

Indigenous Advisory Circle Meeting #4 Summary Report

Parkland Strategy and the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan
Phase 2 Indigenous Community Engagement: Setting the Direction
July 9, 2025

Ridge Road Training & Consulting, Indigenous Engagement Lead





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Attendees

City of Toronto Staff – Parks and Recreation Division

Danielle DeMarsh (Host) (Parkland Strategy, Senior Project Manager)

Matt Bentley (Co-host) (Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan, Senior Project Manager)

Ridge Road Training & Consulting

Kiera Brant Birioukov (Co-Host)

Indigenous Advisory Circle Member

Reggie M.

Tonie O.

Crystal S.

Kaiya C.

Cara M.

Phillip S.

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/>

P&R Introduction and Recap

City of Toronto Parks & Recreation (P&R) staff and Ridge Road Training & Consulting (RRTC) staff provided an overview of the goals of the IAC meeting, highlighting the hope for the IAC to address:

- Needs and priorities of Indigenous communities related to recreation facilities and park spaces across the city
- How existing and future recreation facilities and parks can be reflective of Indigenous communities and uses
- Priorities that should be addressed through updates to the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan and Parkland Strategy

To refresh people's memories of what was discussed in the past, P&R and RRTC then reviewed main points from previous IAC meetings. Emerging priority areas that IAC members engaged with included:

- Training & Education as Foundational
- Need for Permanent Indigenous Spaces
- Centering Indigenous Leadership & Engagement
- Improving Cultural Safety & Access

P&R reiterated the timeline of the project and indicated that it is in Phase 2 of engagement. One IAC member sits on the Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Committee (AAAC) and emphasized that it is essential for P&R to consult and seek approval from the AAAC before going to City Council. The IAC member stressed that they have seen too many Indigenous matters passed at City Council without AAAC's approval and engagement, and this creates mistrust. They expressed that the work being done with this project is important and has been done in the right way so far, and P&R must be careful not to misstep by progressing to Council before AAAC consultation. One IAC member sits on the Scarborough Southeast Pow-Wow Committee, and they suggested that this committee would be a great place for engagement.

P&R shared that in Phase 2, Indigenous-focused engagement will include

- Continued IAC meetings with this group
- Additional pop-ups in Indigenous community spaces

Overall IAC Comments

When reviewing the general messages that P&R has heard from people with regards to recreation and park spaces, IAC members reiterated that there needs to be a solid plan in place for green space, as green space is keeping us alive and is needed amidst climate change. They emphasized that there needs to be forethought, because planting trees is great, but they take a long time to grow, so there needs to be long-term planning to support their longevity.

When discussing the messages that P&R has heard from, and in relation to, Indigenous communities more specifically, IAC members have numerous questions and comments to offer. One IAC member inquired about whether P&R conducts an evaluation of the demographics of people who use park spaces, as well as how and when they use the spaces. The member suggested that such an evaluation could help the City to better understand and support the needs of Indigenous peoples' use of park spaces.

Another IAC member shared that they attended a ceremony on the Humber River where the ceremonial leaders and participants saw themselves as having sovereignty to use this space. This act and perspective brought about the idea of Indigenous folks reclaiming space without needing to “ask” for it, and, rather, exercising their sovereign rights and expecting the City to catch up to them. IAC members invited the City to engage in reframing and becoming experimental with how the rights and sovereignty of nations are acknowledged, as well as the usage of space that goes along with this.

Some additional questions for consideration stemmed from this discussion: Is this a “claim to land” by reclaiming the sovereignty to this land? What does it mean to decolonize this space?

Holding ceremony on the land with the understanding of sovereignty and rights is embodying the Two Row wampum, where the relationship is nation to nation, working together to decolonize spaces.

Another member, however, expressed the perspective that ENAGB (who also host ceremony spaces on the Humber River) constantly feel like they need to fight to keep these spaces and to use them as they were intended, and this should not be the case. They stated that it feels like there is more fight than ceremony, and that the ENAGB space feels consistently contested. The result is that gatherings feel more like protest than ceremony, and this should not be happening in these sacred spaces.

IAC members shared that medicines need to be grown in any available spaces across the City, not just in some token park spaces, and there needs to be more education for non-Indigenous city recreation and park staff about Indigenous peoples having access to booking and using these spaces.

Guiding Principles

The existing Guiding Principles in the Parkland Strategy are Expand, Improve, Connect, and Include.

One IAC member asked whether the term “reconciliation” appears anywhere in the Parkland Strategy and the Parks & Recreation Facilities Plan, and whether the City is hesitant to include it. They emphasized their perspective that this is an opportunity to align with the City’s Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). Another IAC member, however, urged caution in referencing the RAP as a measure of the City’s response to Indigenous needs, noting that the plan was not developed in consultation with the Indigenous community and therefore should not be treated as the primary framework for accountability.

P&R discussed the current Guiding Principles of the Parkland Strategy, and acknowledged past comments that the principle of “Include” maintains a colonial power structure. P&R proposed the possibility of adding the principle of “Protect”. One IAC member suggested adding “Honour”, and pondered if that better reflects the responsibilities that the city is engaging in with Indigenous sovereignty and placekeeping. IAC members expressed that there needs to be a more explicit expression of Indigeneity and Indigenous people in the Guiding Principles throughout both the Parkland Strategy and the Parks & Recreation Facilities Plan.

P&R then posed two questions for discussion:

1. Do you support the addition of “Protect” as a new Guiding Principle? Are there elements that should be protected that we haven’t listed on the slide?
2. Are there important sentiments that are still not covered in any of the Guiding Principles (e.g. recognize/acknowledge)? Do we need additional changes to the Guiding Principles?

When P&R presented proposed updates to the Parkland Acquisition Assessment Tool (which would aim to adhere to the Guiding Principles) IAC members felt that the concept of “cultural significance” needs more detail in order to be assessed for explicit reconciliation opportunities. The work to update the Parkland Strategy and the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan should not be looked at as a “reconciliation project” but a step toward the goal of reconciliation.

Some IAC members wanted to know about considerations for animals’ access to water, ensuring that access to green space and water isn’t cut off while space transformation is taking place (e.g. geese downtown who can’t find safe passage to the lake). One IAC member asked if there could be consideration for animal corridors and transport routes,

suggesting that P&R consider “corridors of greenspace” so animals have continuous access to greenspace leading to the water. The member reminded the group that people can overcome barriers and buildings, but the animals cannot.

Post-Meeting Process

During each IAC meeting, a representative from Ridge Road Training & Consulting (RRTC) takes notes to record the comments and suggestions provided by IAC members. These comments and suggestions are kept confidential (i.e., no names are attributed to specific comments, as shown in the previous section).

The meeting notes are then formatted for easy readability and circulated to IAC members for review. In the review process, IAC members are given one week to read over the notes and provide feedback to ensure they agree with the content and accuracy, and/or if there are any points raised in the meeting that are missing from the notes. At the end of one week, RRTC staff finalize the notes by making any necessary adjustments, so the notes properly represent the IAC members’ contributions. The notes are then shared with the City’s staff to be made available for public viewing.

Addendum: IAC Member Summary Feedback

Following the meeting, IAC members were given time to review the meeting notes and provide additional feedback. The following additional feedback was shared:

Description of the IAC

Might suggest revising this to reflect not just consultation but collaborative guidance. e.g., “to co-create, inform, and guide the vision and implementation...” This would better reflect the circle’s intent and sovereignty in the process.

Suggestion that P&R seek approval from AAAC before going to City Council

Strongly agree. This is a key governance recommendation. You could consider reinforcing the importance of consultation as an act of respect and protocol, not just policy.

Providing more education for non-Indigenous city recreation and park staff about Indigenous peoples’ access to booking and use of these spaces

Can consider integrating cultural safety training and Indigenous access protocols directly into staff onboarding or community-use guidelines, co-designed with the IAC.

Guiding Principles

“Include” implies permission granted by power holders; terms like “Uphold,” “Respect,” or “Affirm” may better reflect Indigenous rights and presence.

“Protect” is important, but “Honour” may evoke a more relational and reciprocal obligation. Maybe could include both “Protect and Honour” to cover both legal and spiritual/cultural obligations.

The idea that this project should not be looked at as a “reconciliation project” but a step toward the goal of reconciliation

Agree. Perhaps add that reconciliation is not a destination, but a continual responsibility, and this project is one way of practicing it in place.

Concern for animal access to land and water during transformation of park spaces

Consider a formal section in the strategy that addresses non-human kinship and responsibilities, aligned with Indigenous ecological knowledge.