on all graffiti-related activities, including opportunities for City-wide improvements and efficiencies and to work with ABCCs, youth and other stakeholders on programs to reduce graffiti vandalism. StreetARToronto transforms public spaces by replacing unsightly graffiti

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vandalism with attractive and appealing murals. StART programs and projects are rooted in a set of values that demonstrate the positive and powerful impacts of diversity and inclusion, foster community engagement and civic pride, add colour and vitality to neighbourhoods, encourage active transportation, showcase Toronto artists their ideas and beliefs and contribute to their skills development, mentor emerging talent, and create opportunities for positive engagement among residents, business owners and operators, artists and arts organizations. As a result, Toronto is home to some of the best street, mural and graffiti art and artists in the world.

In 2017, a Chief Planners Roundtable on Design Excellence was initiated to improve the procurement process, improve the quality of the streetscape, incorporate quality into the building of new transportation infrastructure, advance the conversation around design excellence and ensure adequate funding for project design, management and maintenance.

Procurement

Priority Action - Undertake an inventory and review of current procurement processes (e.g. RFPs, design competitions) and identify any changes, additional processes, and best practices that should be considered moving forward to achieve design excellence in the public realm, including parks, public spaces, elements within the public realm, and buildings. (Leads: Chief Planner and Executive Director, and Chief Procurement Officer).

Ensuring good design begins at the start of a project. It's important to have a procurement process that encourages great design while also being mindful of costs. A process that attracts top talent leads to innovative designs and beautiful public spaces. Over the years a variety of procurement methods have been utilized, including design competitions, to advance and achieve design excellence in new municipal buildings including New City Hall, St. Lawrence Market North, and the new Etobicoke Civic Centre, to name a few.

Parks & Recreation have delivered a number of projects through design competitions. A two-stage competition process has been used to deliver the Village of Yorkville Park, Courthouse Square, Cloud Gardens, HTO Park, the Fort York Visitor Centre, and Love Park. In 2023, Parks & Recreation initiated a two-stage design competition for a new park at 229 Richmond Street West. The first stage of the competition was a Request for Supplier Qualifications (RFSQ). The applicants were evaluated by an evaluation committee based on their qualifications, work experience, and approach to the park site and the five highest-rated teams were shortlisted and invited to participate in Stage Two of the competition. In the second stage of the competition, the shortlisted applicants responded to a Request for Proposals (RFP) and submitted conceptual designs for the new park. Applicants presented their design ideas to the Design Jury made up of experts in landscape architecture, architecture, urban design, art, curation, climate resilience and Indigenous design. This process has enabled the City to prioritize the design of the park, while keeping within a set budget. There are at least three park design competitions anticipated in the next year or so.

Given the critical importance of the procurement process to achieving excellence in public realm design, the Chief Planner and Chief Procurement Officer, working with other divisions, will undertake an inventory and review of the City's current design procurement processes for public realm, including parks, public spaces, elements within the public realm and buildings (e.g. RFPs, design competitions). This work will identify changes, additional processes, internal policies or best practices that should be considered to better focus the procurement process on design outcomes moving forward.

Theme 2 - Maintenance of the Public Realm

While achieving design excellence in the creation of new public spaces and public buildings is important, equally so is the maintenance of the public realm. Staff are proposing three areas for review related to the maintenance of the public realm that can further advance the goals set out in the Council direction. These relate to the management of construction sites, operational practices, and a “Toronto Clean and Beautiful” campaign.

Construction Sites

Priority Action - A “Considerate Construction” guideline will strive to minimise the impact of construction on the public realm. Setting clear expectations for construction site setup and teardown is key to reducing the negative effects on the public realm. Advancing a best practices guideline for the design and aesthetics of construction setups and take downs on city streets will assist to establish expectations. These guidelines will include contextually designed construction hoarding, prevention of “construction creep,” maintaining site cleanliness, and ensuring the timely removal of construction materials upon project completion. (Lead: General Manager, Transportation Services).

Over the past two decades, Toronto has experienced unprecedented growth in new development. This growth has necessitated significant upgrades and maintenance of infrastructure, including watermain upgrades, streetcar track replacements, and the addition of new transit lines. While these improvements signal exciting progress, the scale of construction is highly disruptive, often resulting in lengthy timelines. Moreover, it can leave the city's public spaces appearing neglected and unfinished.

The Strategic Capital Coordination Office (SCCO), working closely with Transportation Services, Engineering & Construction Services and Toronto Water, plays a crucial role in coordinating the capital projects underway throughout the city. This coordination is essential not only for maintaining the movement of people but also for optimizing efficiencies by aligning and consolidating City-led projects.

City maintenance, Service-level and Operational Practices

Priority Action - Staff will review City maintenance, service-level and operational practices across impacted divisions to identify opportunities, and costs required to

improve the quality and care of the public realm. This includes ensuring design, maintenance and operational impacts are considered key factors in designing a high-quality public realm. (Leads: General Manager, Transportation Services, General Manager, Parks and Recreation, and Executive Director, Corporate Real Estate Management).

For the most part, the maintenance of streets and parks is undertaken by Transportation Services and Parks & Recreation.

Streets

In Transportation Services, the Operations and Maintenance (O and M) section manages the public right-of-way for structural integrity and cleanliness. This Section is responsible for operations of roads, sidewalks, and bike lanes, street sweeping, and general maintenance, including critical interim repairs, potholes and grass cutting. O&M has been undertaking a review of a number of their practices and efficacy, including street sweeping and bike lane maintenance and cleaning.

The Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 743, Use of Streets and Sidewalks, outlines responsibilities of private property owners / occupiers in maintaining adjacent boulevards. These responsibilities include but are not limited to: sustaining all vegetation (with the exception of street trees and City-planted materials); maintaining the boulevard free of litter; and keeping the area free of graffiti. Municipal responsibilities include, but are not limited to: maintaining medians, repairing sidewalks, caring for street trees and other City-planted plant material. Working together, this is an efficient and cost-effective approach to maintain the boulevard.

Parks

In Parks and Recreation, the Parks Operations branch maintains and manages the day-to-day operation of nearly 1600 parks across the city. Parks Operations staff inspect, maintain and repair pathways and benches, gathering and picnic areas, playgrounds and splashpads, sports courts and fields, artificial ice rinks, golf courses and many other amenities across Toronto's parks system.

Many of Toronto's parks are aging and awaiting repair and replacement. At the same time, demands on parks have evolved relatively rapidly, particularly in our urban areas, over the past decade due to a combination of factors. Population growth, shifting social trends, and changing weather patterns are driving changing expectations for how parks are used and maintained.

Parks amenities are being used at higher rates and often for more months of the year as residents increasingly seek outdoor spaces for recreation and leisure. Communities are also expressing greater interest in activating their local parks through art installations, cultural events, and other creative uses. Additionally, there is a greater demand for community food growing initiatives and community-led horticulture projects, reflecting a shift towards parks as spaces for collective and sustainable living.

Efforts to integrate Indigenous place-keeping into parks are expanding, requiring thoughtful approaches to programming, design, and collaboration with Indigenous communities. At the same time, a growing and aging population highlights the need to improve physical accessibility in parks, ensuring that all residents can navigate and enjoy these spaces regardless of ability.

Other challenges also weigh heavily on park management. Poverty and the opioid crisis have contributed to an increase in encampments and drug use in parks. Furthermore, extreme weather events and climate change are demanding improved stormwater management in parks, requiring new types of surfaces such as permeable paving.

All of these evolving demands represent pressures on a maintenance budget and staffing structure that have not kept pace with the changes. Meeting these needs require new types of equipment and new skill sets among park staff to be able to effectively maintain parks and keep them safe, beautiful and functional. Additionally, any changes to the design standards for the public realm must consider maintenance implications and requirements for these designs to stand the test of time.

Toronto Clean and Beautiful Campaign

Priority Action - Staff will review and enhance a “Toronto Clean and Beautiful” campaign to shift culture, raise awareness, and bring together multiple partners, stakeholders and private landowners in enhancing the public realm. (Leads: General Manager, Transportation Services, and Executive Director, Environment, Climate and Forestry).

Environment, Climate and Forestry coordinates the Clean Toronto Together Campaign. Celebrating 20 years, Clean Toronto Together - Toronto’s annual spring cleanup initiative is the largest annual litter cleanup in Canada. Every April, thousands of community groups, families, individuals, and businesses and City staff, all work together to keep Toronto’s public spaces litter-free. ECF is working with other Divisions to review the existing annual Clean Toronto Together event to look at opportunities to expand resident and business engagement in voluntary action and increase awareness of the importance of citizen action and input.

<https://www.toronto.ca/explore-enjoy/festivals-events/clean-toronto-together/>

Conclusion

The future of Toronto’s public spaces depends on a collaborative effort to improve design excellence and ensure these spaces are well-maintained, appropriately funded and accessible to all. As the city’s population grows, the need for enhanced parks, public spaces, and public realm infrastructure becomes more pressing. The recommended strategy, focusing on governance, oversight, leadership, and effective maintenance practices, sets the stage for a more cohesive, sustainable, and inclusive approach, leading to success. By focusing on these two core themes and priority actions, Toronto can ensure that its public realm evolves in a way that benefits both

residents and visitors, and build a future that balances design excellence with practical, effective stewardship of its public spaces.

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 - Design Guidelines and Standards for Public Realm

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