



Summary of Results from the Toronto Planning Review Panel Meeting held September 16, 2017

Executive Summary

The Planning Review Panel is a representative group of Torontonians, made up of 28 randomly selected Panelists. Panelists have been asked by the Chief Planner to work together over the course of two years to provide City Planning with informed public input on major planning initiatives. Panelists are tasked with helping to ensure that initiatives are well aligned with the values and priorities of all Torontonians. On September 16, 2017, the Panel met to discuss two topics: the Rail Corridor Planning Framework and the Parkland Strategy.

Rail Corridor Planning Framework

Panelists concluded that:

- A large public park over the rail corridor, Rail Deck Park, is the best use of the rail corridor site. The past and expected increase in residential density in the area justifies the acquisition of more public green space downtown. The site is a unique opportunity to connect important parts of downtown with a world-class "central park."
- The design of Rail Deck Park should allow sufficient access by public transit, and ensure safety with regard to structural design and engineering.
- A clear revenue-generation plan to offset construction and maintenance costs may help to build public support for the park. Costs could be offset by greater collaboration with those putting forward the alternate development application.
- The vision and objectives for Rail Deck Park should place greater emphasis on inclusivity, connectivity, accessibility, and safety.
 - Rail Deck Park should be welcoming to Torontonians of any age, gender, race, and mobility, including homeless and street-involved Torontonians.



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- Greater emphasis should also be placed on welcoming Torontonians from all parts of the city, not just those downtown.
- Connecting neighbourhoods through the public park should be a primary objective. This will help to naturally bring residents and activity to the park.
- The park should be transit-accessible in order to serve residents from all over Toronto, with direct or straightforward connections to Union Station and the planned GO Spadina Station.
- The park should support the continued safety of rail operations, with care given to stormwater management as well as personal safety including night-time safety and suicide prevention.
- The park should attempt to protect local ecology with a particular focus on indigenous trees and plants.
- In addition to the history of the railway lands, the park should recognize and highlight a broader range of history, especially Indigenous history.

Parkland Strategy

Panelists concluded that:

- The four identified functions of parks – Ecology, Sport & Play, Community, and Health & Wellbeing, broadly cover the majority of park uses. However, the definition of the four functions should include the following:
 - Parks not only preserve ecology, but also introduce and educate Torontonians about ecology;
 - Parks play an important civic role in communities, often facilitating celebration for different community groups, in addition to supporting neighbourhood economies through farmers' markets, etc.; and
 - Parks often provide spaces for mindfulness and spirituality, improving mental health in addition to physical health.
- In addition to the four functions identified:



- Park aesthetics alone serve an important function, separate from health and well-being;
- Parks support programmed and impromptu arts and culture that do not fit entirely within the 'community' function; and
- Parks facilitate connections for cyclists and pedestrians navigating through neighbourhoods.
- In higher-density areas, acceptable access to parkland in general includes:
 - Connections to cycling and transit, with multiple pedestrian connections to the surrounding neighbourhoods;
 - Year-round use. These are often spaces that many people will continue to travel to in the winter;
 - Safety and security, including through regular maintenance and appropriately separated uses;
 - Facilities that complement neighbouring community centres and schools; and
 - Gentle park slopes and open space that receive sunlight and provide respite from wind tunnels.
- In lower-density areas, acceptable access to parkland in general includes:
 - Provision for shade and amenities such as washrooms and potable water in open space areas;
 - Paved pathways to allow for different uses including strollers and cyclists;
 - Facilities such as civic spaces and recreation venues that are visible from main roads and directly connected to major transit lines; and
 - Sufficient parking for use during large cultural and sporting events.
- Acceptable access to parkland that supports *Ecology* allows Torontonians of all ages and mobility to easily discover and interact with nature in public parks. In



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lower-density areas, this parkland should connect with cycling trails and allow for programming such as guided tours.

- Acceptable access to parkland that supports *Sport & Play* ensures that no Torontonian is more than a 5-minute walk to a swing set or monkey bars.
 - In higher-density areas, *Sport & Play* facilities should easily accommodate different public user groups at different times of the day.
 - In lower-density areas, access to *Sport & Play* should include specialized facilities and organized programming and sports leagues.
- The *Community*-building function of parks should be emphasized in lower-density areas, where the built form often does not encourage residents to interact as much as in higher-density areas. In higher-density areas, informal meeting spaces in parks should serve those without backyards.



About the September 16, 2017, Meeting of the Planning Review Panel

On September 16, 2017, the Panel met to offer input on the Rail Corridor Planning Framework and the Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division's Parkland Strategy.

The first session began with a presentation from Paul Mulé, a Senior Planner in Community Planning, about the rail corridor site and the proposed Rail Deck Park. He spoke about the rationale for the park and gave details about the recent population growth in the surrounding lands. Paul then shared a draft vision and objectives for Rail Deck Park.

After a question and answer session, the Panelists heard from Gary Pieters, President of the CityPlace Residents Association. Gary spoke about the need for a park in relation to the changing demographics of CityPlace and how a park could connect residents of the surrounding neighbourhoods and offices.

Following a short break, Panelists worked in groups to answer two questions:

1. Based on what you've heard today, do you agree that a public park is the best use of the rail corridor site?
2. If you disagree: Describe an alternative vision that would better serve Torontonians.
If you agree: Consider the draft vision and objectives. Do they prioritize the right features and functions? What features or functions would you suggest deserve greater or lesser emphasis?

Each group then shared their recommendations in plenary.

After lunch, Panelists turned their attention to the Parkland Strategy. A warm-up activity asked Panelists to think about four broad functions of parks identified by the Parkland Strategy project team: Ecology, Sport & Play, Community, and Health & Wellbeing.

Panelists worked in small groups to answer the following question:

Do the four functions identified describe what you and those you know value about city parks? Is anything missing?



Following a short break, Kim Statham, a Project Manager in Policy and Strategic Planning in the Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division, gave an overview of the Parkland Strategy, including the policy context, scope, and project timeline. Kim presented data about the existing parks system and explained the ways in which the City currently acquires parkland. She also shared a proposed method for evaluating the supply of parkland according to the four functions identified earlier.

Next, Jake Tobin Garrett, Policy and Planning Manager, Park People shared his perspective on the supply and need for parkland in Toronto. He highlighted new ways in which Torontonians have started using parks, and suggested greater emphasis be given to the quality, not just the quantity, of parkland. Jake also gave some ideas about how access to existing parks can be improved.

Following a short break, Panelists split into four groups to discuss appropriate access to parkland for each of the four park functions. They were asked:

- In Higher-Density Areas:
 - How would you describe an acceptable level of access to parks that support [park function]?
 - How would you describe an unacceptable level of access to parks that support [park function]?
- In Lower-Density Areas:
 - How would you describe an acceptable level of access to parks that support [park function]?
 - How would you describe an unacceptable level of access to parks that support [park function]?

Each group shared their recommendations in plenary.



Detailed Summary of Results

The results of the Panel's discussion are summarized below. Following the meeting, this summary was drafted by the Panel's support staff based on documentation from the meeting and circulated to Panelists for edits and to approve that this summary reflects the broad consensus achieved during their meeting. Panelists were also welcome to submit additional, individual commentary for inclusion in this summary, which is included under the names of individual Panelists in the subsequent section.

Rail Corridor Planning Framework

Although the Rail Corridor Land Use Study and the Rail Deck Park Implementation Strategy are being concurrently developed, the Panel was asked to focus on the land use study. The project team presented their recommendation for a public park on the site, and asked for the Panel's feedback on the draft vision and objectives for this park.

Question 1 asked the Panel to consider whether a public park would be the best use of the rail corridor site.

Most Panelists strongly agreed that a public park would be the best use of the rail corridor site. For many, they felt the past and future increase in residential density in the area was good justification for acquiring more public green space downtown. They also were generally excited by the prospect of using the rail corridor site to build a world-class "central park" in Toronto that connected important parts of downtown.

Some Panelists' support for the park was contingent on sufficient access by public transit for Torontonians.

Others were generally supportive, but wanted to ensure the proposal's safety with regard to structural design and engineering.

Some Panelists discussed the funding and maintenance of the proposed park, and felt public support for designating this area as parkland would be greater if there was a clear revenue generating plan to help make the park a reality.

Despite the general support for the park designation, some wanted more consideration and greater collaboration with those putting forward the alternate development



application for the site, since a modified version could generate revenue to offset the cost of the park.

If they disagreed that a public park was the best use of the site, Question 2 asked the Panel to propose an alternate vision for the site. If they agreed that a public park was the best use of the site, Question 2 asked the Panel to consider the draft vision and objectives for Rail Deck Park and provide feedback on which features deserved greater or lesser emphasis.

No table opted to propose an alternate vision for the site.

Many Panelists emphasized that the park should be accessible and welcoming to a range of Torontonians. They suggested that the vision's language be more explicitly inclusive, particularly in regards to age, gender, mobility, and race. Some Panelists mentioned that the vision should ensure that the park is welcoming to homeless and street-involved Torontonians.

Other Panelists suggested that the objective "A Park for all Toronto" be replaced with "A Park for Everyone," because "for all of Toronto" may be interpreted as excluding suburban areas and boroughs outside of the former City of Toronto. Some suggested that this change was important because the park should be designed to welcome tourists. Others felt that, given the difficulties with transit in Toronto, it may be worth not overselling the park as something that will serve all Torontonians equally because this may not be achievable.

Most Panelists agreed that connectivity, accessibility, and safety deserved greater emphasis in the draft vision and objectives for Rail Deck Park:

- Connectivity and Accessibility:
 - Most Panelists agreed that connectivity was an important priority. Some felt that connectivity should be the primary objective for the park and reasoned that connecting neighbourhoods and iconic features would naturally bring residents and activity to the park. These Panelists suggested that for residents in dense neighbourhoods, Rail Deck Park should be thought of as an extension of their homes, and more broadly as "Toronto's backyard."



- Panelists generally agreed that transit accessibility was a priority. They suggested that the site should be easily accessible not just for those within walking distance, but for residents across Toronto. Thus, the park should be easily accessible from Union Station and have a direct connection to the planned Spadina GO Station.
- Some Panelists emphasized that the park needed to be accessible all year round.
- Safety:
 - Many Panelists agreed that the proposed park should support the safety of rail operations, particularly in stormwater management. Some Panelists added that personal safety should be considered, including night-time safety and suicide prevention. A few Panelists also noted that the safety objective should include using this park for emergency preparedness.

Some Panelists suggested that ecology and history deserved greater emphasis in the draft vision and objectives for Rail Deck Park:

- Ecology:
 - A few Panelists thought the “Resilient and Green” objective should include the protection of water, wildlife, and indigenous trees and plants from the area.
- History:
 - Referring to the proposed objective to “integrate the history of the Railway Lands,” some Panelists suggested that the park also recognize and highlight a broader range of history, especially Indigenous history.

Parkland Strategy

Before the project team’s presentation, Panelists were given definitions of four park function to consider: Ecology, Sport & Play, Community, and Health & Wellbeing.



Question 1 asked the Panel to consider whether the four functions identified by the project team described what the Panelists and those they know value about city parks.

The Panelists suggested a few park functions in addition to the four functions identified. Several Panelists agreed that a park's aesthetics alone serve an important function, separate from health and well-being. Others suggested that parks can act as spaces for both programmed and impromptu public art, dance, and music performances, and that arts and culture do not necessarily fit cleanly within the 'community' function. A few Panelists added that an important function of many parks is facilitating connections for pedestrians and cyclists navigating through neighbourhoods, and that this was not articulated in the functions.

In general, Panelists agreed with the four functions identified by the Parkland Strategy team, but proposed some changes:

- *Ecology*: Several Panelists suggested that rather than focusing solely on preserving ecology, this function should include reference to the educational function of parks. Parks play an important role in introducing residents to ecology in a managed and easily accessible manner that facilitates unexpected discovery and connects the residents to nature.
- *Sport & Play*: Panelists generally agreed that Sport & Play is an important function of parks, and did not have any additions to make.
- *Community*: Panelists discussed how public art installations and cultural festivals in parks can facilitate community interaction, and how parks are natural spaces for gathering and celebration. Some Panelists noted that parks with civic spaces play a role in the local economy, primarily through community fairs and farmers' markets.
- *Health & Wellbeing*: Most Panelists agreed that parks often provide spaces for mindfulness and spirituality, improving mental health in addition to physical health.

For each of the four functions, Question 2 asked the Panel to describe an acceptable and an unacceptable level of access to the park function in higher-density and lower-density areas.



Though the Panelists approached this question in four separate working groups – one per function, some of their recommendations apply to parkland access in general.

In higher-density areas, acceptable access to parkland in general includes:

- Connections to cycling and transit, with multiple pedestrian connections to the surrounding neighbourhoods;
- Year-round use. These are often spaces that many people will continue to travel to in the winter;
- Safety. Regular cleaning and maintenance is especially important for highly-used parks;
- Safety and security for children in play areas, e.g. fencing in play areas;
- Sufficient availability of dog parks that are separated from other uses;
- Facilities that complement other neighbourhood facilities, including community centres and schools. For example, installing outdoor exercise stations in areas without a community centre could be beneficial. Ideally, coordinating to share nearby facilities could make more spaces available for public use;
- Gentler park slopes to maximize the land that is available for use; and
- Open areas that receive sunlight and provide respite from wind tunnels.

In lower-density areas, acceptable access to parkland in general includes:

- Structures that provide shade in large open space areas;
- Washrooms and potable water in parks. Panelists suggested that it is harder to find these near parks in lower-density areas;
- Year-round availability at some parks;
- Paved pathways to allow for different uses, including strollers and cyclists;
- Well-maintained parkland near natural areas like ravines;
- Facilities such as civic spaces and recreation venues that are visible from main roads and directly connected to major transit lines; and
- Sufficient parking for use during large cultural and sporting events.

Other recommendations were specific to one of the four park functions:

Ecology: In general, this working group suggested that acceptable access to *Ecology* would allow Torontonians of all ages and mobility to easily discover and interact with



nature in public parks. Specifically, this would include pathways that accommodate a range of physical accessibility needs and mobility devices.

In higher-density areas, acceptable access to parks that support Ecology includes:

- Spaces that welcome people of all ages, including families with small children;
- Protecting 'wild' ecosystems and landscapes where possible, rather than creating new manicured parkland; and
- Flowers and plants that support bees and other wildlife.

In lower-density areas, acceptable access to parks that support Ecology includes:

- Community gardens or lots for rent;
- Restoring indigenous species including medicinal plants and fruit trees;
- Well-established connections to bike trails between parks; and
- Organized educational programs, such as tours and field trips for education.

Sport & Play: In general, this working group suggested acceptable access to parkland that supports Sport & Play should include a minimum level of access such that no resident is more than a 5-minute walk to a swing set or monkey bars. In addition, sports facilities should attempt to be culturally sensitive and planned appropriately.

In higher-density areas, acceptable access to Sport & Play includes:

- Multi-function sports fields that easily accommodate different groups on different days or even at different hours;
- Facilities designed explicitly for public use with few restrictions and clear communication about availability. This entails limiting commercial use;
- Sufficient lighting to support extended hours;
- Available equipment, e.g. skate rental facilities;
- Washroom facilities; and
- Sports fields that are no more than 10 to 15 minutes away on foot;

In lower-density areas, acceptable access to Sport & Play includes:

- Specialized facilities that may require a larger footprint;
- Organized programming and sports leagues; and
- Sport and play facilities for adults in addition to children.



Community: This working group suggested that the community-building function of parks should be much more emphasized in lower-density areas. While higher-density areas provide many opportunities for residents to interact, the built form and landscape in lower-density areas often does not encourage residents to interact with their neighbours. Panelists were not concerned with the type of community space provided, but suggested that there needed to be at least one interesting community-building function of each park in lower-density areas.

Panelists suggested that providing informal meeting spaces for those residents without backyards is more important in higher-density areas. These meeting spaces could include features such as community barbecues.

Health and Wellbeing: This working group echoed many of the overall recommendations for acceptable access to parks. In higher-density areas, Panelists suggested that investments such as water features are particularly important because they provide diversion and dampen noise from surrounding areas. In lower-density areas, the working group prioritized amenities such as potable water and public bathrooms that reduce the amount of planning required before visiting a park.

Additional Individual Commentary from Panelists:

Irv Rayman: I have some additional comments about the Rail Corridor Planning Framework:

- In building the rail deck, it will be important to address long- and short-term effects of vibration, long-term deterioration from vegetation growth (such as roots and salts in the soil), and the ability to maintain and repair the train tunnels. It may be easier to build vibration control into the track system rather than into the deck structure.
- If excavating, construction crews may encounter historic artefacts and remains, requiring careful monitoring and conservation. Local Indigenous groups must be consulted well in advance with a strategy set up for how to deal with any discoveries during excavation.



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- Everyone should be welcome in City parks, though there are real concerns about public safety, particularly at night. Areas with large shrubs, tree trunks, or other solid features that could create hidden spaces are particularly unsafe. The possibility of fencing should also be considered to keep the park safe.
- Greater consideration should be given to rain water storage and the surfaces used. While we would like a park to be green and friendly, there are alternatives to grass that would help reduce maintenance and water usage.

I have some further comments about the design of the park:

- The design should consider the park's possible use as a concert venue, like Central Park in New York. That said, the structure, parking, washroom facilities, and access for emergency vehicles will be important.
- The name could also be changed to something that elicits more pride across Toronto.
- As covering the tracks would take away substantial light from the trains, it would be reasonable to leave sky-lit areas, or areas where park goers could watch the trains as a feature (artistically protected for safety). Restaurants and cafés with lots of glass ("eyes on the park") would be great features as well.
- All in all, I love the idea. It is what Toronto needs! Regardless of cost, it will make all the difference to the downtown core and the City's connection to the water. If the cost is too high, then it should be carried out in planned stages.