

On November 10, 2022, the City of Toronto hosted a Focus Group of Indigenous 2-Spirit peoples (LGBTQ2S+) in Toronto to inform the development of the Community Development Plan (CDP) for Downsview. The Focus Group provided an introduction on Update Downsview – a City-led Study to update the Downsview Secondary Plan. The Focus Group also introduced participants to the CDP and sought feedback on the seven draft community priorities.

A Community Development Plan (CDP) is a framework for the implementation of prioritized actions and identified resources that ensure equitable opportunities for Indigenous communities, residents, community groups, agencies, businesses, local anchor institutions and other rights-holders and people in the Downsview Study Area and surrounding communities. The CDP will be aligned with the City’s equity strategies and commitments to Indigenous communities. The CDP will endeavour to consider and prioritize social and economic investments.

Ten participants, who identified as First Nations, Métis or Inuit 2-Spirit people, participated in a wide-ranging dialogue that was the fourth meeting in a series of focus groups representing urban Indigenous communities in Toronto.

This first meeting of 2-Spirit peoples was an opportunity to introduce them to the CDP. They were guided through a short presentation of Update Downsview, an overview of the CDP and community engagement process, and an overview of a proposed framework. The priorities are intended to address the key themes of: access to healthy and affordable food, housing, employment opportunities, recreational facilities and programs, spaces for non-profit agencies delivering programs and services, preserving heritage, arts and education, community safety and wellbeing as well as establishing an inclusive economy.

The meeting was led by Elder Shelley Charles, of Zhooniyaang Mnisiing (Georgina Island) who provided an opening invocation and thanksgiving on behalf of the host and participants.

The meeting was facilitated by Bob Goulais of Nbisiing Consulting who does not advocate for any particular outcome of this project. The intent is to capture the diverse perspectives shared during the discussion.

Update Downsview Community Development Plan Indigenous 2-Spirit Peoples Focus Group

Thursday, November 10, 2022, 6:30 – 8:30 p.m.

The objective of the meeting was to seek input into the development of a Community Development Plan (CDP) framework for the Downsview area. The draft CDP framework included a number of draft community priorities including Healthy Food; Deeply-Affordable Housing; Employment; Inclusive Economy; Recreational and Non-Profit Spaces; Arts, Heritage and Education; and Community Safety and Well-Being.

This draft summary reflects the feedback shared by participants when asked to provide their vision, input, and suggested priorities into the CDP.

HIGHLIGHTS

1. Affordability is an emerging theme for Indigenous peoples in relation to access to healthy food, housing/home ownership, commercial space, transportation, and even affordable parking.
2. Efforts must be made to ensure that Downsview is a safe and accepting community for 2-Spirit peoples and our elders, that is also culturally-safe for all Indigenous people.
3. Consider training and social procurement opportunities including in the development of Downsview that supports employment equity.
4. Community, recreational, and wellness programs will need to include Indigenous cultural programming, traditional activities on the land, access to traditional teachers, and dedicated space for teaching and ceremonies.
5. 2-Spirit people support the development of an Indigenous community hub to access community and social services, training, and include space for local agencies. The hub may also include an Indigenous community centre that supports the building of community.
6. This can be a place that encourages *going back to nature*, favouring naturalized green spaces that supports undisturbed, wildlife habitat.
7. Downsview should endeavour to be an accessible place for people of all abilities and needs, that is not a challenge to travel to or across.

DETAILED FEEDBACK ON THE DRAFT COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PLAN PRIORITIES

1. Access to Healthy and Affordable Food

- **Provide opportunities to grow own food**
 - Develop community gardens and activities such as community canning. “These can be shared responsibilities that are about giving and taking”;
 - The long-term vision is to enable access to affordable, healthy food. The land has to be prepared to do this;
 - Knowledge that the Earth needs to be worked on in order to garden. There is a lot of cement but under the cement is natural soil;
 - Plant edible plants and shrubs. This includes multi-layered Indigenous planting that has different levels of canopy. Most often referred to as the Three Sisters of beans, corn and squash. This has complexity in how it is planted and requires a lot of water. We need to prepare the land and let it rest.
- **Find new ways of food sustainability**
 - Food sustainability is different in the north, but it is incredibly important everywhere. There may be opportunity for employment where food sustainability programs can be expanded and create more jobs;
 - A participant referred to the Sweet Grass Collective at Black Creek. They would be great at teaching food sustainability and help bring Indigenous foods into new spaces;
 - We can learn from different teachers about food and medicines;
 - There is opportunity to create jobs for Indigenous people that support food sustainability. For example, we grow the plants/food and distribute it (i.e. food boxes, farmers markets);
 - Consider building multiple green houses like they do in the north to grow food;
 - Create space to learn to hunt and harvest traditional food sustainably;
 - Create an Indigenous Food Box like the “Good Food” box.

2. Access to Deeply-Affordable Housing

Note: later changed to “Access to Housing” during the Phase 2 engagement process.

- **New Community ways of thinking**
 - We need to think of building community differently. To be a “for us, by us” type of community with a role for everyone including elders. We utilize each other's gifts and contribute back in our own ways. Consider using asset-based community development;
 - The example of the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust raised the thought that the Indigenous community should have an opportunity to grow and create a land-back model.

“Imagine living in a building that's owned and taken care of by Indigenous people for Indigenous people and there's pride in being neighbourly and knowing who your family is and relatives are.”

– Participant

- **Affordability ideas**
 - Definitely agree when it comes to deeply affordable housing;
 - Consider an Indigenous co-op or condominium owned by/for Indigenous people;
 - Housing should be run by us, for us. Like the Inter-tribal housing co-operative in London is an example;
 - “I love my co-op. It's affordable and neighbourly”;
 - More opportunities for affordable Indigenous home ownership;
 - “Imagine living in a building that's owned and taken care of by Indigenous people for Indigenous people and there's pride in being neighbourly and knowing who your family is and relatives are”;
 - Home ownership education program; this is not something we've learned through our families because of residential schools. We may need to have programs to learn about the process to purchase a first home;
 - Consider rent caps; “I believe my rent increased by 6-8% since I've been here”;
 - Create land trusts where Indigenous people can own and develop the land for affordable housing;

- **Getting to know your neighbours**
 - When living in a condo complex, for example: “There are times, well, most times, people don't even know their neighbours. I find that really sad. I know most everybody on my floor and it's amazing. You feel safe”.

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3. Access to Employment Opportunities

- **Affordability and Accessibility**
 - “With equity, I think about affordability. It should be realistic to make enough (income) to afford to live at a minimum”;
 - Employment and education should be accessible. There are so many financial barriers and many systemic barriers.

- **Land-based job opportunities**
 - There may be opportunities for Indigenous people to provide leadership and teach about the land.

- **Having culturally safe places to work**
 - Develop incentives for businesses that prioritize cultural competence and take cultural awareness and safety training;

“With equity, I think about affordability. It should be realistic to make enough (income) to afford to live at a minimum”
 – Participant

- **Foster training opportunities**
 - Have the development companies, and businesses at Downsview offer apprenticeships;
 - There needs to be training opportunities for Indigenous people to get jobs at Downsview. Especially in needed areas. For example, having trained community members so they can provide safety and security.

4. Establish an Inclusive Economy

- **Affordable commercial spaces**
 - Consider low rent for Indigenous small businesses;
 - Include affordable spaces for small businesses (ex. pop-up vendor spaces in a market area).
- **Economic equity and access**
 - Ensure everything is close. Inclusive means that elders and people living with disabilities can also get to and from locations safely;
 - Indigenous people do not want charity. They want equity and access to economic opportunities;
 - Connecting the ages through traditional mentorship. Provide knowledge sharing opportunities so Elders/grandparents can give back to youth;
 - Develop an Indigenous-owned bank or credit union at Downsview;
 - Consider opportunities for social procurement. For example, Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust put a call out for Indigenous and racialized contractors (i.e. painters, landscapers, etc.).

5. Access to Recreation and Below Market Rent for Non-Profits

- **Having a dedicated community hub for Indigenous people**
 - Develop a community hub that includes a community centre, programs and services, access to healthcare including mental health supports, and includes Indigenous housing complexes.
 - The hub can be a place for many activities including activities on the land. For example, Evergreen Brickworks has a lot happening;
 - This can be a northern hub for established Indigenous service agencies;
 - Have an Indigenous hub where other non-profits can come and get Indigenous training and cultural awareness.
- **Indigenous Traditional Activities**
 - For Indigenous peoples, recreation is being on the land. “I like being in the bush”;
 - There is an opportunity to learn about land and sharing Indigenous knowledge in the recreation space;

“For me, recreation is just walking through the bush. I guess that’s why I was saying ‘more trees’ so this has less of a city-feel.”

– Participant

- Encouraging elders to teach youth about recreation; and vice versa. Include all ages together in recreation programming;
- Lacrosse, the Creator’s Game, is sacred to the Haudenosaunee people. Consider teaching about lacrosse, having lacrosse programs for youth, or a lacrosse league.
- **All-seasons and winter recreation**
 - Have more outdoor programs across all seasons, including winter games and hiking;
 - Build outdoor or indoor skating rinks;
 - Establish a winter festival with hand games, snowshoeing, lumberjack contests, and traditional winter games.

6. Community Safety and Well-Being

- **Safe community for 2-Spirit people**
 - “Cultural safety means that 2-Spirit people have the safety to be themselves at work and in the community.”
 - Have a way to ensure predators aren’t coming after people in communities—elderly and vulnerable are often targeted. Have people in place who look out for it. For example, dreamteam.ca;
 - For 2-Spirit people, within our own community, it’s not always a safe space for us. So, I don't know how the City can work on helping us with that. I'd like to ensure that these spaces are aligned so we have a safe place for everybody.”
 - Ensure that Downsview is a safe and accepting space for 2-Spirit people;
 - Consider hiring Indigenous security and peace-keepers. People that know our community.
 - Cultural safety, physical safety and special safety for trans individuals;
 - Create space to learn/teach about different genders, abilities and nations;
 - Need gender neutral bathrooms.
- **Dedicated space for ceremonies**
 - Ceremonies are integral to well-being;
 - Set aside and protect space for ceremonies. Will there a space at Downsview that can be set aside specifically for ceremonies?
 - Have a safe space for fasting on the land;
 - Space for ceremonies run by Indigenous people;
 - Include signage to not disturb during ceremonies, as well signage/education for general public;
 - This requires cultural competence for permit granters;
 - At the 2-Spirit pow-wow: "The sacred fire was too far, there are little trees and it was hot at the Downsview pow-wow";

“For 2-Spirit people, within our own community, it’s not always a safe space for us. So, I don't know how the City can work on helping us with that. I'd like to ensure that these spaces are aligned so we have a safe place for everybody.”

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- **Harm Reduction supports**
 - Create peer support and harm reduction hubs. There is benefit to avoid police and create a stronger sense of community.
 - Have a mental health crisis response team for Downsview. The City currently has a pilot for mental health crises.
 - Not many places in North York have places to pick up harm reduction supplies;
- **Safety for Elders**
 - Digital Safety, especially for Elders
 - Having a way to ensure that creditors are not coming after the people in these communities. The elderly, and the vulnerable people are usually the ones that get targeted.

7. Heritage, Arts and Education

- **Create a “hub” of Indigenous Services including the development of an Indigenous community centre**
 - Develop a dedicated Indigenous community centre space for people, groups, and organizations to use;
 - Create a hub that includes Elders homes, an entertainment complex, space for ceremonies and pow-wows (including a 2-Spirit pow-wow), live artists performing music, and bingo halls.
 - Providing Indigenous agencies with satellite space at Downsview;
- **Enhance Indigenous cultural programming**
 - Provides Indigenous language learning programs;
 - Provide Indigenous medicine and teach everyone how to use those medicines;
 - Prioritize cultural safety for Indigenous people, including 2-Spirit folks.
 - Transform residents and visitors. “Can people learn more about Indigenous peoples as they go through Downsview?”;
 - Downsview is a blank slate with opportunities for placemaking.
- **Support for the Arts**
 - Art gallery with emerging artists and they could teach people. Larger galleries have artists-in-residence and promotes/provides space to them;
 - Intergenerational traditional art spaces for not just for creating art but also teaching art (including for elder knowledge keepers, grandchildren);
 - Space for dancers and performing artists to gather, share, practice.
- **Creation of Teaching Spaces**
 - Have teaching spaces to teach community (youth and Indigenous led) about Indigenous ways of knowing and being, seasonal teaching (i.e. hunting, fishing, etc.), children's programming and a childcare centre;
 - There's a need for traditional teaching lodges;
 - Promote sharing between elders, knowledge holders, and children.

- **Going Back to Nature**

- Walking is best for exercise;
- "We should not have to bus to find good green space";
- More trees! Downsview doesn't really have a lot of trees or true green space. It's here and there;
- At the 2-Spirit Pow-Wow, the sacred fire was too far and there are few trees to shelter from the heat.
- Consider creating water bodies to support the long-term climate;
- Bring back green space that was there. Not just grass or some trees here and there;
- Participants want to see more naturalized green space. "We call it re-wilding, right? Like, bring back some of the natural plants and trees that existed and some of the creatures."
- Add more rivers for the long-term climate.
- Add a large park at Downsview. Something more like High Park;

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– Participant

- **Supporting wildlife habitat**

- "I would love to ensure wildlife habitat is undisturbed... we can naturalize it more";
- Build a bridge for wild animals to travel across the roadways and railways;
- I would love to ensure that our wildlife habitat is not disturbed. I know that the New Metrolinx Plan to build surface level infrastructure will do more harm than good to Mother Earth.

After discussing the 7 community priorities, Bob Goulais facilitated a discussion on transportation challenges.

Transportation Challenges

- **Accessibility at Downsview**

- Ensure all transportation including walkways are accessible
- Ensure all areas of Downsview are easily accessible to the TTC;
- People with wheelchairs couldn't go to the 2-Spirit pow-wow at Downsview;
- We need barrier-free space to use washrooms, get water, and for rest.

- **Car accessible events**

- I have to take vehicle to do art anywhere in city as it's too much to bring on the subway and parking is too much money. It's a barrier;
- "There's a lot of people who may be doing business, or going to a market, they don't want to bring their art or their (dance) regalia on the subway. Or if you are coming to dance at a pow-wow. Then they have to pay money to park or spend a half-hour looking for parking. It's not good."
- A lot of elders come by car. You will need more/closer parking for elders;

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– Participant

- Affordable parking when driving (due to bringing supplies in car, families, etc.);
- To practice ways of life we may need to bring cars to take care of sacred items (i.e. regalia, drums);