

Centennial Park

Accountability Circle Summary Report



June 29, 2021

Vanessa N. Oraekwe - Community Development & Project Coordinator (Consultant)

Pablo Muñoz - Senior Public Consultation Coordinator

Contents

- Introduction – 3
 - Goal 3
 - Outreach 4
 - Context..... 4
- Community Meeting - February 6th 2021 5
- Internal Meeting - February 25th 2021 7
- Recommendations 9
- Minutes from community meeting.....10
- Minutes from Internal Meeting.....12

Introduction –

Over the last few years, anti-Black racism has risen to the top of the public and political agenda in Toronto and across cities in North America. This has been exacerbated and highlighted by the economic and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the process of developing the Centennial Master Plan update, allegations of anti-Black racism from bylaw officers at Centennial Park came to light. These allegations are currently under investigation. The incident was also brought up to the engagement team on the project on several occasions during a youth workshop.

With all of this in mind, as a response, the team felt it was important to create a space for a conversation on how to make Centennial Park more inclusive to members of Black communities. The Centennial Park Master Plan Update presents an opportunity for incorporating ideas from Black communities into the master plan. The team also recognized that this space and conversation needs to include representatives from other branches within PFR and other divisions, particularly those with direct engagement with the public.

The engagement team met with members of the Combating Anti-Black Racism Unit who recommended framing this conversation as a **Black Community Accountability Circle** (BCAC) a framework developed by the Economic Development Division. The reasoning is that Black communities are often invited to focus groups and feel like they are over-consulted and that their recommendations and ideas don't result in change. An accountability circle ensures that representatives capable of acting on the recommendations are part of the process and accountable to activating recommendations.

In order to develop a framework for the BCAC that was relevant to Centennial Park and Parks Forestry and Recreation, members of the Engagement Unit at PFR met with the City Confronting Anti Black Racism team and developed a tailored approach.

The team decided on two meetings, a **Community Meeting** with Black, African and Caribbean residents and park users and an **Internal Meeting** with PFR staff with representatives from various units and representatives from Municipal Licencing and Standards (MLS).

For this process, PFR hired Vanessa N. Oraekwe - Community Development & Project Coordinator with experience working and facilitating conversations with Black, African and Caribbean communities in Toronto.

Goal

In recognition of the systemic anti-Black racism and barriers faced by Black communities when accessing parks, the Accountability circle sought to address historic inequities faced by Black communities, identify immediate needs, identify targets, and remove barriers to ensure members of the Black community are able to have equitable access to City parks and facilities.

While this particular BCAC will address issues specific to Centennial Park, applicability of lessons learned to other initiatives and spaces will be considered, as well as the potential to form other BCACs should they be required.

Outreach

Outreach involved reaching out to key civically engaged community members within the facilitator's network. This method of outreach proved successful as the community members trusted the facilitator's support of the consultation process due to the facilitator's reputation within the community. In accounting for the fractured relationships between the Black community and the City of Toronto, leveraging the relationships between trusted community figures and their networks acted as an avenue to rebuild trust between the Black community and the City of Toronto. Black community members of diverse social locations were invited to join the conversation in order to ensure that there were diverse voices at the table. Black residents in particular who experienced Anti-Black racism at Centennial Park were also contacted as a responsive accountability measure. Invitations were also sent to Black serving organizations and institutions surrounding Centennial Park, including community centres and faith based organizations.

Honorarium

In alignment with BCAC structures proposed by other divisions at the City, the PFR BCAC compensated community members for their time and expertise at a rate of \$50 for one meeting.

Context

The Black Community in Toronto is composed of a diverse groups of people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds and social locations. Historically, Black communities within the Toronto have not been fully integrated into the city space because of systemic racism. This is supported by the statistics that highlight the social disparities experienced by Black Torontonians in areas of social equity. In the City's acknowledgement of housing anti-Blackness and social inequity, there have been strategies implemented through the City's CABR Unit to Confront Anti-Black Racism.

In evaluating the City of Toronto's Census map, most Black people within the City of Toronto live in the west end of the city outside of the city's core in areas such as North York and Etobicoke . As Centennial Park is located in a community that is densely populated with Black Torontonians, it is important to engage the voices of Black community members within the parks redevelopment process in order to not repeat the historical practises of Black exclusion. In acknowledgement of the [City's' Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black to Racism](#), Parks Forestry and Recreation Division's commitment is documented in the following recommendations of the Action plan

- #1.2, #1.3, #1.4, #1.5, #2.1, #2.3, #6.2, #7.1, #7.2, #13.2, #20.2

Community Meeting - February 6th 2021

Meeting was held over WebEx in keeping with the latest Public Health measures set to address the COVID-19 Pandemic.

External Facilitator

Vanessa N. Oraekwe

City of Toronto

Casey Morris – Senior Project Coordinator PRF

Daniel Fusca – Manager of Public Consultation PFR

Pablo Muñoz – Senior Public Consultation Coordinator

Landscape Architects

Jasmeen Bains –PMA

Community Members Present:

There were 9 participants present, including youth, representatives from Etobicoke art institutions, seniors and representatives from faith-based and service providing organizations.

Meeting Key Highlights

The meetings started with a short presentation led by Pablo Muñoz (PFR) about how the Black Communities Accountability Circle was established followed by a presentation by Landscape Architect Jasmeen Bains showcasing the preliminary designs for the Centennial Park Master Plan.

Design and Placemaking

- Participants liked the idea of art spaces within the park like the amphitheatre. They highlighted that opportunities for storytelling are really important.
- Participants expressed that they would like the Centennial Park to celebrate Black history in Canada, and that this could be done particularly through signage, lighting, art cultural markers and wayfinding. They also suggested including languages like Somali, Patois and other African and Caribbean languages from communities that live in the area. ***"Can we find ways for Black communities to not be seen from a place of deficit?"***
- Participants also suggested faith spaces that could "formalize [Black] practices and rituals". They also suggested that African games could be integrated into the park.
- One participant suggested that picnic tables could be moveable in order to be able to provide enough distance from other park users noting often the police is called on them for being "too loud".

- It was highlighted that regardless of how beautiful the space is, it won't matter unless it is accessible and safe for Black communities. A participant noted how easy it was for most communities to have picnics and birthday celebrations but that Black communities always feel uncomfortable.

Partnerships and Programming

- Participants asked that when it came to develop historic and cultural markers that celebrated Black communities, that collaborations and partnerships with Black communities should be developed.
- Participants also suggested developing relationships with events led by Black communities like Caribanna. And including Black folks in the programming of park openings or ribbon cuttings for example.

Booking

- Many participants raised concerns over accessibility and booking. Participants expressed hesitancy around booking systems, high booking fees and lack of general "welcomeness" from City staff. Youth present suggested app booking systems as a way to make booking more accessible. It was also suggested that staff could be more "culturally sensitive".

Interactions with Security, MLS, Neighbours and Police

- Most participants expressed not feeling welcomed particularly due to policing, interactions with security and MLS. They expressed instances of neighbours calling the police on them for being in the park.
- Participants suggested that when there are instances of anti-Black racism, the city needs to not only respond, but actively communicate to Black communities what is being done about it in order for them to feel safe.

*I have been here for over 40 years. The problem is to engage the Black community to feel comfortable using the park. The design and everything looks good, the problem is always the neighbourhood evolving, the mainstream community, they call the police or authorities. They call the police on our children and youth. 10 years from now when our grandchildren grow up where will they play? How will they play? – **Older Adult Participant***

- All participants expressed that they felt that white neighbours disproportionately called the police on them for simply using the park. Participants suggested including signage indicating to not call the police on Black park users.
- All participants express feeling "over policed" saying the police is called on them for using the park, being "too loud" or being in large groups. All participants expressed not feeling safe in the presence of police. Some participants described interactions with

police as "traumatizing".

- Some suggested alternatives and "innovative ways" to keep the park safe without police. Intermediaries or community leaders that are doing work to keep spaces safe without police presence.
- It was also noted that bylaw enforcement officer's main role should be to educate before enforcing. Most of the public is not aware of that and that is a problem. Most of the times that bylaw enforcement officers meet Black park users, they are not aware of why they are being singled out or approached.

Observations by External Facilitator Vanessa Oraekwe

The Accountability Circle made apparent how Black communities are excluded from Park space due to structural racism and popular circulations of Anti-Blackness (stereotypes etc.). Black community members were less concerned with the presentation of the redevelopment and more eager to share their thoughts and concerns regarding the inaccessibility to Park space experienced by Black residents due to bureaucratic processes associated with booking space , over-policing and harassment. It is important to consider how the Parks for All mandate has historically not been the experience of Black residents in the City of Toronto as made clear by the participants of the Accountability Circle. Anti-blackness within Park space presents itself as a risk when considering how it has been able to exclude Black communities from fairly engaging with Park space.

Internal Meeting - February 25th 2021

Meeting was held over WebEx in keeping with the latest Public Health measures set to address the COVID-19 Pandemic

External Facilitator:

Vanessa Oraekwe - Facilitator

City Staff:

Dave Hains- Supervisor Community Recreation
Shane Jeremiah - Youth Outreach Worker
David Kugelman - Supervisor MLS
Jason Lutchman - Supervisor MLS
Osmand Bangura - District Manager MLS
Anna Panchar - Policy Development Officer PFR
Daniel Fusca - Manager of Public Consultation PFR
Pablo Muñoz - Senior Public Consultation Coordinator PFR

The meetings started with a short presentation led by Pablo Muñoz about how the Black Communities Accountability Circle was established and highlights from the Community Meeting that took place on February 6th, 2021.

Meeting Key Highlights

- All staff highlighted that this not a "neighbourhood park". People from all over the city and outside access it. It doesn't have that local community feel as a big destination park and that creates a set challenges.
- Park staff noted that basketball courts *"have always had an issue with the community"* including requests to take them down. There are assumptions and stereotypes that there is drug dealing when there is no evidence of it. Park staff also mentioned occasions when TPS has been called on Black park users barbequing. The calls are made by other residents/neighbours.
- Park staff noted that generally in parks, Black residents are careful. They get the police called on them. They are forced to move with cautions so that there is no attention.
- Staff present indicated at various points that TPS should be a part of this process and conversation. If a complaint goes to the Toronto Police Services, MLS, park staff and corporate security won't have a way of knowing about the complaint or call for help. Staff indicated that calls to 311 are the ones directed to MLS.
- Staff noted that Centennial Park has corporate security. They are usually the first to respond and the first line of communication with the public. This corporate security should be included in this process.
- Staff indicated that there is currently no race-based data collection at MLS with regards to interactions with the public.
- Members present indicated that there are ongoing Anti-Black Racism training sessions that are mandatory for all employees.
- Staff indicated that the engagement model is education being the first resort and enforcement being the last.
- Staff noted that education was the primary goal when it came to ensuring the public was adhering to physical-distancing bylaws meant to address the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the city did not communicate to the public that this was the primary goal.
- Staff suggested that a "Friends of Centennial Park" would be a good way to develop a relationship and communication channel with the community.
- Staff recommended that improvements in communication with client services would ensure that they are aware of events and bookings happening at the park.

Observations by External Facilitator Vanessa Oraekwe

The internal meeting demonstrated that there are gaps in knowledge and service provision when it comes to addressing how Anti-black Racism is expressed within Park spaces. The gaps are primarily in regard to safety, unnecessary engagement with bylaw/law enforcement and social accessibility. While Municipal Licencing and Standards recognizes that Black community members are affected by harassment and exclusion in park spaces, they currently do not have inputs put in place to effectively mitigate these occurrences. Although MLS's mandate is to prioritize education over enforcement the experience shared by the Black Communities Accountability Circle attendees was that this was not the case. Members expressed feeling

targeted by bylaw enforcement. Notably, MLS recognized the intersection between Toronto Police Services and By-law enforcement and how the Black community's relationship with TPS has a negative impact on how Black communities can engage with By-law enforcement. The internal meeting highlighted that whilst the institutions can be privy to the lived realities of vulnerable community members, structural racism has complicated the real time response to issues such as the over-policing of Black presence in community space not only by agents of the City of Toronto, but also by non-black community members who perceive Blackness as threatening because of racist stereotypes.

Recommendations

Centering the voice of Black Communities

It is important to continue to prioritize Black community voices as an integral part of the process of the re-development of Centennial Park. As an equity mechanism, Black community recommendations should be intentionally explored and the viability of these recommendations should be measured in conversation with those who represent the community.

Create Mechanisms of Communication Across Various Divisions

Internally, there are several divisions that play a role in this conversation towards shifting the ways in which the Black community experiences Parks. PFR, MLS, TPS, are a few that were recognized in the internal meeting. There needs to be more effective communication to gauge how interdivisional policies are affecting the manifestation of Anti-Blackness in park spaces.

Additionally, communication between law enforcement and security and client services and programming could be improved so that all staff that come in contact with the public are aware of what is happening at the park and how issues are being addressed.

Collection of Race-Based Data

The collection of race-based data that reflects racially charged harassment would be a pivotal starting point in evaluating and meaningfully confronting these incidences of Anti-Blackness. Once data is made available, there can be tangible action plans mobilized that tackle what kinds of recourse would be necessary to reduce the risks associated with the current Anti-Blackness expressed within Parks.

Communicate with Black Communities

It is important to regain trust with Black, African and Caribbean communities through meaningful engagement and dialog that is followed by actions that make parks more accessible, enjoyable and welcoming of Black communities. This can take place in the form of more park-focused accountability circles.

Communicate Responsibility and Actions

The steps that are taken to address incidents of anti-black racism that occur in parks need to be widely communicated to the community in order to allow them to feel safe accessing the park once again.

Appendix

Minutes from community meeting

February 6th, 2021

Present:

External Facilitator

Vanessa N. Oraekwe

City of Toronto

Casey Morris – Senior Project Coordinator PRF

Daniel Fusca – Manager of Public Consultation PFR

Pablo Muñoz – Senior Public Consultation Coordinator

Landscape Architects

Jasmeen Bains –PMA

- Amphitheatre to combine the storytelling component is really important. I'm happy that is being included. My concern is how people access it. I feel hesitant. What kind of bureaucratic hurdles will I face to access this? Will there be a cost? I'm not concerned about the design but about the access.
- Accessing space is an issue.
- How do black folks feel welcome in these spaces?
- Public space for Black folks is highly contested. It is an intense process. On a regular basis.
- When there are issues of anti-black racism that happen, the city needs to respond and communicate what has been done about it so that Black communities feel safe.
- For booking, can there an app or something that is accessible for youth?
- It doesn't matter how beautiful a space is if it isn't accessible to Black communities.
- Cultural markers. Is it possible in the seating areas and lighting markers by Black Canadians? Can we find ways for Black communities to not be seen from a place of deficit?
- Celebrate Black history in Canada. Signage wayfinding.

- I have been here for over 40 years. The problem is to engage the black community to feel comfortable using the park. The design and everything looks good, the problem is always the neighbourhood evolving, the mainstream community, they call the police or authorities. They call the police on children and youth.
- Different communities when they come to the park they enjoy the park for birthdays or events. Black people always feel uncomfortable. The city can spend all the money, but if Black people can't use it. Osman (me) who is very active has lived here since a teenager. . can Black people feel comfortable.
- We need to engage and be culturally sensitive. The authorities need to be friendly and not choose one community versus another. I don't know how, it has to be systemic racism you can't even book a place or not even get back to us. We have struggles like that accessing spaces in the city.
- 10 years from now when our grandchildren grow up where will they play? How will they play?
- It is important for spaces like this to be explicit about inviting black folks and make us welcome.
- Things that ask for booking fees there needs to be discounts. Making it financially accessible.
- Safety – black folks are overly policed, I don't think people are going to feel safe if the presence of police is there. We need innovative ways to keep the park safe without police.
- Community leaders that are doing that kind of work that make people feel safer.
- I am thinking about picnic tables. Are they fixed structures or moveable? If you are at the park and having a picnic will they be spaced out enough so that we aren't policed for having too many people or playing music too loud?
- Black communities are policed for being too loud or gathering in large groups.
- Is there some kind of process where there is training for intermediaries for the police. We've seen this in the park "Karens' where people are enjoying the park and they call the police. Signage, intermediaries options so that that they don't call the police and be traumatized. Police don't need to be called on black people just for existing in a park. Everyone goes to have
- The bylaw enforcement officer's main role should be to educate. Most of the public is not aware of that and that is a problem. Most of the times that bylaw enforcement officers meet us we don't know what they are citing us for.
- Even if there were no cultural markers we should be able to be safe.

- Can African games be integrated into the park?
- In the opening of a park, have black artists involved in those events?
- How do you engage events like caribanna to take part in parks to bring parks into these events led by Black people? Afro fest happens in one specific place. We need to open it up, these things were born and bred in the city from black folks being pushed out from other spaces.
- Can there be collaborations? Can we place historic markers from Black communities into our parks? We need to celebrate our communities in the infrastructure and parks.
- Languages, Somalis, patois, markers that give history references to Black experience. Our language and experience needs to be thought of.
- Formalize practices and rituals.

Minutes from Internal Meeting

February 25th 2021

Present:

Vanessa Oraekwe - Facilitator
 Dave Hains- Supervisor COmmunity Recreation
 Shane Jeremiah - Youth Outreach Worker
 David Kugelman - Supervisor MLS
 Jason Lutchman - Supervisor MLS
 Osmand Bangura - District Manager MLS
 Anna Pancham -Policy Development Officer PFR
 Daniel Fusca - Manager of Public Consultation PFR
 Pablo Muñoz - Senior Public Consultation Coordinator PFR

- Any place that has had a basketball court has always had an issue with the community including requests to take it down. Usually youth are just playing and the community has a perception that there is drug dealing when there is not. There are assumptions that are made. This is a great opportunity to make the park extra inclusive. I am glad that we are doing this to change the model on how we redevelop parks. I am really excited to reach out more. There are cases when people have been barbequing at the park and people call the police. This is widespread and systematic.
- Neighbours are the ones who typically call police.

- TPS should be invited to take part of this process. The enforcement is not concentrated with Municipal Licensing and Standards (MLS). When a neighbour calls the police
- If a call is made to 311 then it goes to MLS.
- Centennial Park also has corporate security. They are usually our first call. It would be great if they could be included in this process. They are usually the first line of communication.
- There is no race based data collection right now at MLS.
- There are ongoing training sessions that are mandatory for all employees.
- There needs to be an equitable engagement model. Education being the first resort and enforcement being the last resort.
-
- Given the current state with COVID. At the first stage of covid we tried to convey that the first line was education. In terms of telling the public we haven't done that, we haven't told the public our first line is education..
- Education is not the first experience that black folks receive. There is confusion from black folks differentiating between bylaw enforcement and police. How aware is the public. There needs to be education on that. There is no differentiation from the civilian's perspective. By law enforcement officers have uniforms that resemble police.
- It is important that the police be a part of this process because if the complaint goes. Regardless of what training we do if the complaint goes to the police we have no control over that.
- Generally in parks Black residents are careful. They get the police called on them. They move with cautions so that there is no attention.
- It is not a neighbourhood park. People from all over the city and outside access that park. It doesn't have that local community feel as a big destination park. That creates challenges.
- There are times where we get complaints that go to 311 that is directed MLS/

Action Items

- If there are permitted events planned there should be a way of letting MLS know so that they can be aware ahead of time.

- Events are booked with client services. Most of the events are big. Communication needs to be improved between client services, TPS, corporate security, bylaw enforcement. On any given weekend there are so many things going on, from a soccer tournament to a festival. Cross communication is key. We need an incident communication plan.
- Communication with the public. Who should be contacted in different situations? Do you have a noise complaint make sure you call MLS. Who are the appropriate people to call. People generally call 311 and they redirect it.
- We should connect with 311.
- We need to improve our signage. Code of conduct for lack of a better term. If you are not treated properly here is who you should call. Staff at the olympium or ski chalet.
- Issues should first be brought to staff at the park and then then to other forms of security.
- Racially based complaints in a neighbourhood Black people know regardless of what I do this people are going to call the police. What kind of recourse can be put in place so that we are tracking or follow ups on complaints? If the same people keep calling how are we addressing that? How do we action and promote that so that they know they will be supported if something happens.
- We've had an advisory committee who meets monthly and we would invite police to update on crime stats. It would be great to have a friend of Centennial Park, or an advisory committee and some staff could come and share what has been happening at the park and provide a report. You can have youth and seniors to keep an ongoing dialogue and stay on top of them.
- We work with the councillor's office to communicate back to the community. If you had a park meeting seasonally that would be a good way to keep the community updated. The challenge with Centennial Park is that it is so big. The councillor's office is great at communicating via mail.
- When there are incidents of anti-Black racism, there needs to be clear communication on what steps are being taken to address that. I don't know if we are there yet. We could get there and I think we can manage it via question and response. The soft approach is my preference.
- The CABR unit might have ideas on how that can be cascade to the community.
- Education and enforcement. People who are calling 311 or police can there be education in that direction?