

Planning Review Panel

Re: Draft Biodiversity Strategy, City of Toronto

Summary of Advice from the Planning Review Panel Meeting held March 2nd, 2019

Executive Summary

The Planning Review Panel is a representative group of 32 randomly selected Torontonians that help the City Planning Division guide growth and change in Toronto. They 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. Members are tasked, in particular, with helping to ensure that these initiatives are aligned with the values and priorities of all Torontonians.

Advice Re: City of Toronto Draft Biodiversity Strategy

The City of Toronto Planning Division has drafted the city's first-ever biodiversity strategy, aimed at protecting and enhancing Toronto's biodiversity in the face of ongoing species and habitat loss, invasive species, human impacts, and climate change. The draft strategy has nineteen action items, included in this report as an Appendix.

Panelists were asked to reflect on whether the proposed actions in the draft strategy adequately address biodiversity loss in Toronto and serve the interests of all Torontonians, and then make recommendations on possible amendments and additions to these items.

- Panelists broadly supported most of the existing action items, particularly the elements that focus on community engagement, inter- and intra- governmental collaboration, and approaches that address other community needs alongside promoting biodiversity;
- Panelists had several proposed amendments to the action items. Many amendments focused on clarifying and defining language in the existing action items to make them more accessible to a public audience. Other recommended changes were focused on ensuring that a broad, cross section of the community and community groups can participate in the biodiversity strategy, such as by ensuring that 'community groups' are defined, that the scope of involvement defined in the strategy is not unnecessarily limiting, and that there are activities available for all ages;
 - Panelists also made suggestions on how to amend existing action items to ensure that spaces can be effectively repurposed to incorporate biodiversity, thinking beyond just hydro corridors and including spaces like bike corridors and underpasses;

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- Panelists proposed several new action items for the strategy, which focused on promoting public engagement and education about biodiversity among the general public. Panelists want to see the City use existing resources, like regular community environmental days, and new additions to the Division's biodiversity handbook series, to expand their regular community outreach. Panelists also proposed including an item that helps Torontonians take practical, simple first steps to protect biodiversity.

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Detailed Summary

Jane Weninger, a planner with the City of Toronto Planning Division, presented to the Panel on the draft of Toronto's first-ever biodiversity strategy. The strategy is the result of a partnership between the City Planning Division, the Parks, Forestry & Recreation Division, and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority. The strategy aims to protect and enhance Toronto's biodiversity, the loss of which has been exacerbated by a loss of habitats and species, the introduction of invasive species, human and pet impacts, and climate change.

The draft strategy is comprised of a vision statement, nine guiding principles, and a set of nineteen action items that are organized into four action areas: Restore, Protect, Design, and Engage. [A full version of the draft is available here.](#) The list of actions provided to the Panel are included in this report as an Appendix.

Jane provided an overview of what biodiversity is and why it is important to protect, the existing policies and laws that protect Toronto's natural environment, and background on the strategy's development to date. She then reviewed the strategy's nineteen proposed action items. The Panel was asked to consider whether the proposed actions in the draft strategy adequately address biodiversity loss in Toronto and serve the interests of all Torontonians. The Panel was also asked to provide specific feedback on the action items in the latest iteration of the draft strategy, which is due to be presented at the Infrastructure and Environment Committee in Spring 2019.

Discussion

After individually reviewing the action items, Panelists worked in small groups to identify and discuss, to the best of their ability and given their understanding of the issue and the draft strategy:

1. Action items they supported;
2. Action items that required revisions or deletion altogether; and
3. Any new action items that should be considered.

Panelists broadly supported all proposed 19 action items. They appreciated that the strategy was action-oriented and that items generally aimed to embed the enhancement of biodiversity in and alongside other community goals. They also appreciated that it emphasized connecting people to nature, and that it promoted public awareness and community engagement.

The Panelists also proposed several amendments to the action items, as well as a number of new ideas that they felt would strengthen the strategy.

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Proposed amendments

Panelists felt that the document could more clearly define and describe many of the terms and ideas introduced in the strategy. Panelists had several specific recommendations for how to do this:

- Some Panelists wanted to see a clearer definition of “watershed area municipalities” in Action item 4;
- Some Panelists suggested combining Action Items 6 and 7 into a single item and clarifying the definition of ‘adaptive management’ in Action Item 7;
- Action item 10 describes, “encouraging architects, engineers, and planners to incorporate and support habitats”. Some Panelists suggested the need to strengthen this item to “require” rather than simply “encourage”;
- Some Panelists noted the need to clarify the definition of the terms, ‘eco-passages’ and ‘systems-based approach’ in Action item 12;
- Action item 14 describes working, “with community groups to find opportunities to introduce more biodiversity into existing green infrastructure like street trees and green roofs”. While there was broad support for this action item, some Panelists felt that terms like ‘community groups’, ‘green roofs’ and ‘street trees’ should be more clearly explained and defined. They also felt that the phrasing of this action item was unnecessarily limiting, and that the scope for involving community groups could be much larger;
- Some Panelists thought that Action Item 17 and 18 lacked clarity and precision, and were unnecessarily verbose. Some Panelists suggested broadening the definition of “backyard” in Action Item 18 to include other property features such as roofs, front yards, and planters.

Many Panelists also made recommendations beyond edits to wording, which they suggested would strengthen the strategy. These changes were broadly focused on promoting civic involvement, and ensuring efficient use of existing resources to meet the goals of the strategy.

- Some Panelists felt that Action Item 10, which refers to advancing, “Design Best Practices for Biodiversity”, could be strengthened by broadening the focus beyond best practices to consider the role of community engagement. These Panelists noted that good design should reflect local needs and that local community engagement will likely lead to a higher likelihood of community participation and a better understanding of local plant and animal wildlife;
- Some Panelists suggested amending Action item 12, which describes identifying “opportunities for wildlife ‘eco-passages’ using a ‘systems-based approach”, to consider leveraging pedestrian cycling passageways as well as underpasses as potential

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opportunities for wildlife. Panelists suggested that this would advance the strategy's vision of integrating people with nature;

- Some Panelists suggested broadening Action Item 13 to consider spaces beyond utility corridors such as open fields that neighbour highways. However, this view was not shared by all Panelists, some of whom felt that using hydro corridors for integrating humans and nature would not be effective, since these spaces may not be appealing to the public. These Panelists suggested that the strategy should focus instead on repurposing spaces where there is already a higher amount of human traffic;
- Some Panelists suggested that Action Item 14 could be improved by explicitly mentioning the need to partner with specific local community groups who have already implemented biodiversity strategies. This furthers the strategy's goal of community participation;
- Some Panelists proposed that Action Item 18, which describes developing tools to support biodiversity for the public and suggested activities to promote citizen involvement, also include activities for adults and children, such as a seed kit that could help homeowners promote biodiversity in their homes;
- While Panelists supported the items under the "Restore" and "Engage" action areas, some Panelists expressed the need to develop tailored and culturally appropriate engagement materials that educate the public about local ecological restoration projects.

Proposed additions

Panelists also proposed several new ideas for inclusion in the strategy. While the specific ideas did not receive the full consensus of the Panel, the Panel shared an emphasis on providing programming that educates residents on biodiversity, as well as the City's work to protect it.

- Some Panelists suggested that the strategy could be strengthened by introducing an item that aims to help Torontonians take practical first steps to help improve biodiversity;
- Some Panelists proposed that local environment days could be opportunities for the City to engage with the community about local biodiversity strategies;
- Panelists were particularly receptive to the City of Toronto Biodiversity Booklet Series that was presented and would like to see the distribution of similar materials that can educate the public about biodiversity in Toronto;
 - Other Panelists proposed the introduction of public awareness strategies that could similarly educate and alert the public about the migration of species through Toronto and how the public can protect them. Examples included educating Torontonians about the location and habits of local large birds, and

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when Torontonians can expect to see monarch butterflies migrating through the city.

- Some Panelists suggested the introduction of activities that promote biodiversity and that people can participate in with their families. These Panelists thought that a majority of people have a desire to connect with nature and want to learn how they can promote biodiversity and integrate it into their lives. They suggested that a focus on creative strategies that promote public participation may promote community acceptance of biodiversity.

In some cases, Panelists were unsure if certain concerns or ideas could be sufficiently addressed by the strategy. Panelists suggested that, in addition to the specific advice provided above, the project team should consider the following:

- Some Panelists felt there should be more focus in the strategy on finding and leveraging creative ways to foster a more hospitable environment for plants and animals. For example, promoting electric vehicles would improve the city's air quality, which helps biodiversity;
- Action Item 17 describes promoting citizen involvement through developing a GPS-based self-guided tour for residents. Some Panelists expressed concern about the tours and cautioned that they should not promote trespassing on private properties. Panelists also noted the need to provide good information and promotion of these activities, to ensure they are well-used;
- Some Panelists expressed concern about the use of pesticides that harm local plant and animal wildlife, and questioned how the strategy could address this issue;
- Some Panelists wondered if the strategy could address and leverage urban harvesting practices.

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APPENDIX: List of draft actions for Biodiversity Strategy

PROTECT
1) Enlist experts to prioritize actions for regional species of concern
2) Identify measurement goals, building on existing information, include opportunities for citizen science
3) Focus on creating habitat, such as through planning studies, new secondary plans, and site and area specific policies.
4) Develop a Regional Biodiversity Strategy to be led by the Toronto Region Conservation Authority in consultation with watershed area municipalities.
RESTORE
5) Identify priority sites for habitat restoration in order to manage invasives, encourage species to return, and increase resilience of existing species
6) Implement TRCA Invasive Species Management Strategy
7) Use monitoring to inform 'adaptive management' of habitat restoration and invasive species management
8) Develop "Best Practices for Operations & Maintenance" for parks, road right-of-ways, and utility corridors to protect habitat and encourage new habitats
9) Work with plant suppliers and associations to develop a strategy to promote the use and increase the supply of native plant materials.
DESIGN
10) Continue to advance "Design Best Practices for Biodiversity" to encourage architects, engineers and planners to incorporate and support habitats

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11) Include criteria to enhance biodiversity in Urban Design Awards
12) Identify opportunities for wildlife “eco-passages” using “systems based approach”
13) Identify opportunities to create habitat in utility corridors (such as hydro corridors)
14) Work with community groups to find opportunities to introduce more biodiversity into existing green infrastructure like street trees and green roofs.
ENGAGE
15) Identify opportunities for collaborative stewardship projects to create habitats that engage the public
16) Use interpretive art and storytelling to communicate importance of nature and native flora and fauna
17) Promote citizen involvement in biodiversity creation, such as through programs that recognize property owners who create biodiverse backyards, or through developing a GPS-based self guided tour for residents
18) Develop tools to support biodiversity: such as a manual on how to enhance biodiversity now and for changing climate; a toolkit for children to increase awareness on biodiversity, more books in biodiversity series, a database visualization tool to understand what Toronto’s landscape used to look like
19) Undertake survey in 2019 and 2024 to see if we are making progress in raising awareness and changing behaviour