

# **New Park at 160 McAllister Road You[th] Tell Us! Workshop Summary Report**

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# Contents

- Executive Summary..... 3
- Project Context..... 4
- Scope of Engagement ..... 4
- Overview of the Process - Where Are We? ..... 5
- Engagement Objectives..... 5
- Methods: Framework ..... 5
- Methods: Engagement Design ..... 6
- Methods: Coding ..... 8
- What We Heard..... 10
- Phase One Outcomes ..... 13
- Next Steps ..... 15
- References ..... 16

## Executive Summary

On November 13, 2023, students from the University of Toronto Urban Studies Program collaborated with the City of Toronto's Capital Projects Design and Delivery (CPDD) branch to conduct a "You[th] Tell Us! Workshop" at Dublin Heights Elementary and Middle School. The workshop gathered insights from 16 students in Karrie Cheung's Grade Eight gifted class to help steer the development of a new park at 160 McAllister Road. Students were placed into groups of 3-4 and given a presentation introducing the park site, followed by guided discussion sessions where students brainstormed to envision and craft their ideal park. Central to the workshop was the creative 'Be a Planner' activity, where each group crafted their dream park onto poster boards using drawings, sticky notes, and symbols. At the end of the crafting session, each group presented their park design in front of the class. This sparked a lively discussion where groups compared ideas and answered questions about their poster. Several key themes emerged from the workshop, summarized below in the project's Vision Statement, Guiding Principles and Big Moves.

### Vision Statement

Together, we are creating an inclusive and dynamic new park — one that embraces sports, nature, and imaginative play spaces while weaving in spaces for people to socialize, relax, and connect with each other. The New Park at 160 McAllister Road will prioritize multipurpose spaces, aesthetic appeal, and accessibility for all ages. The park should be adaptable for the ever-changing community, ensuring that fun can be had for generations to come, all year round.

### Guiding Design Principles

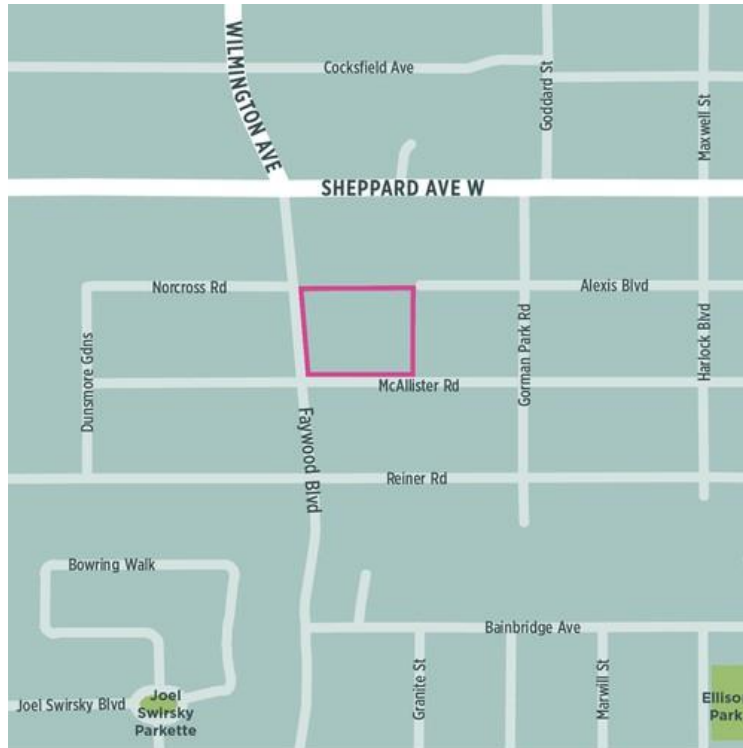
1. Places to hang out with friends are important.
2. Areas in the park should be adaptable for many uses and seasons.
3. Make room for sports!
4. Parks are for families. They should work for youth and seniors.
5. Plants can foster well-being and a connection to nature.
6. Flat spaces are boring. Parks should have a unique and diverse terrain.
7. Park areas should be "Instagrammable."

### Big Moves

1. Build a space that supports low-barrier socializing through informal seating and a shelter structure such as a gazebo.
2. Create a sports field that accommodates a variety of sports activities and changes with the seasons.
3. Design a park that celebrates nature. Build intentional nature features that diversify the terrain and reflect the land's natural ecology.
4. Invest in a community-led public art project to create a sense of place and community ownership within the park.

## Project Context

A new 14,570 m<sup>2</sup> park is planned for 160 McAllister Road. This location is south of The Toronto Heschel School at Faywood Boulevard and Sheppard Avenue West. The new neighbourhood park will serve local communities, including the students at the nearby Dublin Heights Elementary and Middle School, where our youth engagement took place.



□ New Park at 160 McAllister Road

## Scope of Engagement

This project is a high-level Consult on the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Public Participation Spectrum. This means that the project staff will hear community ideas and desires for the park and receive feedback on design alternatives. Staff will communicate back to the public how their feedback has informed the project outcomes.



IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum

## Overview of the Process - Where Are We?

There are three phases taking place in the engagement process:

- Phase 1 – Towards a Vision
- Phase 2 – Exploring Design Options
- Phase 3 – Setting the Direction

We are completing the first phase, which has been taking place in Fall 2023. Undergraduate Urban Studies students from the University of Toronto and the students of Dublin Heights Elementary and Middle School had the opportunity to co-develop a vision and the guiding principles of the new park at 160 McAllister Road. The children shared their experiences and ideas for what the future vision of the park could look like:

**Guiding Principles:** Identifying what we need to do to maximize youth engagement. Developing a vision of the new park in the perspective of youth.

**Building a Vision:** Seeing ‘what will be’ in the future of 160 McAllister Road Park

What has been done in this phase?

- Background Analysis - identifying the scope
- Design and development of Youth Engagement workshops
- The launch of the You[th] Tell Us! workshops at Dublin Heights Elementary and Middle School.
- Collection of visual designs and feedback from the Dublin Heights Middle School students.
- Online thought exchange activity (conducted by a different team)

## Engagement Objectives

Our objective was to collect visual and oral feedback from youth between the ages of 12 to 13 (Grade Eight) through an art activity and group discussion conducted in a fun, creative, and welcoming environment. We aimed to learn more about the lived experiences, aspirations, and needs of local middle-school-age youth in order to incorporate them into the Vision Statement, Guiding Principles, Big Moves, and design process for the new neighbourhood park at 160 McAllister Road.

## Methods: Framework

When designing our engagement methodologies, we drew from the transformative learning framework that is at the centre of Indigenous pedagogy - specifically the **Head, Hand, and Heart model** (hereafter, known as the HHH model) (Singleton, 2015). The HHH Model is designed to produce thick, nuanced participant data, while also developing stewardship and care between the participants, the activity, and the site of interest (Singleton, 2015).

To effectively execute the HHH Model, an engagement must include:

1. **Head:** Moments for reflection
2. **Hand:** Tangible, kinetic activities
3. **Heart:** Moments for sharing

The Students' Commission of Canada has since adopted this approach, but have added 'Spirit' to the model to emphasize the most important element of youth engagement: fun (McCart & Khanna, n.d.).

We knew that youth would not engage meaningfully in the workshop if it felt like homework. We were also highly cognizant of technology's and the COVID-19 lockdown's negative impact on this age group's attention span. Thus, we sought to create a safe, inclusive, 'no wrong ideas' environment that could generate valuable, honest qualitative data within a fun, game-like state. The HHH+S Model was the perfect vehicle to execute this objective, because it contains a multitude of quick, diverse activities that provide an opportunity for every type of learner and communicator to find a way that they can best contribute.

With this in mind, our You[th] Tell Us! workshop consisted of five main parts:

1. Introductory presentation
2. Guided discussion
3. 'Be a Planner!' creative sketching activity
4. Group presentations
5. Class data ranking

In this next section, we will expand upon these methods.

## **Methods: Engagement Design**

### **Pre-Engagement**

Upon communicating with Dublin Heights Elementary and Middle School, we connected with Karrie Leung's Grade 8 gifted class. Leung carved out the afternoon for us to conduct our workshop during class time.

We arrived during lunch to set up while the students were away. This gave us time to reconfigure the desks to accommodate small groups of 3-4 youth participants and evenly distribute materials. Groups were kept small to increase the likelihood of in-depth conversations and equal participation. Each facilitator was pre-assigned to a table group, where they would provide support and ensure all participants had an equal opportunity to be heard.

As 12:45 PM approached, one facilitator greeted participants at the door and assigned them a table while the other facilitators waited to greet their groups at their tables. These precautions were taken to ensure a quick start to the workshop

and to limit transition times between activities.

## Step One: Introduction

We began with a short presentation that introduced the New Park at 160 McAllister Road and the purpose of the workshop. This was important for (1) establishing a project identity among the community to aid the City's future communications efforts and (2) communicating to participants how their feedback will be incorporated into the park design.

**Rationale:** If participants knew why their feedback mattered, then they would feel more ownership over the workshop's outcomes, thereby increasing the likelihood that they would engage meaningfully.

## Step Two: Guided Discussion

The workshop officially began with a reflective, guided discussion. Participants were asked to imagine a great day in the park and share within their small groups:

- What made this day so enjoyable?
- Who were you with?
- What park features/elements were there that you enjoyed?

Facilitators were present to prompt conversations; however, they mostly served as silent notetakers.

**Rationale:** We wanted youth to draw on their lived experience as young adolescents and their experiences at younger ages so that we could capture data across a wide range of age groups within one consultation. This also allowed us to understand how youth's sentiments towards parks change over time so that we can design parks with longevity. Ultimately, this reflection exercise helped participants open up to each other with a simple question and get into the activity-focused visioning headspace before the main activity.

**HHH+S Model:** This activity engaged both the head and the heart, as it required youth to both reflect on their own experience and listen to the experiences of others.

## Step Three: 'Be A Planner!' Activity

The main activity of the workshop was the 'Be a Planner!' activity. In this exercise, youth participants were tasked with designing their perfect park using sketches, words, sticky notes, symbols — whatever best expressed their vision. They were supplied with a Bristol board blueprint and markers, sticky notes, pens, and stickers to do so. A spot for a wish list was also provided where participants who were shy or less creatively inclined could still get their ideas on the page.

Additionally, printed examples of park features were provided to help students generate ideas. The facilitators' role was to keep participants on track. While we

originally allotted 20 minutes for this activity, the participants were having so much fun that we extended the time to 45 minutes.

**Rationale:** There is an adult-centrism in youth engagement where youth are asked to think and act more like adults to be taken seriously (LaForgue, et al., 2022). In this crafty activity, we wanted to foster and embrace youth' inherent creativity, imagination, and whimsy. By packaging their ideas within an official planning blueprint, we were demonstrating to the youth that their ideas and their approaches to knowledge production were authoritative.

**HHH+S Model:** This activity engaged the hands and spirit, and provided a nice and needed break from the more formal approaches to thick participation.

### Step Four: Presentations and Ranking

At the end of the workshop, groups were given two minutes to explain and present their park designs to the class. While each class shared, a facilitator was recording all of their key themes in a Jamboard, which was projected on a screen at the front of the room for everyone to see. Once the Jamboard was complete, participants were asked to identify which elements were the most important.

**Rationale:** By presenting under a time crunch, groups had to evaluate and prioritize which elements were most important to their dream parks; this allowed us to pre-code important themes. The Jamboard also allowed youth to see that their feedback and ideas were being recorded and recognized. Thus, they could leave the activity knowing that the facilitators had listened to them.

**HHH+S Model:** This activity engaged their hearts, by providing a space to share and listen to other groups' ideas. It also engaged the head by encouraging them to critically evaluate which themes/features were most important to them.

## Methods: Coding

Yankelovich (1991) argues that good polling of the public's opinion does not happen when you take aggregate data at face value.

Rather, you must test if your public (1) takes responsibility for those views, (2) is firm in their views, and (3) is consistent with their views.





adventure to play than a standard flat field and playscape. Thus, we developed eight key themes.

Key themes:

- Socializing
- Sports
- Adventurous Play
- Adaptability/Multipurpose Spaces
- Nature/Scenic areas
- Accessibility for all
- All-season use

## Reliability and Ranking

We tested the reliability of our key themes by creating a modal data set out of our Google Jamboard. We assigned each element to its appropriate theme based on the rationale that was given (as recorded in the facilitator notes).

For example, “chess tables” would go under “accessibility for all”, because youth wanted to include places for seniors to sit in the park. Some elements fit into more than one category; for example, the outdoor auditorium would be assigned to both “socializing” and “multipurpose spaces”. Once each element was accounted for, we tallied up the frequencies of each theme within each group. Finally, we also factored in how many groups emphasized a key theme to determine its true importance.

Most frequently occurring themes:

- Sports (12 features)
- Socializing, adaptability, and nature (10 features respectively)
- Accessibility (9 features)
- Aesthetics (7 features)
- Adventurous Play (6 features)
- All-season use (3 features)

## What We Heard

Several key themes emerged from the engagement workshop. These included a strong desire for social spaces like gazebos, multipurpose and imaginative play areas for activities, and a focus on inclusive design catering to all ages and users. The students also expressed a keen interest in dedicated sports areas, unique terrain features such as hills, and clearly defined spatial areas within the park. Integrating nature into the park’s design was a point of emphasis, with suggestions for unique tree species and elements fostering a connection to nature. Moreover, creative design and aesthetic appeal of the park was recognized as a significant factor, reflecting the influence of social media on today’s youth.

## By the Numbers...

Key recurring themes emerging from the workshop:

- **1** workshop
- **5** youth designs
- **16** participants

Big Move #1: Build a space that supports low-barrier socializing through informal seating and a shelter structure such as a gazebo.

- **100%** of participants wanted space to hang out with family and friends

Big Move #2: Create a sports field that accommodates a variety of sports activities and changes with the seasons.

- **80%** of youth designs made space for sports
- **2** designs changed with the seasons for year-round use

Big Move #3: Design a park that celebrates nature. Build intentional nature features that diversify the terrain and reflect the land's natural ecology.

- **3** groups wanted the park to feel connected to nature

Big Move #4: Invest in a community-led public art project to create a sense of place and community ownership within the park.

- **3** groups made their dream parks "Instagrammable"

## Guiding Principles

Upon analyzing the key themes that emerged in our inductive coding process, seven guiding design principles emerged. In this section, we will review those principles by order of importance and summarize the feedback that informed these choices.

### 1. Places to hang out with friends are important.

- Most students said that they are less likely to seek out parks when they are by themselves or with their friends. When they do, they are most often with their families.
- **Each group recommended spaces to eat, talk, and sit to attract youth who are already outside with their friends and looking for a space to hang out.**
  - Group 4 suggested that we build a gazebo with plenty of seating for park users to hang out, eat lunch, rest, and do homework in a communal setting.
- Seating should support face-to-face conversations.
- Some students pointed out that they do enjoy hanging out on playgrounds,

but that these spaces are often designed for younger children. Carving out spaces for young teenagers to play and hang out can improve their park experience.

- Students suggested an outdoor auditorium (drawn as an amphitheatre) can create seating as well as a focal point for community plays and events.

## **2. Areas in the park should be adaptable for many uses and seasons.**

- Most of the students mentioned open fields as a park feature they enjoy because they have many potential uses.
- Some students said they don't like to be told how to play. They preferred spaces that were distinct, but still allowed their independence and creativity by leaving room for imaginative play.
- **Students suggested the park include multipurpose spaces that can attract youth with diverse interests by supporting a range of park activities.**
- **Participants wanted the park to support year-round use through adaptable, multipurpose features, such as a rubber running track that would turn into skating trails in the winter.**

## **3. Make room for sports!**

- **4 out of 5 groups identified space for sports as a key element of their ideal park.**
- Students mentioned soccer, basketball, badminton, baseball, tennis, pickleball, and frisbee golf.
- **Students often separated the space for sports into a designated space within the parks they designed.**
- Some groups' designs featured adaptability for all-season use.
- For example, one group's design included a space that can transform from a soccer field to a skating rink in the winter
- Students mentioned exercise equipment could also promote outdoor fitness for a variety of users.

## **4. Parks are for families. They should work for youth and seniors.**

- Students said they were more likely to visit parks with their families than with their friends.
- **Students emphasized that the park should include features appealing to a wide range of ages and abilities.** When crafting their ideal park, some groups added features that seniors would enjoy, such as chess tables and lots of places to rest and relax. They also creates spaces for young children to play, and for parents to supervise and socialize.
- Students identified smooth pathways, washrooms, and drinking fountains as key features to support prolonged park use for members of all age groups.
- A recurring theme among the groups was ensuring that the park is inclusive and accessible, so that multiple generations of families can enjoy parking outings together.

## 5. Plants can foster well-being and a connection to nature.

- **4 out of 5 groups identified a connection to nature as a key feature in their park designs.**
- Students identified trees, flowers, and water features as central elements for fostering a sense of connection to nature and for supporting mental wellbeing and relaxation.
  - One group suggested incorporating signage about the park's ecology to encourage a deeper connection between park users and nature.
- Students wanted the park to have unique tree species that they do not often see in other parks, such as willow, redwood, and Sakura trees
- **Some students wanted space in the park where they can recreate the feeling of being in a forest; groups associated nature with a sense of calm and reflectiveness.**
- Students suggested adding a community garden.

## 6. Flat spaces are boring. Parks should have a unique and diverse terrain.

- 3 out of 5 groups expressed the desire for unique and adventurous terrain, typically in the form of a hill, boulders, and large rock formations.
- Students linked unique terrain with adventure and fun. Many of the students enjoy playing sensory games like grounders and hide & seek, which would be elevated by a diverse landscape.
- **Students suggested that landscaping for unique terrain creates visual interest and a sense of enclosure; students did not want the park to feel identical to other flat, open parks in the neighbourhood.**
- Landscaping to create an outdoor amphitheatre/auditorium was also proposed in 2 of the 5 groups.

## 7. Park areas should be "Instagrammable."

- 2 out of 5 groups designed their ideal parks to include "aesthetic" (aesthetically-pleasing) features to attract more youth to the park.
  - Examples of aesthetically pleasing park features include gazebos, lanterns, archways with lights, ponds, flower beds, and flowering trees.
- The prioritization of "Instagrammable" aesthetics reflect Generation Alpha's relationship with technology and how social networks have reformulated their relationship to space; spending time is most enjoyable in a setting with aesthetically pleasing design features.
- **One group envisioned a park with a community art project like a mural, where community members could participate in the park's beautification and feel a sense of ownership over the space.**

## Phase One Outcomes

We engaged 16 Grade Eight students at Dublin Heights Elementary and Middle School to understand this age group's aspirations for a new neighbourhood park.

Drawing on the students' group discussion feedback, jamboard responses, and artistic creations, the team worked together to develop the project's Vision Statement, Guiding Design Principles, and Big Moves.

## **Vision Statement**

Together, we are creating an inclusive and dynamic new park — one that embraces sports, nature, and imaginative play spaces, while weaving in spaces for people to socialize, relax, and connect with each other. The New Park at 160 McAllister Road will prioritize multipurpose spaces, aesthetic appeal, and accessibility for all ages. The park should be adaptable for the ever-changing community, ensuring that fun can be had for generations to come, all year round.

## **Guiding Principles**

1. Places to hang out with friends are important.
2. Areas in the park should be adaptable for many uses and seasons.
3. Make room for sports!
4. Parks are for families. They should work for youth and seniors.
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## **Big Moves**

- Build a space that supports low-barrier socializing through informal seating and a shelter structure such as a gazebo.
- Create a sports field that accommodates a variety of sports activities and changes with the seasons.
- Design a park that celebrates nature. Build intentional nature features that diversify the terrain and reflect the land's natural ecology.
- Invest in a community-led public art project to create a sense of place and community ownership within the park.

## **Implications**

### **Missing Stakeholders and Rights-Holders**

While we gathered rich and creative feedback from the students, it is important to highlight the limitations of our data. Due to time constraints, we only conducted one workshop, at one school with only one grade/age group. We also did not meaningfully consult with equity-deserving stakeholders or Indigenous Rights-holders. Thus, it is worth noting that the Vision Statement, Guiding Design Principles, and 'Big Moves' derived from this workshop should be considered with caution and in combination with the findings from the online Thought Exchange, as this report does not by itself represent the views of the entire community.

## **Community Art Project**

The students' request for a community art project in the park is feasible. The park's senior project coordinator has been negotiating with the neighbourhood councillor regarding the implementation of a community art piece in this park. The councillor is in the process of deciding whether public art funds should be invested in the new park at 160 McAllister road, or allocated to a different park nearby. The coordinator informed us that the students' request for a community art piece in this park provides the proof of concept necessary to support the allocation of the public art funds to the new park at 160 McAllister Road.

## **Next Steps**

### Communicating Back

This report includes a summary of the workshop feedback for adults and professionals.

### Community Engagement Phase 2

The City of Toronto is proceeding with plans to design a new park at 160 McAllister Road proceeding with Phase 2 of Community Engagement. This work will be guided by Phase One's community engagement in Fall-Winter 2023 , including the You[th] Tell Us! Workshop, an online thought exchange activity, and an in-person community pop-up event. Together, these engagement activities established the project's Guiding Design Principles, 'Big Moves' and a Vision Statement, with a focus on creating a sports- and nature-focused park, prioritizing multi-purpose, adaptable spaces, places to socialize, aesthetic appeal, and accessibility for all ages and abilities.

In Phase Two, the City will present the public with two to three design option based on the vision and guiding principles developed in Phase One. Activities that include an online survey, an on-site gallery wall, an in-person public workshop will support the selection of a preferred design.

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