

Lower Don Parkland Indigenous Naming - Progress Update

Date: June 29, 2026

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

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

Wards: Spadina Fort York (10), University Rosedale (11), Toronto Centre (13), Toronto Danforth (14)

SUMMARY

This report responds to City Council direction to undertake due diligence on the proposed use of the name “Wonscotonach” for the Lower Don parkland system and trail, and to engage Indigenous communities to confirm an appropriate approach to naming of this parkland system and trail.

Through research and engagement conducted between 2018 and 2026, including recent discussions with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN) and leading academic research, staff have heard that there is not consensus on the accuracy, spelling or interpretation of “Wonscotonach,” though it is related to historical Anishinaabemowin place names of the area.

Recent engagement, including a Circle discussion hosted with MCFN leadership, Elders, Knowledge Keepers and language speakers in April 2026, affirmed that further discussions are needed and the process should involve Indigenous naming protocols. MCFN has advised that a decision on naming should be informed by a land-based process, including a site visit in summer 2026, to determine whether a historically accurate name can be reclaimed or a new name should be gifted based on contemporary relationships to the land.

This report recommends that Council authorize staff to continue this Indigenous-led process and report back in the second quarter of 2027 with a chosen Anishinaabemowin name for the Lower Don parkland system and trail, along with an interpretive narrative for public use.

The naming initiative will also inform a subsequent, collaborative planning process for the Lower Don parkland system, including future park improvements, programming, and

Indigenous placekeeping, to be advanced in partnership with Indigenous communities beginning in 2026.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

1. City Council request the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning and the General Manager, Parks and Recreation to continue to advance an Indigenous-led naming process with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, and report back to City Council in Q2 2027 with a chosen Anishinaabemowin name, either historical or newly gifted, for the Lower Don parkland system and trail; and an associated narrative for public interpretation and signage.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

Funding for the naming review, continued Indigenous engagement, research, and related pre-engagement/scoping work is available within Parks and Recreation's approved Capital Budget through the Indigenous Placekeeping Capital project.

There are no additional financial impacts arising from the recommendations in this report. Any future financial implications related to the Lower Don Trail Master Plan update, additional signage, placekeeping, programming, stewardship, or capital improvements will be identified through future staff reports and considered through future budget processes.

RECONCILIATION IMPACT

This initiative advances reconciliation by enabling Indigenous communities to lead the naming of a significant public landscape in accordance with their own cultural protocols. It supports Indigenous language revitalization, strengthens relationships with Indigenous communities, and advances Indigenous placekeeping within Toronto's public spaces.

- Actions 5 & 6: Improving relationship-building with Indigenous communities;
- Action 15: Supporting Indigenous placekeeping;
- Action 17: Supporting the revitalization of Indigenous languages;
- Action 16: Celebrating Indigenous arts and culture; and
- Action 2: Enhancing Indigenous education and awareness among the public.

This naming process is a crucial step toward addressing the historical erasure of Indigenous languages and culture by advancing the commitments of the City of

Toronto's Reconciliation Action Plan. Specifically, it aligns with the Reconciliation Action Plans actions to "elevate Indigenous languages in placemaking and placekeeping initiatives," and "work with language speakers and Knowledge Carriers to ensure that Indigenous language is given priority in the naming and renaming of City streets, parks and other City assets."

While the names that are emerging from this process are a celebratory step toward supporting Indigenous language revitalization and placekeeping, the process itself is equally meaningful. Progress on advancing truth, justice and reconciliation will be made by establishing new ways of working, leading and stepping back. How the City does its work matters. This process demonstrates ways of shifting power and priorities with respect for Indigenous worldviews, cultural protocols, ceremonies, self-determination and leadership. It also brings non-Indigenous people along the path and process of reconciliation by encouraging deeper understandings of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, revealing the rich history, cultures, and languages.

DECISION HISTORY

On December 16 and 17, 2025, as part of a Progress Update on the Implementation of the Reconciliation Action Plan, City Council directed the Waterfront Secretariat and Parks and Recreation, with the support of the Indigenous Affairs Office, to report back on the due diligence undertaken by staff related to the name "Wonscotonach Parklands" for the Lower Don Parkland system.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.EC25.5>.

On December 17 and 18, 2024, City Council requested Parks, Forestry and Recreation and the Director, Indigenous Affairs Office, with the support of the Waterfront Secretariat and TRCA, to engage Indigenous communities to review the name "Wonscotonach Parklands" for the Lower Don Parkland system.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.MM24.45>.

On July 19, 20, 21 and 22, 2022, City Council adopted A New Commemorative Framework for the City of Toronto's Public Spaces, prioritizing Indigenous Peoples, Black communities and equity-deserving groups.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.EX34.6>

On April 6 and 7, 2022, City Council adopted Actions to Advance Truth and Justice for Indigenous Peoples in the City of Toronto: Toronto's Reconciliation Action Plan which includes action #17, Support the Revitalization of Indigenous Languages

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.EX31.1>

On April 24, 25, and 26, 2018, City Council adopted PE26.4 - Update on the Partnership with Evergreen and Establishing an Identity for the Lower Don Parklands, Directing Parks and Recreation to undertake community engagement on the collection of parklands surrounding the Lower Don as the "Wonscotonach Parklands."

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2018.PE26.4>.

On November 3, 2017, the Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Committee received a presentation on a proposal for Indigenous placekeeping and naming of Toronto parks and public realm, including this parkland system of the Lower Don Valley parks. <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2017.AA12.5>

COMMENTS

About the Lower Don Parklands

The Lower Don Parklands is a system of contiguous parkland within the Don River valley that is approximately 290 hectares. The parkland system is located between the new mouth of the Don River at Biidaasige Park and the Forks of the Don where the four water systems of East Don, West Don, Lower Don and Taylor Creek meet. For thousands of years, the river was an essential resource for Indigenous peoples, including the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat. The lower river was a vibrant wetland for hunting, fishing and harvesting ground and the First Peoples who lived in this area were drawn in by the waterway. The trail, currently called the "Lower Don Trail," that runs through most of this area will be approximately 9 km in length from its north end at the Forks of the Don to Biidaasige Park, once, in future, an extension from Corktown Common to Biidaasige Park is complete.

Through previous Council direction and adopted policies, staff have advanced the proposal to have an Indigenous name for the Lower Don Parkland system. This approach would re-introduce an Anishinaabemowin name for the parklands, but not seek to change existing individual park names, such as Riverdale Park East and Riverdale Park West, the Don Valley Brickworks Park, etc. The river names in the boundary area are also not being proposed for a name change. Attachment 1 provides a map of the Lower Don Parklands, illustrating the connected parks as part of a larger system.

The parkland system can create an identity and guide future placekeeping, programming and stewardship as well as attract more residents, visitors and users of the trail and parkland system.

Naming

The name "Wonscotonach" has been referenced in documents, discussion and some informal placekeeping in the area, as a historical Anishinaabemowin name for this area. This name was originally put forward in 2018 for consideration as a new name for the parkland system, for further engagement with Indigenous communities. Through Indigenous community engagement led by Parks and Recreation and Evergreen, there was support for an Indigenous name for the parkland system; however, consensus on the name itself, interpretation/translation and spelling were not reached.

More recent research being done by Dr. Alan Corbiere (M'Chigeeng First Nation), Canada Research Chair in Indigenous History of North America, Associate Professor, History Department at York University, has revealed that considered translations and spellings may not be accurate. Further discussions with the MCFN have also raised opportunities to take a closer look at the name and learn more from Dr. Corbiere's language revitalization and place naming research. This includes discussions with the MCFN's current and former Chiefs, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, language speakers and learners, Councillors and staff.

Ongoing engagement has focussed on identifying the accurate historical name, rather than continuing to use one that may have been misspelled, mistranslated or anglicized over time, including by the surveyor from whose notes it came. Dr. Corbiere's research has also credibly shown through handwriting analysis that this may not be the spelling that was originally recorded by the surveyor. Given this analysis, staff are collaborating with Dr. Corbiere and the MCFN to determine whether an accurate historical Anishinaabemowin name can be recovered and reclaimed to be used for the parkland system, or if it would be more appropriate for a new name to be given based on the present-day experience of and relationship to the land.

The chosen name and interpretation can then be used in future park planning, placekeeping, programming and stewardship in the river valley. Approximately 25 signs are anticipated to carry the new name for the parkland system/trail.

Engagement, Research and What We've Heard

Previous Engagement History (2018-2024)

An Indigenous name for the Lower Don Parklands has been explored and discussed with Indigenous communities since 2018, in response to Council direction.

In 2019, diverse Indigenous language scholars were invited to a circle discussion about "Wonscotonach", hosted by Parks and Recreation and Evergreen. While there was interest in, and support for Indigenous place naming and the concept of creating a connected identity across the various parks and trails, consensus on the spelling, translation and appropriate use of "Wonscotonach" was not reached. Some have raised that this is likely an anglicized spelling. It was discussed that a narrative will need to share that more than one name is relevant to the area and that the layered histories, language complexities and translations should be noted, perhaps with an asterisk on the name chosen.

Other spellings and meanings were also put forward, including Basil Johnston's spelling referenced in *Sacred Feathers* "waussae – bright, ishkstae – fire, naeyaush - point" and "Waasayishkodenayosh," raised through the Port Lands Indigenous Placekeeping Initiative and Indigenous Advisory Circle that led to the naming of Ookwemin Minising and Biidaasige Park.

Various interpretations of the names have included "bright burning point," "bright fire point" and "back burnt grounds", possibly referencing prescribed burns, torchlight fishing or fires along the river or the waterfront.

Recent Research and Engagement with MCFN (2025-2026)

In 2025, staff renewed discussions with the MCFN. Discussions over the last year have centered on next steps for deciding on and lifting up a name, including consideration of more recent academic research and ceremonial considerations.

Over the last year, City staff were connected with Dr. Corbiere and learned from his research and expertise on Anishinaabe place names and language revitalization efforts in Canada. His research identified "Wonscote'onack" (back burnt grounds) and "Nezhingwaakokaang" (point of land with lots of white pine trees) as possible translations based on years of historical research and discussions. Supported by City Planning staff, Dr. Corbiere's research continues via a review of the Ontario Archives documents, including surveyors' notes (Alexander Aitken) and original place name documents (Augustus Jones) from the 1700-1800s.

After five meetings with the MCFN staff, two planning sessions with Dr. Corbiere and email correspondence with the Ontario and Toronto Archives, City staff were invited to attend the MCFN's Annual Historical Gathering in Hagersville, Ontario in April 2026. After the event, staff hosted a Sharing Circle with MCFN's current and former Chiefs, Elders, Councillors, Knowledge Keepers and staff.

The Circle shared that, following traditional Indigenous naming practices, they would like to walk on the land in summer 2026 (dates to be confirmed) as next steps to decide whether to:

- retrieve and reclaim a historical Anishinaabemowin name for the Lower Don Parkland area (based on Prof. Corbiere's research); or,
- discover a new Anishinaabemowin name for the parkland system based on a present-day connection to and experience of the land.

Based on the discussion with MCFN community members, as well as broader comments heard from across First Nations and urban Indigenous communities, City staff note that there is a great deal of complexity around retrieving historical Indigenous language and/or place names and education and awareness is needed among staff and City Council. These considerations include:

- the history of language loss and complexities in interpreting Anishinaabemowin;
- how Anishinaabe people traditionally gave more than one name to a place;
- differences in spelling in Indigenous languages given the history of oral languages;
- distinct cultural protocols related to retrieving and reclaiming historical place names or discovering new names;
- challenges reaching consensus about which language or dialect is used;
- how history can influence place names over time; and

- that Indigenous place names are deeply descriptive, often communicating the historical, spiritual, or land-use significance of an area.

Name Narrative

Given this complexity, MCFN agreed that an interpretive narrative could acknowledge and reference multiple names as well as history of Indigenous place names as well as loss of language, to align better with Indigenous worldviews on place naming, language interpretation and oral history. While a single name will be chosen for the parkland system and trail, the nuance can be captured in a “name narrative” and shared with the public through signage, interpretation and a website.

Next Steps

Indigenous-Led Naming Process

The naming of the Lower Don parkland system will be led by the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN), in accordance with recommended cultural protocols.

MCFN has advised that the next step is a land-based process, including a site visit in summer 2026, to inform whether:

- a historically accurate Anishinaabemowin name can be reclaimed; or
- a new name will be gifted based on present-day relationships to the land.

MCFN will determine the process and timing of any associated ceremony and engagement. City staff will support this work and ensure alignment with applicable City policies.

Staff will report back to City Council in Q2 2027 with a chosen Anishinaabemowin name for the Lower Don parkland system and trail, along with an associated interpretive narrative.

Implementation and Interpretation

After Council has received the chosen Anishinaabemowin name, staff will advance the development and installation of signage and interpretive materials to support public understanding of the parkland system and its name.

Signage is anticipated at key entrances and along the trail as part of planned updates to ravine wayfinding. Installation is currently expected in 2027–2028 and will be coordinated with existing funded projects. Interim signage may be considered following Council direction to support early awareness.

Future Park Planning

Following completion of the naming process, Parks and Recreation will initiate a collaborative planning process for the Lower Don parkland system.

This work will build on the Lower Don Trail Access, Environment + Art Master Plan (2013) and include ongoing Indigenous engagement and advisory input. The planning process will identify opportunities for future improvements, programming, Indigenous placekeeping, and stewardship.

A Request for Proposals for planning, design and engagement services is anticipated in 2027 following pre-engagement.

Commemorative Framework

Separate from this initiative, an interdivisional team is reflecting on current learnings and identifying opportunities to strengthen Indigenous considerations within the City's Commemorative Framework, policies and practices. This work is intended inform future approaches to namings and related City practices. This work will inform a future staff report led by Economic Development and Culture on updates to the Commemorative Framework, anticipated in Q2 2027.

Conclusion

Staff have undertaken due diligence on the proposed use of the name “Wonscotonach” and, based on research and Indigenous community engagement, found there is not community consensus on this name and that a visit on the land is important for determining next steps.

Consistent with Council direction and reconciliation objectives, staff recommend continuing an Indigenous-led naming process with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

Staff will report back to City Council in Q2 2027 with a chosen Anishinaabemowin name and interpretive narrative. This work will inform future planning, placekeeping, and stewardship of the Lower Don parkland system.

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Map of Lower Don Parkland system
Attachment 2: 2026 MCFN Historical Gathering Workshop Summary & Description

ATTACHMENT 1. Map of Lower Don Parkland system



ATTACHMENT 2. 2026 MCFN Historical Gathering Workshop Summary & Description

Participants

MCFN:

- Chief Margaret Sault
- Former Chief Stacey LaForme
- Craig King
- Caitlin LaForme
- Councillor Jai King
- Councillor Fawn Sault
- Elder Val King
- Elder Peter Schuler
- Elder Mark Sault
- Mya King-Green
- Chris Myke

Special Guest/Language Expert and Anishinaabe Historian:

- Dr. Alan Corbiere (M'Chigeeng First Nation), Canada Research Chair in Indigenous History of North America, Associate Professor, History Department, York University

City of Toronto Staff:

- Cadhla Gray, Waterfront Secretariat
- Fred Martin, Waterfront Secretariat/Indigenous Affairs Office
- Adriana Chartrand, SIPA, City Planning
- Dave O'Hara, Parks & Rec
- Ruthanne Henry, Parks & Rec
- William Skura, Parks & Rec
- Jennifer LaFontaine, Indigenous Affairs Office

Summary

Background

City staff have been actively discussing the Lower Don Parkland naming (MM24.45 & EC25.5) with MCFN staff over the last year during 5 meetings.

This builds off previous dialogue among City and partner staff and MCFN's former Chief and Council, Elders and staff in 2010 and throughout 2018-2021, as well as broader urban Indigenous community engagement in 2018-2019 (Rivers, Parks and Reconciliation: Wonscotonach Parklands Proposal | The Don River Valley Park; Wonscotonach Parklands: What we're hearing | The Don River Valley Park; Presentation - AA12.5 - Incorporating Indigenous Place-Making in City of Toronto's Parks Capital Projects). While diverse communities and participants had interest in and supported Indigenous place naming and the concept of creating a connected identity across the various parks and trails, consensus on the spelling, translation and appropriate use of

“Wonscotonach” was not reached. Other spellings and meanings were also put forward, including “waasayishkodenayosh.”

City staff built a relationship with Dr. Alan Corbiere (Canada Research Chair in Indigenous History of North America, Associate Professor, History Department, York University) and continued to meet in January, February and April 2026 to better understand his research and expertise on Anishnaabe place names and language revitalization efforts in Canada, and his interest in collaborating with MCFN and City staff on the Lower Don Parkland initiative to refine the spelling and translations of the historical place names associated with the Don River and surrounding area, if possible.

MCFN invited Professor Corbiere to their April 2026 annual Historical Gathering to present about his historical and cultural research into the Anishinaabemowin names related to the Don River, resulting in his findings of the interpretations of “Wonscote’onack” (back burnt grounds) and “Nezhingwaakokaang” (point of land with lots of white pine trees). Each translation is based on years of historical research, discussions and exploration of knowledge and primary and secondary sources, including Anishinaabemowin language speakers themselves as well as:

- *Sacred Feathers*, Donald B. Smith (reference to Basil Johnston interpretation of waussae ishkstae naeyaush “burning bright point”)
- Previous maps, including *Alexander Aitken’s 1788 survey map* (notation of Nichingquakokonik)
- *Reclaiming the Don; An Environmental History of Toronto’s Don River Valley*, Jennifer Bonnel (reference of Nechenquakekonk and Wonscontonach)
- *A Treaty Guide for Torontonians*, The Talking Treaties Collective, Ange Loft, Victoria Freeman, Martha Stiegman, Jill Carter (reference to Wonscotonach)

Historical Gathering & Circle Discussion Summary

City staff were invited to attend MCFN’s 2026 April Historical Gathering and collaborated on a workshop with MCFN current and former Chief(s), Elders, Councillors, Knowledge Keepers and staff to discuss Dr. Alan Corbiere’s place naming research in the context of choosing how to move forward with the Lower Don Parkland naming.

After hearing this presentation, Dr. Alan Corbiere and City of Toronto staff sat down in circle, starting in ceremony, with MCFN community members to discuss these historical place names and whether the uncovered names are appropriate for naming of the Lower Don Parkland.

Research Presentation

Dr. Alan Corbiere presented on Anishinaabemowin language structure and morphing, or forms within the language that help to understand historic place naming. One specific example relevant to the Wonscotonach Lower Don Parkland name review initiative is the prairie morph “scote” or “shkode” which is believed to be within the word “Wonscotonach”. Dr. Corbiere also reviewed against other historical records for creek

names, as recorded by Augustus Jones in 1796. It appears there could be a transcription error, and the spelling might be Wonscoteonack. Other possible names for the area were also reviewed, such as Alexander Aitken's 1788 survey map referencing "a point of many pines", "Nezhingwaakokaang". An Indigenous name similar to this, "Nechenquakekonk" is referenced by Jennifer Bonnell in her book *Reclaiming the Don; An Environmental History of Toronto's Don River Valley*.

Paths Forward

Options that surfaced for the Lower Don Parkland naming were to either:

- Retrieve and reclaim a historical Anishinaabemowin name for the Don River, or
- Discover a new name in Anishinaabemowin language based on a present-day relationship to the place.

One Elder had the recommendation to acknowledge those original names and reclaim them but then (re)name the parkland itself based on a present-day connection, because they are different places, then and now.

Next Steps

The next steps in this process will be to arrange a walk on the land with the workshop participants to decide which naming path forward to pursue.

Professor Corbiere will also continue his research by searching through original surveyor notes in the Ontario Archives in coordination with City of Toronto staff, for the background materials and narrative to go on signage and public communications that will accompany any name chosen.

Narrative to Accompany Name Chosen

The Circle began with tobacco, ceremony and guiding questions:

- What about Indigenous place naming or this specific place name is important to you?
- Have you heard any stories related to these names?

From the workshop, Anishinaabemowin language learners and speakers identified themes that are important to include in any narrative, storytelling and public education that will accompany the chosen place name.

These include:

- the complexities of language loss and translating/interpreting Anishinaabemowin or other historically spoken languages that can be "spelled how they sound" – why it is difficult to retrieve and reclaim historical place names"

- “Consider the interpretations over generations of contact – history of the language, dialects, and how it’s been impacted”
- how language shapes thought and how Anishinaabemowin speakers think differently;
- how Anishinaabemowin is a synthetic fusional language like Latin;
- how Anishnaabe people traditionally gave more than one name to a place, there are many words that can be used to describe one thing; and
- the different uses of spelling in Anishinaabemowin and Indigenous languages and the complexities of standardizing spelling but importance for the sake of speakers of different dialects and future generations to know words used in the past, including place names.

The Circle confirmed that the City’s approach of crafting a narrative accessible on a website and signage to accompany the chosen name/spelling, in order to help educate both the public, Indigenous communities and City staff and Council on Indigenous languages and naming, is one that reflects the realities of Anishnaabe people and Anishinaabemowin as a language, and helps this municipal work to be more aligned with Indigenous worldviews.

The City’s desire to improve Indigenous place naming and language revitalization must acknowledge:

- the complexity of Indigenous languages (and deciding one language, one name or one spelling)
- the nuance and cultural relevance of Indigenous place naming and distinct protocols related to retrieving and reclaiming historical place names or discovering and lifting up new names
- distinctions of naming land, connections between people’s naming ceremonies, protocols and processes.