

Indigenous Advisory Circle Meeting #5 Summary Report

Parkland Strategy and the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan

Phase 2 Indigenous Community Engagement: Setting the Direction

January 6, 2026

Ridge Road Training & Consulting, Indigenous Engagement Lead





Contents

- Attendees..... 3
- Overview of Indigenous Advisory Circle 4
- Presentation..... 5
 - Previous IAC meeting 5
 - IAC Meeting 5 Purpose..... 5
 - Project Progress and Implementation 5
 - Themes 6
 - Post-Presentation Discussion Questions 8
- Summary of Key Points/Themes Shared During Discussion at Meeting 9
 - Visual Representation..... 9
 - Ceremonial, Cultural & Community Spaces..... 11
 - Education & Programming..... 13
 - Economic and Employment Opportunity..... 14
 - Access, Accessibility, and Safety 16

Attendees

City of Toronto Staff – Parks and Recreation Division

- Danielle DeMarsh (Host) (Parkland Strategy, Senior Project Manager)
- Alex Lavasidis (Co-host) (Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan, Project Officer)

Ridge Road Training & Consulting

- Kiera Brant-Birioukov (Co-Host)
- Gabrielle Ayotte (Notetaker)

Indigenous Advisory Circle Members

- Cara M.
- Crystal S.
- Kyle M.
- Tonie O.

An additional three Indigenous Advisory Circle Members were unable to attend the meeting, but reviewed the presentation slides and submitted written feedback to the discussion questions.

- Jessica R.
- Andrew M.
- Reggie M.

Overview of Indigenous Advisory Circle

The Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC) consists of 12 members and is composed of individual Indigenous community members and Indigenous community members who also work with and represent Indigenous organizations across the City of Toronto.

The purpose of the IAC is for members to meet with representatives from the City of Toronto's Parks & Recreation (P&R) Division and Ridge Road Training & Consulting to provide comments, opinions, and suggestions on updates to Toronto's Parkland Strategy and the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan. The IAC members' contributions help to ensure Indigenous peoples and communities feel represented, safe, and connected in City recreation facilities and parks.

The meeting was scheduled based on the availability of the majority of members, but not every IAC member was able to attend the meeting. Honoraria was offered to each IAC member who attended or contributed feedback on the meeting content.

For more information about the project and the Parkland & Recreation Facilities Strategies: Community Engagement, please visit <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/accountability-operations-customer-service/long-term-vision-plans-and-strategies/parkland-recreation-facilities-strategies-community-engagement/>

Presentation

City of Toronto staff gave a brief presentation to the IAC, after which the discussion began. Below is a summary of the presentation.

Previous IAC Meeting

The City provided a brief overview of progress made since the previous IAC meeting, which took place on July 9, 2025. Staff summarized engagement that occurred earlier in 2025, including the introduction of six emerging themes developed through Indigenous community feedback, and the review of the guiding principles that guide the development of the updated Parkland Strategy (PLS) and Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan (PRFP).

The City noted that a presentation was delivered to the City's Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Committee (AAAC) on September 9, 2025. AAAC members were broadly supportive of the emerging directions. Staff also highlighted ongoing meetings with First Nations, including Hiawatha First Nation and Six Nations of the Grand River, as part of Phase 2 engagements.

IAC Meeting 5 Purpose

The purpose of IAC Meeting #5 was to share and receive feedback on updated draft themes and potential ideas for action that respond to previous feedback received from Indigenous communities. These themes and ideas will be considered for inclusion in the final updates of the Parkland Strategy and the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan where appropriate.

Project Progress and Implementation

The City walked the group through the engagement timeline, noting the multi-year process required to update both the Parkland Strategy and the Facilities Plan.

Phase 1 Engagement (Fall 2024 – Early Spring 2025): Focused on identifying challenges, opportunities, and a community-informed vision.

Phase 2 Engagement (Summer 2025 – Winter 2026): Current phase, focused on exploring directions, partnerships, and draft ideas for action. This includes ongoing engagement with Indigenous organizations, community members, and First Nations.

The City noted that timelines are still being finalized, and acknowledged that implementation of ideas for action will vary. Some ideas may be incorporated into existing City projects and budgets, while more complex ideas, particularly those related to land acquisition or large-scale infrastructure, will require dedicated capital funding, Council approval, and additional staff capacity.

The City also emphasized that progress cannot occur without ongoing engagement and collaboration with Indigenous communities, who have expressed capacity constraints and consultation fatigue. As such, timelines and expectations must remain long-term, flexible, and responsive to community needs.

Themes

City staff explained that the original six themes guiding the plans have since been refined into five themes, all now centred around a core focus on “Relationships with Land, Water, and Community”. These themes are intended to support culturally safe spaces, Indigenous land stewardship and self-determination, and park and facility design that reflects Indigenous worldviews and needs. The themes are visualized in the following infographic:



Each theme has several subthemes (presented below), all of which have corresponding ideas for action for the City to consider.

1. Visual Representation

- a. Naming of parks, features, & buildings
- b. Signage (e.g., wayfinding, interpretive)
- c. Art (e.g., sculpture, murals)

2. Ceremonial, Cultural & Community Spaces

- a. Horticulture opportunities (e.g., grow native plants & medicines in parks)
- b. Pow Wow spaces
- c. Sacred fire spaces
- d. Co-location, including Indigenous services and spaces in existing centres/parks (e.g., kitchens, dance/studio space)

3. Education & Programming

- a. Truth & Reconciliation awareness through public programs
- b. Indigenous programming (e.g., sports, language, storytelling, gardening)
- c. Cultural competency & crisis response training for Parks & Recreation staff

4. Employment & Economic Opportunity

- a. More Indigenous Parks & Recreation Staff
- b. More Indigenous vendors
- c. Hiring Indigenous designers, architects & landscape architects to design spaces

5. Access, Accessibility & Safety

- a. Easier access for Indigenous gatherings & events for community (e.g., reduced costs, fewer administrative hurdles)
- b. Free access to water recreation (e.g., canoes)
- c. City land acquisitions to advance access to water & land
- d. Support Indigenous land uses (e.g., harvesting, ceremonial sites, teaching lodges)

Much of the discussion was spent in considering the various proposed actions and seeking any additional ones.

Discussion Questions

IAC participants were invited to look at the following questions to inspire discussion on the considerations/potential actions in connection with the five themes.

1. Do you support the ideas for action?
2. Are there any actions missing?
3. Is there an idea for action that should be prioritized?
4. Are there any specific suggestions you have for any of the actions?

Summary of Key Points Shared During Discussion

Visual Representation

Oral Feedback from Meeting

- Members emphasized that visual representation must reflect the diversity of Indigenous Nations, languages, and artistic traditions rather than privileging a single Nation or linguistic choice.
- Participants noted that visual elements should be intentionally used as teaching tools for newcomers, helping people understand whose Land they are on and how to engage respectfully.
- It was raised that visual representation must go beyond static or symbolic signage. Meaningful visibility should be paired with programming, feasts, gatherings, and community activity.
- The group highlighted the importance of creating visibility that is lived and relational, not reduced to plaques or checkboxes.
- Some members suggested creating Indigenous youth ambassador or Land Steward roles within parks, where youth could share knowledge, learn from the Land, and offer guidance to visitors.
- Participants recommended updating City language by removing outdated and potentially triggering terms (such as “Aboriginal”) from websites and documents.

- Concerns were raised about the erasure of Afro-Indigenous people within current approaches to Indigenizing spaces. Members stressed that representation and programming must intentionally include Afro-Indigenous identities.
- The discussion underscored that visual representation must be plural, educational, relational, and inclusive, especially of Afro-Indigenous youth and newcomer communities.

Written Feedback from IAC Members

- Members emphasized that visual representation must arise from genuine, ongoing consultation rather than symbolic or decorative gestures, noting that trauma-informed practice requires relational approaches that avoid harm.
- Participants reiterated that naming, signage, and artwork must avoid flattening the diversity of Indigenous Nations. Transparency about who is consulted, how, and why, was identified as essential for building trust.
- Members stressed that maintenance and renewal must accompany any commitment to new signage so that representations do not fade, deteriorate, or unintentionally signal neglect. Visuals should serve as a living component of relationship-building, not static installations.
- Additional feedback noted that while the City has demonstrated an ability to produce signage quickly for other municipal needs (e.g., traffic cameras, encampment notices, ferry signage), similar urgency should be applied to Indigenous signage. Members emphasized that small, incremental visual changes could begin immediately.
- Some participants expressed concern about multicultural artworks that combine numerous cultures within a single sign or piece. They recommended sharper focus on First Nations, Inuit, and Métis representation, noting that many multicultural initiatives already receive attention while Indigenous placekeeping has historically been neglected.
- Members emphasized that ceremonial signage must be considered carefully, as certain ceremonies (e.g., grief practices or healing work) may require discretion or trauma-informed approaches. They stressed the need for additional consultation on when signage is appropriate.

- Members suggested learning from examples in other municipalities and Nations (e.g., Vancouver, Calgary, Montana communities) regarding naming processes, community consultation, and design.
- Participants supported coordinating visual representation work with Museum and Heritage Services but encouraged Parks to expand beyond signage near existing museum sites and develop more integrated inter-divisional approaches.
- Concerns were raised that committing to a fixed quota of yearly signage could lead to rushed or inappropriate decisions. Members instead recommended committing to regular naming and consultation meetings.

Ceremonial, Cultural & Community Spaces

Oral Feedback from Meeting

- The group discussed the complexity of designing spaces such as sacred fire areas, including whether these spaces should remain exclusively Indigenous or be multi-use with strict protocols. Members expressed concerns about balancing openness and safety in ceremonial spaces, noting that fully open public access can sometimes lead to disrespectful behaviour or unsafe interactions during ceremonies. Some participants noted that if the City cannot ensure a space for ceremony will be respected, it may be best to not build the space until solutions for how it is used are found.
- Participants raised the idea of using community ties, relationships, or screening processes to ensure respectful access to cultural spaces such as sweat lodges. Concerns were shared about internal gatekeeping or ownership conflicts arising if Land Stewards are not chosen carefully and with community accountability.
- Participants emphasized that institutional processes, such as insurance requirements, liability frameworks, and risk-management protocols, often create barriers to Indigenous ceremonial practices, and that the City must do more to remove these barriers that infringe on Indigenous People's ceremonial rights. They noted that ceremonial spaces must be guided by traditional Knowledge Keepers rather than colonial policy structures. They stressed that identifying these colonial barriers is necessary to expose how they impede practice, and

encouraged ongoing advocacy for inherent ceremonial rights while recognizing the tension between resisting institutionalization and ensuring that Indigenous families in urban areas can access ceremony where they live.

- It was suggested that long-term Indigenous Land Stewards at parks could help maintain relationships with Land, offer continuity, and mentor youth.

Written Feedback from IAC Members

- Members stressed that private or dedicated ceremonial spaces are often necessary from a trauma-informed perspective, since ceremony, grief practices, and cultural protocols require protection from interruption, surveillance, and external gaze.
- Participants emphasized the importance of Indigenous designers and engagement teams, noting that Indigenous-led design processes prevent re-traumatization and ensure spaces reflect Indigenous worldviews rather than institutional assumptions. Members strongly supported expanding Indigenous design expertise through internships and mentorships with local Indigenous architecture students.
- Members underscored the need for clarity around how decisions will be made regarding which Nations, cultural teachings, or ceremonial practices are represented in specific spaces. They noted these decisions are relational and sensitive, and must be handled with care.
- Feedback highlighted that security and vandalism have been recurring concerns in public spaces used for ceremony. Members recommended educational partnerships with school boards (TDSB/TCDSB) to build public understanding and respect for Indigenous ways of being.
- Participants supported increasing access to existing City spaces while acknowledging that bylaws, policies, and institutional processes can create barriers. Members noted that the City should proactively review these barriers.
- Members reiterated that some public spaces are currently treated as de facto “private,” creating barriers for Indigenous peoples. Staff were encouraged to explore mechanisms that foster greater feelings of welcoming and belonging.
- Participants encouraged progressing toward spaces that support wide-ranging needs such as Teaching Lodges, water access, native plantings, medicine

gardens, food forests, kitchens, and storytelling spaces, with several members recommending that plantings and medicine gardens be elevated as a standalone priority due to existing horticulture capacity within the City of Toronto. A participant noted that the City of Toronto horticulture department could play a role in these plantings.

- Members expressed strong support for Indigenous-focused CRCs and for the creation of Indigenous clubhouses to support land-based programming, identifying Biidaasige Park as a priority location.

Education & Programming

Oral Feedback from Meeting

- Members reiterated the need for increased access to Indigenous-led programming in existing recreation centres, including sports, language classes, storytelling, gardening, and cultural activities.
- Participants clarified that programming opportunities must include both indoor spaces (such as gyms, kitchens, multipurpose rooms) and outdoor park spaces. They highlighted the lack of accessible, affordable gym space for Indigenous sports teams and dancers, particularly in the downtown area.
- Concerns were raised about delays in honoraria and stipend payments, with some facilitators waiting months for compensation. The group identified the importance of ethical, timely, and flexible compensation processes as a core part of building sustainable partnerships with Indigenous communities.
- Members noted that while certain facilities such as corporate-run recreation centres are good models, City-owned centres must be adapted and expanded to meet similar needs. Participants called for long-term thinking around the creation of an Indigenous community recreation centre as part of the City's future planning.

Written Feedback from IAC Members

- Members stressed that culturally-grounded programming must remain flexible and responsive to community rhythms, noting that rigid administrative processes can impede participation and contradict trauma-informed practices.
- Participants reiterated that free or low-cost programming is essential, emphasizing that financial barriers, such as fees for ferries, facility rentals, or public space access, directly restrict Indigenous use of their own Lands.
- A member recommended creating a sign-up system enabling Indigenous educators to access spaces for land-based teaching without needing to modify their pedagogy to comply with existing park rules. They envisioned a model where educators notify Parks & Recreation of their needs and receive support without intrusion, benefitting learning across age groups and institutions.
- Feedback emphasized co-creation of programming, ensuring that initiatives are shaped by Indigenous peoples rather than merely offered to them. Members also recommended strengthening relationships with Indigenous organizations, Indigenous staff at school boards, and community educators.
- Participants highlighted the need for more Indigenous staff within Parks & Recreation at the City, especially within community centres where programming demand already exists. Centres such as East Bayfront and Ethennonnhawahstihnen were noted as positive emerging models.
- Members advocated for sensory-informed and welcoming environments, including visual cues, staff presence, and signage that immediately signal cultural safety and belonging.
- Several participants stressed that access to public spaces on Indigenous Land should be free for Indigenous people and recommended broader discussions on ferry fees, park access charges, and City policies that create inequity.

Economic and Employment Opportunity

Oral Feedback from Meeting

- Members emphasized that Indigenous-specific roles should not be limited by Western Human Resource requirements such as mandatory university degrees, which exclude Knowledge Keepers with community-rooted experience. They noted that job descriptions must reflect Indigenous ways of knowing and value lived experience and traditional knowledge.
- Concerns were raised about self-identification processes that allow people without community ties to claim Indigenous identity, taking positions intended for Indigenous staff. The group recommended developing self-identification processes in collaboration with Elders and Indigenous communities to ensure accountability and integrity.
- Several people highlighted that requiring status cards for access to training programs or services excludes Indigenous people without documentation. Members stressed the importance of removing unnecessary documentation barriers so Indigenous people can access essential skills training and employment supports.
- Participants reflected on how the City can support Indigenous-led spaces that are safe, inclusive, and culturally grounded without reproducing gatekeeping or exclusion.

Written Feedback from IAC Members

- Members reiterated the importance of Indigenous representation across all levels of staffing front-line roles, including recreation staff, camp leaders, garden workers, operations roles, and leadership positions such as lead hands, forepersons, and supervisors. Representation directly increases safety, trust, and belonging.
- Participants emphasized the need for long-term capacity building within the City, including dedicated funding lines within Parks and Recreation capital budgets for reconciliation-related roles, training, and Indigenous engagement.

- Members strongly supported Indigenous-specific training pipelines, including Indigenous construction workers, suppliers, manufacturers, vendors, engagement practitioners, and designers. Participants encouraged clearer thresholds for Indigenous procurement and for including Indigenous roles in design briefs and Requests for Proposals.
- Feedback highlighted the need for wraparound support for Indigenous staff, recognizing the emotional labour, racism, and community expectations that Indigenous employees often navigate in institutional environments.
- Members stressed the necessity of formal verification processes to ensure that Indigenous-specific positions are held by Indigenous people with authentic community ties.
- Participants also recommended Indigenous vendor training, including support for business development and pathways to participate in waterfront food spaces or park vending opportunities.
- Targeted outreach was identified as essential, with members recommending collaboration with Workforce Equity to ensure opportunities reach Indigenous communities directly.

Access, Accessibility, and Safety

Oral Feedback from Meeting

- Members identified the need for a clear “one-window” contact for Indigenous groups seeking to book spaces or access park facilities to avoid fragmented or relationship-dependent processes.
- Participants noted the value of formally recognizing canoe and human-powered watercraft launches as an official facility type, enabling long-term planning, funding, and tracking of water access. Several people imagined Indigenous-run canoe launch areas or marinas that offer culturally-grounded access to water without financial barriers.
- It was noted that municipal bylaws and Western concepts of equality may pose challenges, requiring nuanced changes to properly honour Indigenous rights to Land and water.

Written Feedback from IAC Members

- Members emphasized that historical and ongoing surveillance, policing, and displacement contribute to Indigenous community members feeling unsafe or unwelcome in public spaces. Trauma-informed practice must guide all access-related planning.
- Participants supported a one-window access system for bookings and information, noting that it must be accessible in person, by phone, and online; not located in hard-to-reach offices; and must be co-designed with community to avoid becoming another bureaucratic barrier.
- Members recommended explicit commitments to reducing or eliminating booking costs for Indigenous communities and suggested that the City re-evaluate fee structures to align with approaches used in federal parks and museums, where Indigenous people receive free access.
- There were notes that contracted security staff should be required to undertake Indigenous awareness training to prevent harmful interactions and reinforce cultural safety.
- Members encouraged expanding public education and relationship-building with Indigenous organizations to support broader community understanding and reduce disruptive behaviour or complaints related to sacred fires, ceremonies, or land-based activities.
- Participants raised concerns about appropriation and over-harvesting of medicines, noting the commodification of items such as chaga and the need for protective protocols.
- Members expressed support for identifying areas of interest for long-term stewardship opportunities, including water access, food security, harvesting, and ceremony.
- Members supported shared stewardship and the “land back” movements.
- Participants recommended creating Indigenous canoe launching sites on the waterfront to ensure barrier-free access.