

# Urban Indigenous Communities Engagement Summary Report

The Parkland Strategy and the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan  
Phase 1: Towards a Vision  
February 3, 2025

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# Executive Summary

The City of Toronto has 1500+ parks and hundreds of recreation facilities to provide communities with places to play, connect, celebrate, learn, grow, exercise, build community, access nature, and have fun. To ensure these intentions are met, the City has a Parkland Strategy and a Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan, which are 20-year plans that guide the growth of, and investment in, these spaces across the city. The Parkland Strategy fulfills the Ontario *Planning Act*'s requirement for a parks plan, enabling the municipality to apply the alternative requirement, under Section 42 of the *Planning Act*, to development and redevelopment that is eligible for parkland dedication.

The City has initiated a process to review these two plans, led by the Parks and Recreation Division (P&R), and has retained Ridge Road Training and Consulting Inc. (RRTC) to develop and deliver engagement opportunities specific to urban Indigenous communities. A priority for the City when developing, reviewing, and revamping these plans, is ensuring that Indigenous communities members' voices and perspectives are well represented in the present and future of Toronto's recreation facilities and parks.

Phase 1, engagement with urban Indigenous communities, included online surveys, an Indigenous Advisory Circle, park "tours" (i.e., Indigenous community members led P&R and RRTC staff through park spaces to highlight features to maintain and to add/change), and "pop-ups" (i.e., in-person information booths set up in Indigenous community spaces with P&R and RRTC staff available to speak directly with people).

Most Indigenous participants showed that they use the City's recreation facilities and parks at least a few times per month all throughout the year. Most participants expressed feeling generally safe when using the spaces and facilities, but still made suggestions for improving safety measures to enhance experiences and usability.

Overwhelmingly, participants were passionate about enhancing visual representation of Indigenous history and culture across all spaces. Participants vocalized the need for more Indigenous people to be hired for recreation facilities and parks, and expressed the urgent need for more spaces and policies supporting Indigenous cultural practices.

Another theme was that of recreation facilities and parks as spaces for education and reconciliation. This vision includes providing Indigenous peoples with access to cultural teachings, activities, languages, and ceremonies, while offering non-Indigenous peoples learning and engagement opportunities to foster understanding and bridge differences.

An overarching theme from across engagement sessions was the desire that recreation facilities and parks be (re)designed to repair and rebuild Indigenous relationships with

the Land. Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain ancestral relationships with Land, but this intergenerational relationship has been interrupted by colonization. There is a call for recreation facilities and parks to honour Indigenous knowledge, culture, and history at all levels of operations, to enhance the livability for all who call Toronto home.

# Introduction

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The City of Toronto has 1500+ parks and hundreds of recreation facilities that are intended to provide communities with places to play, connect, celebrate, learn, grow, exercise, build community, access nature, and have fun. To ensure these intentions are met as much as possible, the City has a Parkland Strategy and a Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan, which are 20-year plans that guide the growth of, and investment in, these spaces across the City. The Parkland Strategy fulfills the Ontario *Planning Act*'s requirement for a parks plan, enabling the municipality to apply the alternative requirement, under Section 42 of the *Planning Act*, to development and redevelopment that is eligible for parkland dedication. These documents are reviewed every five years to make sure they remain up to date and supportive of current resident needs and that they can be implemented based on changes to provincial legislation and today's financial realities.

A priority for the City of Toronto when developing, reviewing, and revamping these plans is to ensure that Indigenous communities members' voices and perspectives are well represented in the present and future of Toronto's recreation facilities and parks. To meet this priority as much as possible, the City's Parks & Recreation Division (P&R) hired Ridge Road Training & Consulting (RRTC)—a Haudenosaunee-owned research company—to support and collaborate with P&R in reaching out to urban Indigenous peoples and communities within the City of Toronto.

In the first of a 2-phase engagement process, P&R and RRTC developed and facilitated a variety of engagement opportunities for urban Indigenous communities to share what matters most to them and their community for recreation facilities and parks, both now and for the future. The engagements were in the form of online surveys, an Indigenous Advisory Circle, three park "tours" (i.e., Indigenous community members led P&R and RRTC representatives through park spaces to highlight features to maintain and to add/change), and five "pop-ups" in organizations serving Indigenous peoples (i.e., in-person information booths set up in Indigenous community spaces with P&R and RRTC representatives available to speak one-on-one with people).

This summary report presents an overview of how these Phase 1 engagement opportunities were facilitated and an overview of what we heard from the engagements (i.e., the comments and ideas shared by Indigenous contributors).

# How We Engaged

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The City of Toronto's Parks & Recreation Division and Ridge Road Training & Consulting collaborated to develop a range of ways for Indigenous peoples, communities, and organizations within the City of Toronto to share their voices in relation to the Parkland Strategy and Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan. The aim was to make the invitation to contribute as wide as possible and to offer options that would allow Indigenous peoples living and working with diverse schedules to participate in the community engagement process.

To develop a list of people and organizations to invite to participate in the engagement process, P&R first sent Ridge Road a contact list of Indigenous organizations generated from their networks, and then RRTC added missing organizations and contacts based on their own contact list.

A Senior Public Consultation Coordinator working with P&R sent the initial email communication about the public engagement process to the established contact list. The email provided an overview of the project, its intention and scope, and an invitation for the urban Indigenous recipients and their organizations to join any of the engagement opportunities (see Surveys, Indigenous Advisory Circle, Park Tours, and Pop-ups below). The email also offered recipients a 20-minute chat with the Indigenous Engagement team if they had questions or needed further details for considering opportunities for involvement.

Additionally, recognizing that organizations can have busy schedules and sometimes need reminders, P&R and RRTC sent out follow-up information emails to over 40 Toronto-based Indigenous organizations and 20 Indigenous educators/researchers at post-secondary institutions in Toronto, recapping the project and list of engagement options, and providing links to the surveys and IAC self-nomination form. RRTC also made telephone calls to almost 20 organizations that were slower to respond to ensure that the information had been received, and any questions could be addressed. The intent was that the organizations, institutions, and individuals who received the information email would share the information and link with their Indigenous networks.

To encourage as large an audience as possible for the survey and pop-up options, links and information for both were shared through Indigenous networks on social media by the Indigenous Engagement Team and the pop-up host organizations. Additionally, potential participants in any of the engagement options were encouraged to share the information with their own networks.

## Surveys

Two surveys were created for the public engagement process – one about parkland and one about recreation facilities. A short and long version of each survey was available, providing choice to reflect participants' time availability. Each survey concluded with a set of socio-demographic questions which are included in all City surveys for understanding community representation in responses.

To make them available, a link to the surveys was posted on October 18, 2024, on the City of Toronto website (on the project webpage) and through the City of Toronto and RRTC's social media platforms.

Just under 9,000 people (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) responded to the surveys either in part or completely. Within each survey, participants were given the option to identify themselves as Indigenous. There were 96 participants who identified as First Nations, Métis, and/or Inuit. Survey filters made Indigenous-specific questions available only to self-identified Indigenous participants. The surveys gathered responses on a range of topics, including their current use of recreation facilities and parks, their desired future use of these spaces, their sense of safety within recreation facilities and parks, and the reasons for it, and their suggestions for improving these spaces for Indigenous use and representation.

## Indigenous Advisory Circle

The Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC) consisted of 11 Indigenous members as of December 2024 – growing to 12 members in January 2025. It is comprised of individual Indigenous community members and Indigenous community members who also work with and represent Indigenous organizations in the City of Toronto. The purpose of the IAC is for members to meet with P&R and RRTC representatives and provide comments, opinions, and suggestions for what features should be maintained, changed, and/or added to the Parkland Strategy and Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan, so as to ensure Indigenous peoples and communities feel represented, safe, and connected in recreation spaces and parks. Honoraria is offered for attendance to each IAC meeting.

To become part of the IAC, urban Indigenous people were invited to self-nominate for membership. In addition to some demographic and contact information, the self-nomination included options to highlight any identifiers (e.g., First Nations, specific Nation, professional or community position) that would give them particular perspectives on parks and recreation systems and spaces; name any Indigenous organization(s) they represent; and, list why they were interested in contributing to the IAC. The



purpose of the self-nomination process was to help P&R and RRTC ensure a diverse range of community members were included. The 12 nominees all highlighted important experiences and perspectives to contribute to the mandate of the IAC, and each were offered a seat on the IAC.

At the time of this report, one IAC meeting had taken place in December 2024. There are three more to be held as part of the urban Indigenous community engagement process, for a total of four meetings. The IAC meeting was moderated by one RRTC representative, with another RRTC representative taking notes to record contributions from IAC members. P&R representatives participated by presenting information from the Parkland Strategy and Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan and answering any questions that IAC members had about the City's workings of the Strategy and Plan.

## Park tours

For park tours, Indigenous community members were invited to profile a City of Toronto park that was of relevance to them, and lead P&R and RRTC representatives through the space while highlighting features of the park they would like to see to maintained and/or they would like to see added/changed.

In Phase 1, P&R and RRTC representatives participated in three tours with Indigenous community members, taking detailed notes during and after the tour to capture contributions of the Indigenous participants. The locations included High Park, Masaryk Park (Parkdale), and Regent Park. Honoraria was offered at each park tour.

## Pop-ups

Pop-ups were 1- to 3-hour sessions with information booths set up at various organizations serving urban Indigenous peoples around the city. Display boards with project information and engagement questions were placed on easels and P&R and RRTC representatives were available to speak one-on-one with people. Upon learning about the pop-up option, an Indigenous organization could invite P&R and RRTC to host one of the information booths at the organization's location (e.g., in the lobby of the organization's office). These sites served as an opportunity to connect with urban Indigenous community, or staff and volunteers who served the Indigenous community. During Phase 1, five pop-ups were held over three months (November 2024 – January 2025). Participating organizations were Centennial College, Toronto Birth Centre, 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, Native Child and Family Services, and Niiwin Wendaanimak (Four Winds) – Indigenous Health and Wellness Program. At the time of writing this report, approximately 80 people were reached through the pop-up sessions. Honoraria was offered to each participant at the pop-up, as well as food for participants.

P&R and RRTC representatives were present to explain to participants the Parkland Strategy and Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan, answer questions, and highlight the effort being made to engage Indigenous voices as part of the review process.

Participants were encouraged to contribute by writing their responses on post-it paper to four prompt questions and then post their responses on a collective board (see Image 1 below). Alternatively, participants could chat one-on-one with representatives to dive deeper into discussion and specifics.

The four engagement prompt questions were:

- 1) *What is your favourite recreation facility or park, and why?*
- 2) *What's your vision for Indigenous communities using and interacting with recreation facilities and parks in Toronto?*
- 3) *Are there existing recreation spaces or parks in the city that serve your Indigenous communities' needs well, and if so, how? Are there other locations where you would like to see something similar added?*
- 4) *Are there changes to existing or proposed recreation facilities or parks that you would like to see?*

## What We Heard

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Upon reviewing the participant contributions (i.e., survey responses, pop-up conversations and notes, park tour comments and notes, and IAC discussions), several themes and categories emerged. Participants' responses and contributions addressed issues of feelings of safety, how often and time of year they used parks and recreation facilities, the desire for Indigenous visual representation, the support of Indigenous cultural practices, education in and through the parks and recreation facilities, and the hope for repairing and rebuilding relationships with the Land. Throughout the participant contributions, whether they were positive or critical, the overarching message can be summed up by one participant's vision for Toronto's parks and recreation facilities:

*"A place where all are welcome to learn and experience our Indigenous culture in a safe and welcoming manner."*

The summary of What We Heard from the engagement opportunities will begin with participants' feelings of safety when using the City's recreation facilities and parks.

## Feelings of safety

Approximately 85% of Indigenous survey respondents felt that the City of Toronto's community recreation facilities are generally safe, welcoming, and inclusive. Figure 1 below shows the breakdown of responses when asked about these traits.

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I feel that City of Toronto community recreation facilities are safe, welcoming and inclusive.**

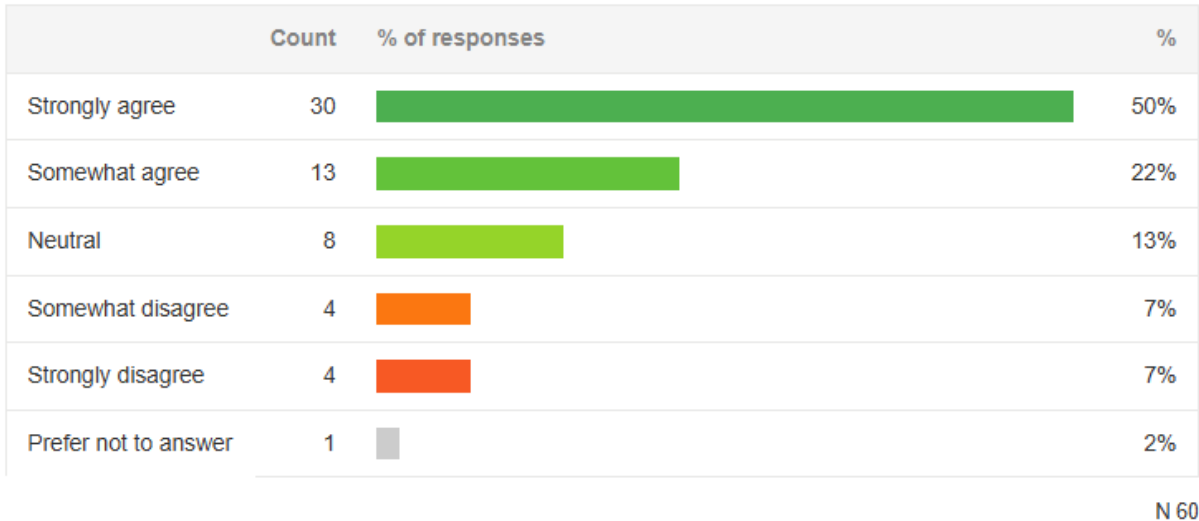


Figure 1

When asked if they had any suggestions for making the recreation facilities more safe, welcoming, and inclusive, the majority of comments were about desired changes to be made. However, some participants made a point of commenting that no changes are needed. For example, some stated that recreation facilities are

*“already very safe, welcoming and inclusive”* and another commented, *“they are all inclusive at this point.”*

These types of comments suggest that the City’s recreation facilities are already in a good state for at least some Indigenous peoples.

While the 14% of participants who indicated that they do not feel safe, included, or welcomed in the City’s recreation facilities and parks are in the minority, their voices and experiences are still important and are given strong attention, as they bring up important issues.

Some comments representing the feelings of those who do not feel safe, welcome, or included are:

*“[Parks] are tailored for white families only. Indigenous families are often harassed without consequence. Indigenous representation is next to zero.”*

*“‘park’ = colonial, gate-kept land. People who live nearby thinking it’s ‘our’ park and othering unhoused people and others in a park”*

and another participant stated the recreation facilities and parks are

*“on Indigenous land but make Indigenous community members feel unwelcome and kicked out of open spaces.”*

Participants also shared concerns around safety due to the presence of drug and alcohol use in the park spaces, limited lighting at night, experiences of sexist and racist interactions, and limited staff for monitoring the spaces and providing support when needed.

These views and issues with feeling safe, welcome, and included expressed by Indigenous participants do come from their Indigenous perspectives, but a frequent sentiment seen and heard in the participant contributions is that addressing these issues will be good for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

## Safety in language

RRTC and some participants noted that the language of "inclusivity" inaccurately represents the purpose of Indigenous engagement. The concepts of *inclusion* and *inclusivity* originate from colonial structures, where asking how Indigenous peoples can be better "included" in P&R policies and initiatives is incongruent with ethical Indigenous engagement. Such framing assumes Indigenous peoples must integrate into existing systems rather than challenging or transforming those systems to reflect Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and governing. This perspective reinforces the idea that Indigenous peoples must "fit in" to colonial structures rather than asserting their sovereignty and self-determination. It also treats settler institutions as the default, positioning Indigenous participation as an "add-on" rather than recognizing Indigenous governance, laws, and traditions as equally valid. Since recreation facilities and park spaces exist on traditional Indigenous territories, any attempt by non-Indigenous entities (such as the City of Toronto) to "welcome" or "include" Indigenous peoples continues a colonial mindset that places non-Indigenous institutions in control of shaping Indigenous land.

In reference to the idea of Indigenous needs in recreation facilities and parks, one participant stated, *“I think ‘needs’ is a word that suggests we are somehow differently abled,”* and another participant insisted, *“Stop making us different. Making us out to be different and trying so hard to accommodate us makes everyone think we are different.”*

Neither of these statements suggest that the voices of Indigenous peoples and communities are unimportant in the work of transforming recreation facilities and park spaces. Rather, they suggest that Indigenous representations, knowledges, and practices need to be normalized such that they are just part of the way things are done, and not special 'add-ons' to the colonial foundation. It becomes difficult for anyone to

feel safe, welcome, and included—to feel that they simply belong—if they feel that the language used around and about them is highlighting as something out of the ordinary.

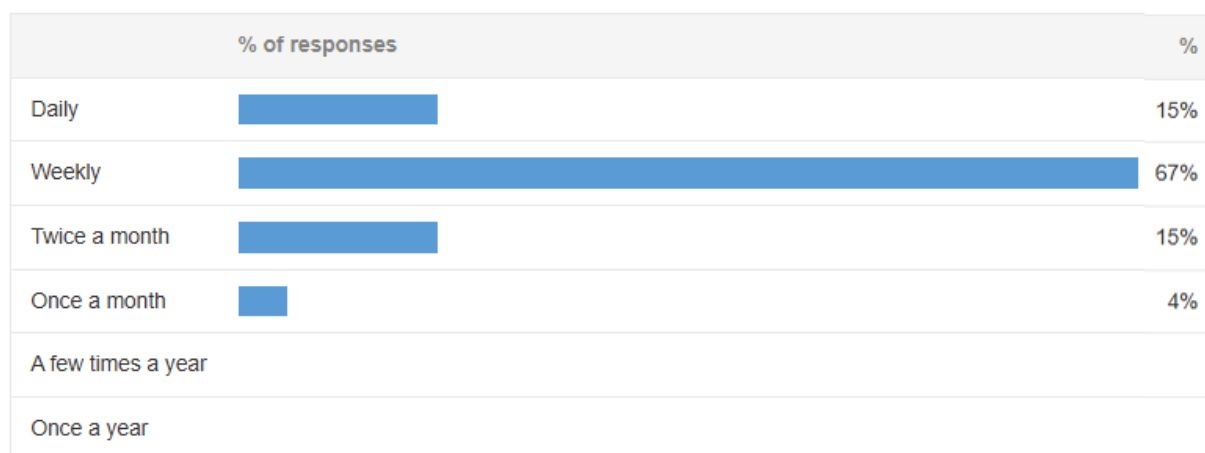
The recommended response for changing such language is to make a shift away from Indigenous needs as something different from the norm that needs to be accommodated and toward understanding of Indigenous needs and visions as being grounded in a framework of sovereignty. This means that the City must meet Indigenous peoples on their own terms, prioritizing Indigenous perspectives from the outset. Rather than Indigenous peoples adapting to City policies, the City should adapt its practices to align with Indigenous needs. Framing conversations and engagement sessions from a vision of *treaty responsibilities* is essential to ethical engagement. P&R already embodies this practice in their Indigenous engagement approach, and therefore updating the language would be more reflective of their intentions and visions for the future.

Through the various engagements with Indigenous participants, representatives from the City of Toronto's P&R Division and RRTC recognized that, regardless of whether participants felt safe, welcome, and included, most had ideas and desires for improving recreation facilities and parks to better represent and connect with Indigenous peoples and communities.

## Frequency of use

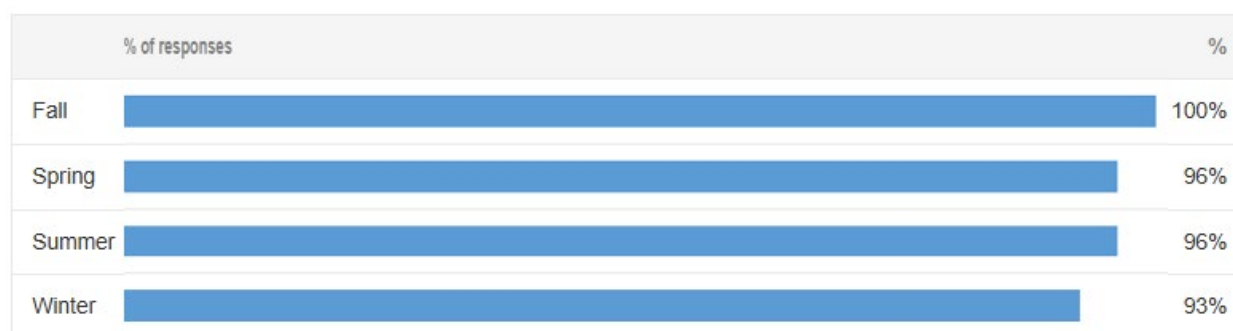
Ensuring that Indigenous peoples and communities feel represented and connected to park spaces and recreation facilities is not merely a symbolic act of decolonization. It is essential because Indigenous peoples actively use these spaces and facilities in their daily lives. As Figure 2 below shows, when asked about the frequency with which they use community recreation centres, 82% of respondents said they use the centres on a weekly basis at a minimum (67% weekly and 15% daily). Additionally, as Figure 3 shows, nearly all respondents use community recreation centres at all times of the year.

**On average, how frequently do you or members of your household use City of Toronto community recreation centres?**



*Figure 2*

**During which season(s) do you or members of your household use City of Toronto community recreation centres? Select all that apply.**



*Figure 3*

These response rates suggest that urban Indigenous peoples living in Toronto value having access to spaces and facilities for a range of uses. Moreover, Indigenous peoples are actively present in recreational spaces and parks. As we will see below, many Indigenous participants want the places and spaces that they value to also reflect and respect who they are as community members.

## Making parks and recreation spaces safer for everyone

Many participants provided suggestions for enhancing safety, particularly for populations at higher risk of unsafe situations, such as women and 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals.

Participants suggested a need for more consistent lighting, safety call buttons, fully stocked and up-to-date First Aid/AED kits, and improved structure and positioning of staff posts so staff can better see who is entering and using the spaces and facilities. Additionally, multiple participants brought up the idea that “*if a park needs ‘security’, use Indigenous-led Bear Patrol.*” The Bear Clan Patrol was started in Winnipeg in 1992, and the organization is made up of Indigenous peoples working to take on what they believe to be their traditional responsibility of providing security for Indigenous peoples and communities in non-threatening, non-violent, and supportive ways. One participant added a suggestion that a Bear Clan Patrol could work well with a 2-Spirit crisis response group.

These measures unfortunately cannot guarantee safety from harassment and/or assault, but they can act as deterrents (e.g., perpetrators less likely to act if they can be easily seen and identified under consistent lighting and/or by Bear Clan Patrol members). Additionally, there would be more immediate response options so that perpetrators can be more quickly apprehended and those who have been harmed can more quickly receive support. With Indigenous women and girls 3.5 times more likely than other women and girls to face experiences of harassment and/or assault (Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2004), increasing safety in recreation facilities and parks is crucial for Indigenous communities.

Participants expressed the desire for more fencing around playgrounds, to keep children safe from cars, cyclists, scooters, and especially dogs. One participant also shared that having fencing around playgrounds and splash pads makes her feel safer, as it helps create a clear boundary between those who are actively supervising children and others who may be present in the space. In her words, she said: “*I know if you are there with a child or not, if there is fencing around the [playground].*” She expressed concerns about individuals without children lingering near play areas and felt that fencing provides a sense of security by ensuring that those within the space are there for appropriate reasons.

One issue that elicited a wide range of responses but was frequently mentioned by participants was the presence of encampments of unhoused people in parks. This topic was particularly sensitive for the Indigenous community, as some participants had experienced housing instability or homelessness themselves, had loved ones who had, or wished to acknowledge the significant presence of Indigenous people in tent encampments within Toronto parks.



One participant honoured that living on the land, in a tent, is a very traditional way of life for many Indigenous people,

**“My mother was born in a tent, as her family lived on the land. This isn’t an ancient or dated practice.”**

Some participants expressed that folks living in park encampments are people with challenges but that does not make them bad people, and there should be *“less encampment raids, stop making houseless people feel less than.”* Another expressed that the City needs to *“clear out encampments and stop public drug use.”* Yet another perspective called for a *“balanced approach to encampments, not clearing them, but not allowing them to get out of control, not near playground.”* Lastly, some participants expressed the need for greater services and support for encampments, suggesting that the City should set up safe injection sites near parks so people using drugs are not overdosing and/or leaving needles and drug material in parks where children can be playing. Improved facilities for unhoused community was also expressed, including increasing access to drinking water, bathrooms, and even showering facilities.

## Suggestions for services and features

Participants' suggestions for services and features in the City's recreation facilities and parks consistently emphasized the need for Indigenous representation and opportunities to connect with the Land, ceremony, and traditional knowledge. While some participants viewed parks as colonial spaces that conflict with Indigenous relationships to the Land, many framed their suggestions within—rather than in opposition to—the realities of municipal, provincial, and federal control over traditional territories. There was enthusiasm for utilizing the existing structures that exist to enhance access to ancestral cultural knowledge, including the incorporation of technologies, such as using smartphones and QR codes to share traditional knowledge.

### Visual representation

The concept of visual representation was presented by participants with a variety of understandings around how such representation should occur.

### Art and sculptures

Across all forms of community engagement, one suggestion that continuously came up was to add Indigenous forms of art throughout recreation facilities and parks. More specifically, participants called for using “traditional art, sculptures, and murals” to make Indigenous cultures visible to community members and to support Indigenous artists.

Forms of art such as framed paintings could be on display inside recreation centres, while painted murals could be on walls both in and outside of facilities. Sculptures could be inside buildings but would more likely be positioned outside in the open spaces of parks.

## Staffing

Visual representation was also described by participants as the presence of Indigenous peoples within the Parks & Recreation field staff (i.e., staff in recreation facilities and park spaces).

**“The biggest thing would be to hire Indigenous people so we are visible”**

Representation through hiring Indigenous staff would be much more than just being seen as an Indigenous person. The visible presence of Indigenous staff would be indicative of relationship-building; of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives being part of the administration, development, and maintenance of parks and recreation facilities; and of better possibilities for Indigenous cultural practices to be learned, understood, and respected within parks and recreation spaces.

## Indigenous Community Centre

Many conversations cumulated in the need for Indigenous community spaces, such as a Community or Recreation Centre.

The vision for this space would be an Indigenous-designed building, which should include spaces for Indigenous people to host community-building events. It should include a kitchen and eating areas. Dance and studio spaces are essential to host a wide range of movement-related activities. Participants stressed that Indigenous-centered spaces should have spaces for childminding, including an indoor playground and toy-lending library. One First Nations youth mentioned that she would love a *“twirly slide and a ball pit”*, and a place to have a birthday party with her family.

Creating sites that nurture a sense of connection to the natural world was repeatedly mentioned. Design features that profile natural lighting through windows and skylights were mentioned, as well as having several access points to outdoor areas. The space should be designed as welcoming as possible, with furniture arranged in ways that are conducive to community-building. In a visit to one pop-up location, a participant mentioned the Indigenous-designed spaces at Centennial College that use circular furniture and architecture to invite conversation and community. First Nations teachings are also incorporated into the design of these spaces (see Figure 4 and Figure 5),

through the Basket Room, smudging ventilation options (a “smudge button” on the wall), an Elder gathering room, and indoor wood burning fire option for sacred fires.

Scarborough was repeatedly mentioned as an underserved area for Indigenous peoples, where there is a large Indigenous population without access to many Indigenous spaces, services, or programming. Many participants expressed the issues with commuting in from the east-end to downtown to access Indigenous programming and services, where downtown also poses issues with parking.

Some participants mentioned there should not be “one” Indigenous community space but rather several locations throughout the city.

## **Cultural practices**

One of the most repeated points from Indigenous participants was the importance and need for space for Indigenous cultural practices within recreation facilities and parks. In every iteration of community engagement, participants called for the City to take steps so that Indigenous communities can have sanctioned fires – including but not limited to sacred fires – in park locations. Additionally, participants want to see recreation facilities accommodate smudging widely and freely.

Participants shared that in their experiences, smudging was rarely accommodated. Instead, the dialogue was that smudging was inconvenient, framed as a fire hazard instead of a sacred ceremony, and was met with ignorance/fear from City staff.

Participants expressed that cultural and land-based practices should be offered through recreation programming, with a particular call for Indigenous language classes, storytelling, hide-tanning, pow wow bootcamp, moccasin making, cradleboard making, and gardening practices such as sacred medicines. These recreational programming activities should also be easier to find on the P&R website, with a designated “Indigenous programming” section. Reduced or waived fees for Indigenous peoples should be considered, as access to this knowledge is a result of colonization and occupation on Indigenous land.

## **Ceremonial sites**

There was an overwhelming call for more pow-wow spaces, particularly a space that was accessible for wheelchairs, could accommodate food/craft vendors, and had an indoor or sheltered space for dancers to get ready or could be used for inclement weather. The presence of cultural practices acts both as visual representations, normalizing Indigenous cultures within City spaces, and as a way of educating all peoples, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Indigenous participants also expressed a particular need for greater access to spaces for rites-of-passage ceremonies. This included outdoor birthing spaces, walking out ceremonies, placenta burying ceremonies, berry fasts, and celebration of life ceremonies. Specific to identifying ceremonial sites was finding places that would not attract tourists. One participant mentioned that although the new Teaching Lodge in Nathan Philips Square was in a prominent location, it would not be appropriate to have a sweat there because coming out of a sweat ceremony into a sea of onlooking tourists was not conducive to the ceremony.

## **Education**

At the heart of reconciliation and decolonization is the need for education—about, by, and for Indigenous peoples. As such, if recreation facilities and parks are to be spaces for reconciliation, it makes sense that suggestions from Indigenous participants included great focus on the potential for educational opportunities.

### **Education for staff**

Indigenous participants want to see existing non-Indigenous staff receiving training and education on Indigenous histories, cultural practices, and anti-racism more broadly. The effort to create spaces where Indigenous peoples feel connected and respected should be active, not passive. This means that all those who monitor and maintain the parks and recreation facilities should be able to knowledgeably engage with Indigenous community members, especially if they are to respect and support Indigenous cultural practices.

### **Signage**

For both staff and the community members using the park spaces and recreation facilities, participants suggested that there should be signage for Indigenous representation and public education. There could be signs written in Indigenous languages. The selected language could be decided through consultation with treaty/traditional land keepers of the area, as well as with Indigenous community members in the areas of the park/facility. The signs could convey recognition of cultural spaces, history about Treaties, significance of a location, origin stories, place names, and they could be used for labels of everyday spaces such as bathrooms, changerooms, playgrounds, etc. Indigenous language is the heartbeat of Indigenous identity, and therefore such signage is an important commitment to creating spaces that reflect Indigeneity and support language revitalization.

### **Educational programming**

Several participants suggested that City recreation facilities and parks should be spaces that support programs for Indigenous-led education for cultural activities (included

above) in addition to educational programming such as history about the Treaties, the significance of a park location, and origin stories. They suggested that such education should be culture-specific (i.e., recognition of knowledge-sharing being done by members of a particular community/nation), and with programs for all age ranges.

## **Linking technology and Indigenous education**

Indigenous participants provided suggestions that show the potential for education about the natural world and Indigenous teachings using recent technology. One participant described on their pop-up post-it,

*“More signage in parks with Indigenous teachings, information about trees, nature, etc. Can use QR codes”*

The hope is that the City could work with Indigenous peoples and communities to design the content that all people can learn when they scan the QR codes, thereby ensuring that the education being provided properly represents Indigenous knowledges and relationships with the land in that space. Other suggestions include offering QR codes to provide information about invasive species and how to safely remove them (e.g., inviting all into decolonizing the space through the removal of harmful/invasive species). Another suggestion was to use QR codes to share information on traditional medicines found in the area, and what to expect if you see an Indigenous person harvesting this (e.g., do not harass them).

The information and teachings of the space are not isolated from the rest of the City and even beyond that. The parks, recreation facilities, and the Land on which they are situated are connected to other spaces, histories, and information (e.g., parks are within neighbourhoods that have histories, and they are part of the histories of the wider City, and those histories are connected to histories of Indigenous nations and colonization). The potential for education is never-ending. As such, participants also suggested designing

*“QR codes that can link to resources and to education for non-Indigenous – Calls to Action [i.e., decolonization] and more.”*

Reconciliation and decolonization should happen within people's immediate contexts while also connecting to broader efforts across Turtle Island. Some individuals need education on what actions are needed, as well as where and how to ensure their impact is sustained over time.

## **The space itself as a source of education**

Connected to the idea of learning about the natural elements of the parks and recreation spaces, participants stated that park spaces should have opportunity to be

educational in their design, regardless of whether there is a scheduled cultural program taking place or not. For example, one participant said,

**“I want to be able to take my grandchildren to a place that has teaching opportunities. A garden, art, a body of water: all can be the base of teaching. The land is our teacher, so what better place than parks to become reacquainted with our culture?”**

The Indigenous participants placed emphasis on education, but they recognize that educational programming cannot be available all day every day. However, they see that education is constant through the fact that people are always engaging with the Land, whether they know it or not.

## **Repairing and rebuilding relationships with the Land**

Throughout the majority of responses from participants, suggestions for features of recreation facilities and parks were rooted to Indigenous peoples' relationships with the Land. Indigeneity is Land – who Indigenous people are is directly tied to their ancestral land. Colonization inflicted the direct erasure of Indigenous peoples from their land, severing ties to ancestral relationships with place, and interrupting the transmission of intergenerational knowledge. Developing culturally-appropriate and culturally-safe parks and recreation facilities provide opportunities for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples to repair and rebuild those relationships with kin, land, ancestors, and themselves.

Participants expressed the need for greater signage in parks and recreation facilities that offer land acknowledgements, showing all community members which Indigenous nation(s) are the traditional keepers of the Land in which the park or recreation facility is situated. However, many participants emphasized Indigenous knowledges, values, and cultures within the very fabric of the park and recreation spaces, rather than only surface-level imagery, and suggested much more than just the signage.

Many participants expressed the direct link between Indigenous identity and water. Participants underscored that water is sacred. Some participants suggested that water fixtures and fountains should be better featured in parks, both drinking water for consumption as well as an aesthetic feature. Many participants stated that more trees and plants should be planted, with a focus on native species planting and pollinators. Repairing the relationship with the Land is not only about seeing more plant life. Planting native trees and plants helps to restore the ecosystem—the natural web of relationships between all beings. With native trees and plants, native animals can then more easily access natural sources of food and shelter and play their part in the ecosystem. Indigenous participants expressed that seeing this restoration of the Land

would become “therapeutic” as they can rebuild their connections with and be part of the relationship between all beings.

Rooftop planting was offered as a preferred alternative, to create greenspace when there is none. Rooftop gardens and beekeeping were suggested.

Indigenous peoples’ relationships with the Land are active, engaging with the Land, not merely existing upon it. A great number of responses presented the idea of parks having “*medicine gardens people can harvest.*” Medicine gardens include both sacred medicines (including tobacco, cedar, sage, and sweetgrass) as well as other medicines including sunflowers, bergamot, echinacea, yarrow, which help contribute to maintaining mental, physical, and spiritual health. These gardens are places of teaching, learning, and culture, all connected to the Land. Participants suggested “*working with the elders regarding city gardens and incorporating the Anishinaabe 7 Sacred Teachings within the community centres*” and hiring “*Indigenous groups for native plantings and gardening.*” To repair and rebuild relationships with the Land means having opportunities to engage with and be part of the Land.

## **Sister spaces**

For many of the Indigenous organizations, there was a call for greater ease for them to access parks and greenspaces. Many Indigenous organizations have a need to access parklands for their programming and ceremonial offerings. There was a suggestion for Indigenous organizations to have a designated “sister” park, where they could have priority bookings, waived fees, and ease of booking procedures.

There was acknowledgement that the [Indigenous Affairs Office](#) can help with the booking process, but the contact person is not widely known. Their contact information should be prominently placed at multiple stages in the booking process so that everyone who needs it has access to this practice.

## **Accessibility**

While the City’s recreation facilities and parks do have great potential to benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members, one issue that the Indigenous participants raised was that of accessibility. The broad issue of accessibility was addressed in relation to physical and financial access.

### **Physical**

Physical accessibility to recreation facilities and parks is not unique to Indigenous participants, but it is, nonetheless, important for Indigenous peoples wanting to use the spaces. The hope is for all people to be able to access and use these spaces. Participants highlighted that they want to see that City parks and recreation centres are

designed so people using mobility aids (e.g., wheelchair, walker) can enter and use the facilities. They also suggested that there be more places for sitting and resting, particularly for elderly community members. The consideration for elderly community members becomes Indigenous-specific when considering that Indigenous Elders are often the ones leading Ceremony, so if there are to be more opportunities for Ceremony, Elders need to be able to access and find comfort and rest in the spaces and facilities.

For parents using children's outdoor spaces and playgrounds, sand was not favoured. It is not seen as accommodating for strollers or mobility aids and is hard to keep sanitary. Some parents expressed finding band aids and even drug paraphernalia in the sandboxes.

## **Financial**

Participants offered reminders that there is also the issue of financial accessibility. As one participant insisted, "*Make programs less cost-prohibitive for the community.*" No matter how many programs are scheduled in a park or recreation facility, people cannot benefit and build community if the programs are unaffordable for community members. In the various forms of community engagement, multiple Indigenous participants pointed to different locations and activities that they know to be free for Indigenous peoples (e.g., multiple kayak rental locations subsidised through various programs), and they suggested that this practice be used more widely.

In many ways, what Indigenous participants want to see and feel in recreation facilities and parks is what almost any community member—Indigenous or not—would want: safety, accessibility, and space to bring community together. The more Indigenous-focused suggestions—visible representation, support for cultural practices, education, rebuilding relationships with the Land—are specifically Indigenous because of the history behind the suggestions and participants' visions, but all of these ideas have potential to be beneficial for all community members. Many of the Indigenous participants recognize this and want recreation facilities and parks they can connect with but that all people can engage with and appreciate.



# Acknowledgements

The work being done to update, adapt, and improve the City of Toronto's Parkland Strategy and Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan requires the contributions from several teams, each made up of several people. It is important to acknowledge them here and show the range of collaborations being done to bring about park spaces and recreation facilities that represent and respect the community members who use them, the traditional keepers of the Land, and the Land on which they are situated.

## City of Toronto

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# Indigenous Advisory Circle

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We extend our most heartfelt nya:wen'kowa and chii miigwetch to our Indigenous Advisory Circle and look forward to continuing this discussion with you.

## Community Members

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We appreciate all the community members who participated in the urban Indigenous community engagement process for the City of Toronto's Parkland Strategy and Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan. Your questions, insights, and feedback have been invaluable in refining our materials and enhancing the overall experience for all community members.

**To learn more about the project, visit**

[www.toronto.ca/ParksandFacilitiesPlans](http://www.toronto.ca/ParksandFacilitiesPlans)