

Equity Deserving Advisory Group Meeting #1 Summary Report

Informing the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan (PRFP) and Parkland Strategy (PLS)

Meeting Date: January 23, 2025



Introduction

The City of Toronto acknowledges and appreciates the contributions of stakeholders, Rights Holders, and community members who participated in the first meeting of the Equity-Deserving Advisory Group (EDAG). This engagement reflects the City's commitment to meaningful collaboration in shaping the review of the *Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan (PRFP)* and the *Parkland Strategy (PLS)*.

The meeting brought together representatives from organizations serving racialized communities, Black communities, women, girls, gender-diverse people, children and youth, seniors, people with disabilities, LGBTQ2S+ communities, newcomers, and low-income residents. Their insights and lived experiences are essential in identifying and addressing barriers to equitable access in Toronto's parks and recreation facilities.

The insights gathered will directly inform the ongoing review of these plans, ensuring that future investments reflect the needs of equity-deserving communities. The City of Toronto looks forward to continued collaboration in future engagements

Meeting Details

Date: January 23, 2025

Time: 1:00PM-3:00PM

Location: Virtual

City of Toronto Attendance

Parks and Recreation Division-Strategic Project Implementation and Community Engagement Branch

Annely Zonena - Director

Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan Unit

Matt Bentley - Sr. Project Manager

Alex Lavasidis - Project Officer

Vanessa Cipriani - Planner

Parkland Strategy Unit

Danielle DeMarsh - Sr. Project Manager

Toni Papa - Planner

Erica Beasley - Planner

Community Engagement Unit

Patricia Lucreziano – Sr. Public Consultation Coordinator

Consulting Teams

Monteith Brown Planning Consultants, Technical Consulting Team

Ridge Road Training and Consulting, Indigenous Communities Engagement Leads

EDAG Members Attendance

- **The 519**, Curran Stikuts
- **North York Community House**, Cutty Duncan
- **Lived Experience Advisory Group**, Erim Yalcin
- **ParaSport Ontario**, James Murphy
- **YMCA Greater Toronto**, Janie Romoff
- **For Youth Initiative**, Jasmine Indradarshini
- **Toronto Accessible Sport Council**, Jonathan Wood
- **Variety Village**, Katie Watkins
- **PR Disability Steering Committee**, Keith Rashid
- **Toronto Youth Cabinet**, Melanie Yu
- **Social Planning Toronto**, Melissa Wong
- **Harriet Tubman Community Organization**, Priscilla Hinnewaah
- **YWCA**, Rachael Lawrence
- **Hijabi Ballers**, Rishada Majeed
- **Park People**, Sarah Munro
- **The Neighbourhood Link**, Shahanara Khandaker
- **8 80 Cities**, Shannon Lawrence
- **Out Sports Toronto**, Shawn Sheridan
- **United Way Greater Toronto**, Sidhra Yakub
- **Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital**, Timothy Ross

Meeting Summary

Note: Although not all items discussed during the meeting fall within the scope of the Parks & Recreation Facilities Plan, or the Parkland Strategy, all discussion has been captured and will be shared with the relevant teams within P&R.

What factors shape equitable or inequitable access to recreation spaces?

Participants shared that many communities face challenges such as limited free programming, inaccessible registration systems, and uneven distribution of facilities. Barriers include language accessibility, gender-inclusive spaces, and lack of mobility-friendly infrastructure. Safety concerns, particularly around by-law enforcement in public spaces, were also raised.

Accessible Parking:

- There is insufficient accessible parking in recreation facilities and parks.
 - The City of Toronto is meeting the minimum requirements but not exceeding them to meet actual demand.
 - This limits access for people with mobility challenges or those who require parking near facilities.

Program Registration:

- **Speed and Complexity:** Registration for programs fills up quickly, and the system is not user-friendly for many groups.
- **Language Barriers:** Programs and registration systems are not accessible in multiple languages (e.g., Bengali), making it difficult for newcomers to participate.
- **Technology Barriers:** Many newcomers, particularly women, face challenges navigating online registration systems.
- **Limited Availability:** The restricted number of spots in registered programs often excludes people who would benefit.
- **First-Come-First-Served Systems:** These systems create inequities, particularly for equity-deserving communities like the 2SLGBTQ+ population.

Free and Drop-In Programs:

- A lack of free programming limits access for individuals from low-income households.
- Many community centres primarily host registered or private programs, which create an environment where certain groups feel unwelcome.
- Barriers exist even in accessing “free” programming, such as the Welcome Program, which is not well-publicized or easy to navigate.

Distribution of Facilities and Programs:

- Recreation facilities and programs are not distributed equitably across the city. For example, some sports, like gymnastics, are unavailable in Scarborough, highlighting gaps in accessibility.
- Communities often lack walking-distance access to recreation centres. This is a greater issue in suburban areas where public transit is less reliable.
- Unequal distribution of resources has led to wealthier neighborhoods having better-maintained parks and facilities, leaving other communities underserved.

Gender-Sensitive and Inclusive Spaces:

- Gender-neutral bathrooms and change rooms are lacking, making it difficult for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals to feel safe and comfortable in facilities.
- More programming and spaces designed for women are needed, particularly for culturally sensitive and newcomer women who may not feel comfortable in mixed-gender spaces.

Park Accessibility and Amenities:

- Lack of accessible pedestrian pathways prevents people with mobility devices from enjoying parks fully, including beaches and lakefront areas.
- Many parks lack shade, weather-protected structures, seating, and culturally relevant social spaces (e.g., for sharing food or music).
- There is a perception that parks downtown have fewer amenities compared to suburban parks, particularly when it comes to benches and spaces to sit.

Social and Cultural Barriers:

- Parks and recreation spaces are sometimes policed or monitored in ways that make equity-deserving communities feel unwelcome.
- Community members noted fear of penalties or confrontations with bylaw officers, especially among newcomers and marginalized groups.

What should the City of Toronto prioritize to make recreation spaces more inclusive?

Attendees emphasized the need for more drop-in and free programs, culturally relevant activities, and gender-neutral facilities.

They called for clearer communication about available services, better park maintenance, and improved access to public spaces year-round, including during winter months.

Infrastructure and Facility Improvements:

- Renovations to existing recreation facilities and parks should focus on making them well-maintained and welcoming. Poor maintenance discourages use and creates a perception of neglect.
- Ensure pathways, playgrounds, and green spaces are fully accessible. Smooth surfaces, elimination of ledges and gaps, and broader pathways should be prioritized.
- Add more benches and shade structures, ensuring usability for all demographics, including seniors.

Gender-Inclusive Design:

- Include gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms in all future facility renovations and new builds.
- Add private or all-women spaces to accommodate cultural and gender-specific needs.

Programming Enhancements:

- Expand drop-in programs to reduce reliance on registration systems.
- Offer more free or low-cost programming to reduce financial barriers.
- Adjust program schedules to accommodate caregivers and individuals with non-traditional work hours.
- Develop culturally appropriate programs that reflect the interests and needs of local communities.

Climate and Environmental Resilience:

- Redesign parks and green spaces to address climate change.
- Add resilient landscaping, improve drainage, and ensure greenery can thrive under warming conditions.
- Include covered and sheltered spaces to protect users from inclement weather.

Staff Training and Increased Staffing:

- Increase the number of staff at recreation facilities and parks to ensure adequate support for programming and maintenance.
- Train staff in cultural sensitivity, anti-oppression practices, and 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity to foster welcoming environments.

Community Engagement:

- Local community involvement in governance and planning is essential to ensure that recreation facilities reflect community needs.
- Transparency in participatory budgeting processes will build trust and accountability.

Quick Wins:

- Improve accessibility at beaches and pools immediately by adding ramps and hoists for people with mobility issues.

How can community hubs improve accessibility?

Participants supported co-locating services such as libraries, childcare centers, and mental health resources within recreation facilities. They highlighted the need for clear governance to ensure equitable access and avoid conflicts between service providers.

What services should be in community hubs?

Participants suggested libraries, childcare, mental health support, after-school programs, and community kitchens to make services easier to access.

- Libraries, childcare centres, EarlyON programs, and schools.
- After-school programs and community kitchens to support diverse community needs.
- Spaces for multi-service frontline organizations that provide integrated social, mental health, and recreational support.

What should the City of Toronto consider when choosing services?

People highlighted the need for safety, inclusivity, and fair access so all communities feel welcome.

- **Safety and Inclusivity:** Co-located services must prioritize safety, including clear governance agreements to ensure smooth operations.
- **Diverse Offerings:** Services should reflect the cultural and social needs of the community, including multi-use and intergenerational spaces.
- **Health-Conscious Facilities:** Avoid co-locating fast food vendors; instead, offer nutritious food options aligned with wellness goals.
- **Equity Lens:** Ensure services prioritize equity-deserving groups and incorporate feedback from local communities.

Are there any drawbacks?

Some noted that shared spaces could create conflicts over use and access, so clear rules and management are needed.

- Co-located facilities may struggle to support unhoused individuals or residents with complex needs, such as addiction or mental health challenges.
- Shared governance between City and non-City organizations may lead to operational inefficiencies or confusion about responsibilities.

Is there anything else we should consider?

Members suggested quiet spaces, improved lighting, and better accessibility features in parks. Their feedback will help shape future investments to make Toronto's recreation spaces more inclusive for all.

- Introduce **quiet spaces** and prayer areas in recreation centres to accommodate diverse cultural and religious practices.
- Design **multi-use spaces** that can function flexibly for different cultural activities.
- Enhance safety features in parks by improving lighting, signage, and visibility in walking paths.
- Include intergenerational design elements in parks and playgrounds, ensuring that adults and children have complementary amenities to enjoy together.