

# Phase 2 Urban Indigenous Communities Engagement Summary Report

Review of the Parkland Strategy and the Parks & Recreation Facilities Plan

Phase 2: Setting the Direction

Date: March 13, 2026

Prepared by Ridge Road Training & Consulting Inc.  
For the City of Toronto, Parks and Recreation Division





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# Executive Summary

The City of Toronto's (the City) Parkland Strategy and Parks & Recreation Facilities Plan are strategic documents that guide the planning of, and investment in, parks and recreation facilities over a 20-year horizon. Adopted in 2019 and 2017, respectively, these documents are currently under review and a community-wide engagement process is underway to help inform revisions. A key priority in this process is ensuring that Indigenous voices, needs, and rights are meaningfully reflected in decision-making. To support this, the City contracted Ridge Road Training & Consulting Inc. (Ridge Road), a Haudenosaunee-owned research and engagement firm local to Toronto, to lead engagement with urban Indigenous communities.

This report summarizes Phase 2 of urban Indigenous community engagement, conducted from February to December 2025. Phase 2 deepened dialogue, refined priorities, and gathered feedback on draft themes and potential actions for advancing the City's work on Truth and Reconciliation with urban Indigenous communities with a focus on parks and recreation spaces. Engagement included four working meetings of the Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC) established to guide the review process, three community drop-in sessions in Indigenous community spaces, a school engagement session, and a final IAC meeting to validate priorities.

A central insight from all participants was that relationships with land, water, and community are foundational and must guide all planning and decision-making processes that shape recreation facilities and parks. From this central concept, five priority themes emerged:

## 1) **Visual Representation**

Indigenous presence should be meaningful, relational, and ongoing through naming, signage, art, and design.

## 2) **Ceremonial, Cultural, and Community Spaces**

Dedicated Indigenous spaces should be designed, led, and governed by Indigenous peoples, prioritizing cultural safety and community accountability.

## 3) **Education and Programming**

Indigenous-led programs, free or low-cost recreation opportunities, and cultural competency training for staff support reconciliation, belonging, and community well-being.

## 4) **Employment and Economic Opportunity**

Hiring, procurement, and leadership opportunities for Indigenous peoples are essential to sustainable placekeeping.

**5) Access, Accessibility, and Safety**

Reducing barriers, ensuring free access, and adopting trauma-informed approaches are critical to supporting Indigenous engagement with parks and waterways.

Phase 2 findings emphasize the need for Parks and Recreation planning to center Indigenous sovereignty, relationships, and rights in order to create spaces that respond to Indigenous needs and interests. This report provides guidance for the City to advance decolonization, reconciliation, and Indigenous placekeeping through tangible actions in the Parkland Strategy and Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan.

# Introduction

The City of Toronto (the City) has over 1,500 parks and hundreds of recreation facilities 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. 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 community 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 (Ridge Road)—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.

During the two-phased engagement process, P&R and Ridge Road 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, park tours, a school visit, and community drop-in sessions at organizations serving Indigenous peoples.

This summary report presents an overview of Phase 2 urban Indigenous community engagement activities and findings, reflecting activities that occurred between February-December, 2025.

# How We Engaged

The City's Parks & Recreation project team and Ridge Road Training & Consulting collaborated to develop a range of ways for Indigenous peoples, communities, and organizations within Toronto to share their voices in relation to the Parkland Strategy and the Parks & 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.

Phase 1 urban Indigenous engagement activities included:

- Establishing an Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC)
- 1 IAC meeting
- 5 community drop-ins
- 3 park tours

Phase 2 urban Indigenous engagement activities included:

- 4 Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC) meetings
- 3 community drop-ins
- 1 school engagement session

## Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC)

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The Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC) was established in December 2024 to help guide the review process. It consists of 12 members who are representatives of urban Indigenous communities in Toronto, as well as staff from Indigenous-serving organizations. The IAC has been highly active, with members consistently attending meetings and contributing meaningfully through dialogue and discussion.

The IAC has provided input to help develop emerging directions for the Parkland Strategy and the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan, advising on ideas to maintain, change, or add. Its goal has been to ensure that urban Indigenous peoples are represented, safe, and connected in recreation spaces, and that Indigenous worldviews are fully reflected in planning and implementation. Honoraria were offered to all members who attended the meetings, and to those who offered their written

contributions on the meeting materials shared, when scheduling prevented their attendance.

In Phase 2, the IAC met 4 times virtually (February, March, July, and December of 2025). The meetings were moderated by a First Nations Ridge Road facilitator and a notetaker. P&R representatives participated by presenting information from the Parkland Strategy and the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan and answering any questions IAC members had about how strategic documents function within the City.

## Community Drop-Ins

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Community drop-ins consisted of two-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 in high-traffic areas where P&R and Ridge Road staff were available to speak one-on-one with people as they passed through the space. Honoraria were offered to each participant that attended the drop-in and refreshments were provided. An organizational honorarium was also offered to each of the Indigenous organizations that hosted the drop-ins.

Phase 2 community drop-ins were held October-November, 2025 at three organizations, engaging a total of 39 participants:

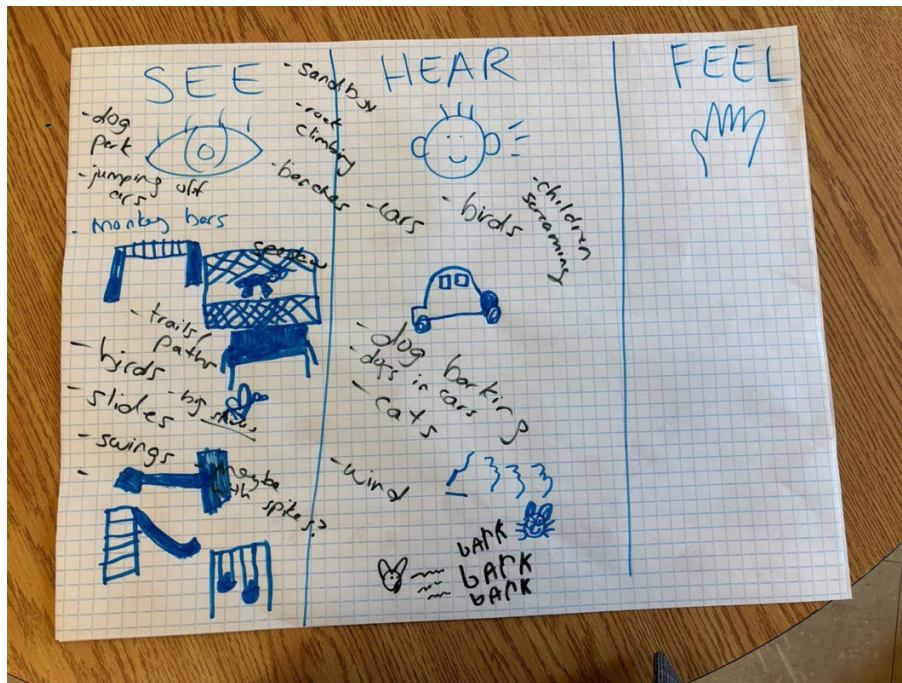
- Native Child & Family Services (30 College St): 21 participants
- Native Women's Resource Centre (191 Gerrard St E): 16 participants
- Eighth Fire at Centennial College (90 Progress Ave): 2 participants

## School Visit

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In April 2025, Ridge Road and P&R staff visited a Grade 1 class at *Kâpapâmahchakwêw* Wandering Spirit School in East York. The school is designated for First Nations, Métis and Inuit families in Toronto.

The project team discussed what makes up a City of Toronto park with the students, including green spaces, ravines, art, and a variety of uses for all living beings in the city. The project team and the students discussed what makes a park feel inclusive and safe for everyone, and then thought about what a safe park looks, feels, and sounds like (see brainstorming chart below).



As an activity, students then brainstormed ideas for each of the following categories:

- Nature
- Play and fun
- Resting places
- Spaces for animals
- Culture and ceremony

Lastly, students drew their dream park, comprising all the elements they would have in their dream park - some real, and some purely creative and imaginary.

# What We Heard

Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC) Meetings #2 - #4 and the school visit were oriented around idea generation and refinement, as the IAC worked with P&R and Ridge Road staff to determine key priorities for the Parkland Strategy and the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan. The first section, Emerging Needs & Ideas from Community Insight speaks to the ideas identified and needs as articulated by the IAC from the three IAC meetings and from the school children during the school visit.

From these discussions, a set of five priority themes, each with accompanying potential actions, were developed by P&R staff. The community drop-ins and the IAC Meeting #5 were focused on gaining feedback and further input into these priority themes and are thus presented together in the next section, Community Feedback on Identified Priority Themes.

## Emerging Needs and Ideas from Community Insight

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### IAC Meeting #2

IAC Meeting #2 took place in February 2025 and was attended by seven IAC members. During the meeting P&R offered a project refresher and an overview of the Indigenous engagement completed to date. P&R offered some emerging themes from the conducted Indigenous engagement, including:

- Greater need for increased safety for Indigenous folks
- Visual representation
- Indigenous community centres
- Ceremonial sites and spaces
- Educational and cultural programming
- Physical and financial accessibility
- Repairing and rebuilding relationships with Land

The discussion focused on engaging with each theme, determining which are the most urgent, how they can be addressed, as well as any potential barriers.

IAC members emphasized the distinction between equity (for all communities) and reconciliation that is specific to Indigenous peoples. There were worries about the lack of Indigenous placekeeping in facility concepts, including the absence of art pieces, Indigenous-named rooms, and dedicated fire spaces in parks.

There were recommendations for meaningful and inclusive representation of Indigenous peoples and of their diverse identities (particularly Afro-Indigenous identities) within City spaces.

The top priorities identified by the IAC were:

- **Fire Spaces:** Secure safe, permanent locations for sacred fires.
- **Water Connection:** Enhancing cultural and spiritual connections to water bodies.
- **Indigenous Language Signage:** Incorporating original place names in parks and public spaces.

The main barriers and solutions identified by the IAC were:

- **Non-Indigenous Pushback:** Concerns over settler myths and resistance to Indigenous cultural practices.
- **Stigma & Systemic Biases:** Addressing historical racism in urban planning and Business Improvement Areas (BIA).
- **Land Reclamation vs. Purchase:** Reframing discussions on land acquisition to focus more on reclamation and Indigenous stewardship.

## IAC Meeting #3

IAC Meeting #3 took place in March 2025 and was attended by six IAC members.

P&R summarized the previous IAC meetings, as well as the additional Phase 1 Indigenous engagement completed. Based on all of the input and feedback, P&R had developed three broad themes to guide the Parkland Strategy and Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan:

- **Repairing & rebuilding relationships with Land**
- **Improving accessibility**
- **Educational & cultural programming**

The top priorities the IAC identified in Meeting #3 were:

- Hiring Indigenous staff
- Prominent treaty and land acknowledgements
- Establishment of Indigenous community centres across Toronto

The discussion was focused on determining which themes felt most urgent and how each theme could be actualized, as well as identifying potential barriers to implementation and how they can be addressed.

The IAC members spoke at length concerning education about Indigenous peoples. There is a need for cultural competency training for City staff to ensure there are no barriers or misunderstandings regarding Indigenous access, use, and presence in different City spaces.

A need for a Pow Wow space in Scarborough was brought forward as a priority. There is a large Indigenous population living in Scarborough, yet there are not enough Indigenous organizations operating in this area to serve its large community. Most Indigenous-serving organizations have downtown locations, despite many of their members and clients having to travel to access their services. It would be ideal to host a recurring Pow Wow in Scarborough to reflect the Indigenous population living there.

There were also recommendations for making facility rentals free for all Indigenous peoples, regardless of income.

## IAC Meeting #4

IAC Meeting #4 took place in July 2025 and was attended by six IAC members.

The meeting was a combination of presentation by P&R of project developments and specific questions the team had for the IAC, as well as discussion and IAC feedback.

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 trees take a long time to grow. There needs to be both short- and long-term planning for green space restoration.

An IAC member asked 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 evaluation could help to better understand and support the needs of Indigenous peoples' engagement with the park spaces.

Another IAC member shared that they attended a ceremony on the Humber River where the ceremonial folks 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 the nations are acknowledged, as well as the usage of the spaces that goes along with this.

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

### **Parkland Strategy Guiding Principles**

The Parkland Strategy’s current Guiding Principles are Expand, Improve, Connect, and Include. P&R brought forward these Guiding Principles for discussion, seeking input on whether these should be expanded or refined based on Indigenous community needs. During discussion, an IAC member raised concerns about the absence of explicit references to reconciliation, noting this as an opportunity to align with the City’s Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). At the same time, some members cautioned against using the RAP as an accountability framework, since broad Indigenous engagement with a variety of communities was in question. Their argument being that while the City may use the RAP to inform planning, it does not define the City’s accountability to Indigenous communities or their needs.

P&R acknowledged prior feedback that the principle of “Include” reinforces a colonial power dynamic. P&R sought feedback on whether “Protect” should be added as a new Guiding Principle, what elements require protection, and whether additional principles (such as recognize or acknowledge) are still missing. An alternative suggestion of “Honour” was raised by the IAC to better reflect Indigenous sovereignty and placekeeping responsibilities. IAC members emphasized the need for clearer and more explicit recognition of Indigenous peoples and Indigeneity within the Guiding Principles and throughout the Parkland Strategy and Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan.

### **Parkland Acquisition Assessment Tool**

When reviewing the Parkland Acquisition Assessment Tool, IAC members noted that the criterion “cultural significance” lacks sufficient detail to meaningfully assess reconciliation-related impacts. Members stressed that the project should be understood as a step toward reconciliation, rather than framed as a reconciliation project itself.

IAC members also raised concerns about animal access to water and greenspace, particularly during urban redevelopment. Questions were raised about safeguarding

animal movement, including the potential for continuous green space corridors to maintain safe access to water. Members emphasized that, unlike people, animals cannot navigate built barriers, and these considerations should be embedded in planning decisions.

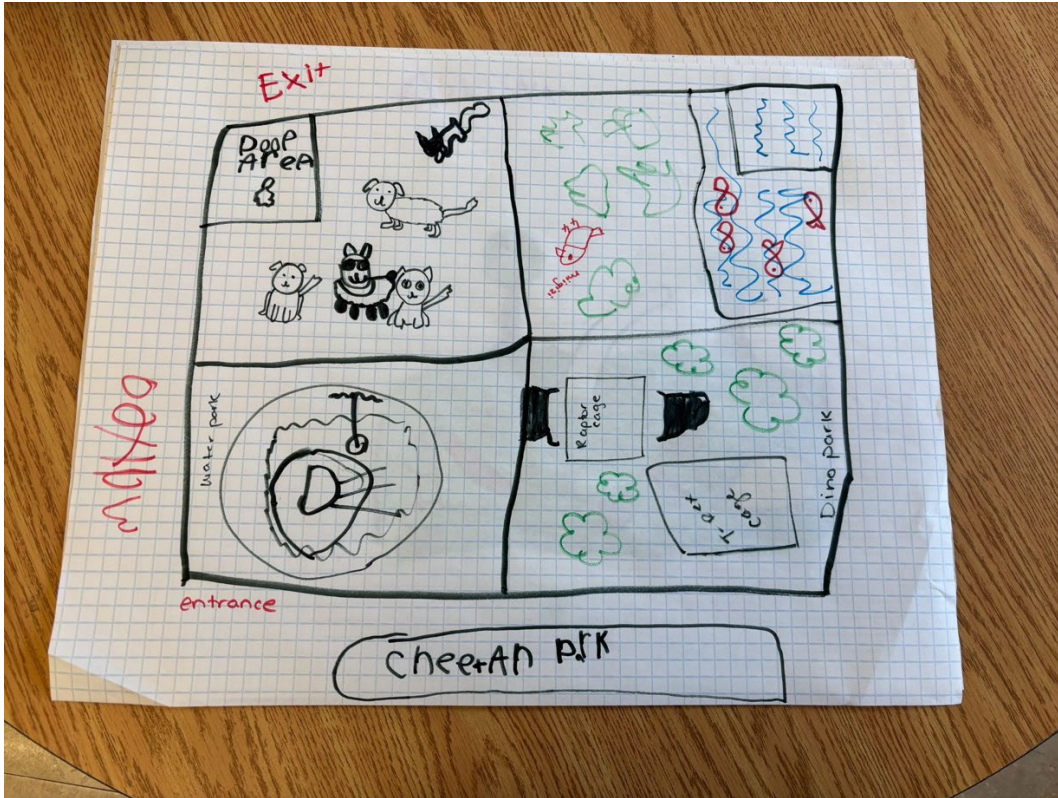
## School Visit

The school visit to *Kâpapâmahchakwêw* Wandering Spirit School took place in April, 2025. During the visit, the students were invited to draw/create their own ideal park and to explain to the project team the elements of their park (images included below) A brief synthesis of some elements of the kids' visions are outlined below:

- Lots of play equipment, especially slides, monkey bars, see-saws, trampoline, rock walls, and climbing structures
- Extra toys for people to share, including toys for the sand pit, like trucks and digging toys
- Water features, including wading pools, splash pads, and even a water slide; or, being close to water, like a pond
- Sensory features, including sandpit and lots of green grass
- Spaces nearby for their grown-ups to sit so that they don't need to be far away
- Gates and fencing for everyone's safety - especially gates to protect from dogs (and dinosaurs)







## Community Feedback on Identified Priority Themes

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### IAC Meeting #5 and Community Drop-ins

IAC Meetings #2, #3, and #4 focused on idea generation and dialogue, and P&R synthesized these discussions into a draft set of priority themes for community feedback. Further engagement to elicit feedback and insight on these priority themes was undertaken through IAC Meeting #5 and three community drop-ins.

Initially, six priority themes were identified. Through further reflection and discussion, it became clear that one theme – Centering Relationships with Land, Water, and Community – could not exist as a separate or additional priority. Instead, it needed to be placed at the center, as all ideas, actions, insights, and contributions are rooted in and flow from these relationships.

Because relationships with land, water, and community are foundational, they were intentionally centralized and prioritized. The remaining five priority themes were then positioned around this core concept, reflecting their interconnectedness and dependence on it. This structure is illustrated in the infographic below. The infographic was the focus of community engagement to generate discussion in IAC Meeting #5 and community drop-ins in Phase 2.



Each of the five themes has several subthemes (presented below), all of which have corresponding potential actions for the City to consider.

### **1. Visual Representation**

- a. Naming of parks, features, and 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 and 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**

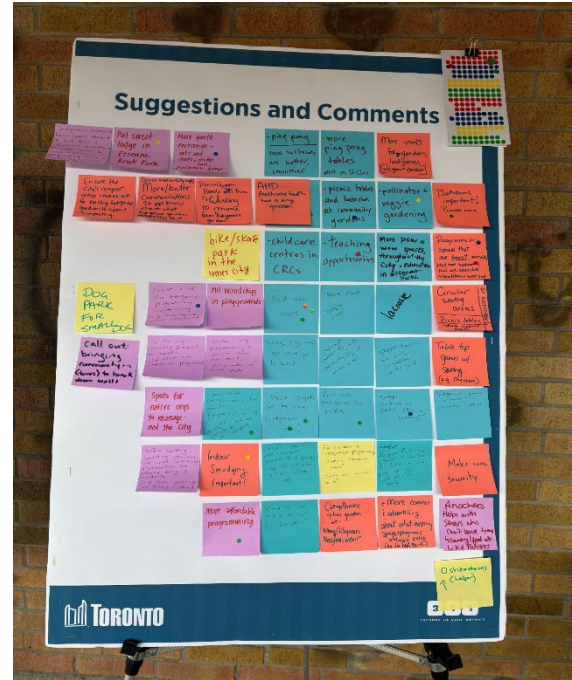
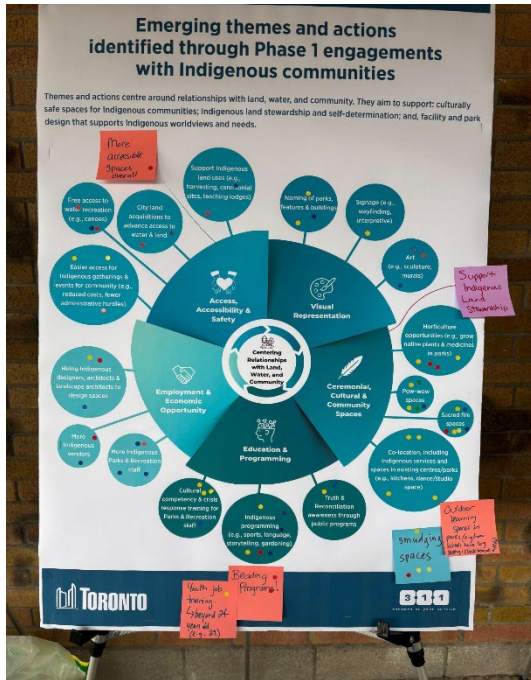
- a. Easier access for Indigenous gatherings & events for community (e.g., reduced costs, fewer administrative hurdles)
- b. Free access to water recreation (e.g., canoes)
- c. City land acquisitions to advance access to water & land
- d. Support Indigenous land uses (e.g., harvesting, ceremonial sites,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

IAC Meeting #5 took place in December 2025 and was comprised of six IAC members (four attended virtually, and two provided their comments and feedback in writing). The meeting presented the five priority themes and potential actions, and sought detailed feedback from the members from discussion prompts, including:

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

Community drop-in participants were invited to respond to display boards containing the themes by highlighting what resonated, what they disagreed with, and what they felt was missing in terms of content, nuance, or considerations.

Participants could give their input orally where their ideas were transcribed by the engagement team, in writing on a sticky note, or by placing a coloured dot on the priority/action that resonated with them.



*Above photos: Community drop-in engagement display boards populated with colourful sticky notes with community ideas and feedback written on them and dot stickers indicating support.*

The findings below synthesize insights from IAC Meeting #5 and three community drop-in sessions. Together, these perspectives complement and reinforce one another, providing a more comprehensive understanding of Indigenous community needs.

## Priority Theme #1: Visual Representation

### 1. Considerations for Visual Representation and Visibility

- Visual representation must reflect the diversity of Indigenous nations, languages, and artistic traditions rather than privileging a single nation or linguistic choice.
- Visual elements should be intentionally used as teaching tools for newcomers, helping people to understand whose land they are on and how to engage respectfully.
- Indigenous visual representation must extend beyond static or symbolic signage. Meaningful visibility should be supported through programming, feasts, gatherings, and ongoing community activities. Participants also highlighted the importance of hiring Indigenous staff and stewards to ensure Indigenous

presence is not tokenistic but instead led and championed by Indigenous peoples.

- Participants highlighted the importance of creating visibility that is lived and relational, not reduced to plaques or checkboxes.
- Visual representation must be plural, educational, relational, and inclusive, especially representative of the Afro-Indigenous community (particularly Afro-Indigenous youth) and newcomer communities.
- Visual representation must arise from genuine, ongoing consultation rather than symbolic or decorative gestures, noting that trauma-informed practice requires relational approaches that avoid reproducing harm.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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. Small, incremental visual changes should begin immediately.

## 2. Inclusivity and Cultural Equity

- Concerns were raised about the erasure of Afro-Indigenous people within current approaches to Indigenizing spaces. Representation and programming must intentionally include Afro-Indigenous identities (e.g., Black History Month).
- Some participants expressed concern about multicultural artworks that combine numerous cultures within a single sign or piece. They recommended sharper focus on Indigenous representation specifically, noting that many multicultural initiatives already received attention while Indigenous placekeeping has historically been neglected. To honour the special and unique position of Indigenous peoples in Canada, Indigenous placekeeping and cultures should be kept distinct and separate from other multicultural initiatives.
- Update City language by removing outdated and potentially triggering terms (such as “Aboriginal”) from websites and documents.

### **3. Ceremonial and Sensitive Signage**

- Ceremonial signage must be considered carefully, as certain ceremonies (e.g., grief practices or healing work) may require discretion or trauma-informed approaches. There is a need for additional consultation on when signage is appropriate.

### **4. Process, Learning, and Municipal Practice**

- The City should learn 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. Participants instead recommended committing to regular naming and consultation meetings.

### **5. Indigenous Presence in Parks and Public Spaces**

- Indigenous community members expressed a strong desire for parks and public spaces to visibly reflect Indigenous presence, identity, and stewardship. Suggestions included expanding tree canopy and shade, improving wildlife-friendly areas, implementing pollinator and vegetable gardening, and having well-maintained (clean, safe) materials for playground surfaces.
- Public spaces that are Indigenous-led, Indigenous-designed, and Indigenous-run were highlighted as a key expression of Indigenous sovereignty within visual and physical environments.
- Participants also noted that universal design principles originate in Indigenous practices, meaning that inclusive, accessible design should be informed by Indigenous worldviews.

### **6. Naming, Art, and Specific Infrastructure**

- Naming parks, features, and buildings in ways that honour Indigenous languages and histories was consistently emphasized, as was the inclusion of Indigenous

art, murals, sculptures, wayfinding, and interpretive signage that communicates teachings and stories.

- Participants expressed needs for specific areas including implementing more ping pong tables with new and improved surfaces at St. Clair West, as well as focusing on renaming the Dunn Indigenous Garden.
- Broader suggestions included a dog park for small dogs, table-top games with seating and a bike and skate park in the inner city.

## 7. Youth Engagement and Stewardship Roles

- Some participants 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.

# Priority Theme #2: Ceremonial, Cultural and Community Spaces

## 1. Ceremonial and Dedicated Indigenous Spaces

- There is a need for dedicated ceremonial and cultural spaces across the city, including sweat lodges, Pow Wow grounds, sacred fire sites, and locations for growing medicines and native plants.
- Participants 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.
- 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 noted challenges around space usage when areas are opened without guidance, explaining that a sacred room being used as a general study

space can shift its purpose. Establishing intentional entry points, rather than fully open access, helps maintain cultural integrity and protects sacredness.

- 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.

## **2. Indigenous-Led Design, Staffing, and Governance**

- 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. Participants strongly supported expanding Indigenous design expertise through internships and mentorships with local Indigenous architecture students.
- Long-term Indigenous Land Stewards at parks can help maintain relationships with land, offer continuity, and mentor youth.
- There is a need for clarity around how decisions will be made regarding which nations, cultural teachings, or ceremonial practices are represented in specific spaces. These decisions are relational, sensitive, and must be handled with care.
- Staffing Indigenous spaces is also important for ensuring cultural safety and the respectful use of space. At Centennial College, it has been critically important to have an Indigenous staff member serve as a welcoming connection point into the Indigenous community space on campus. The staffing of these spaces is essential; Indigenous staff are the ones who create and maintain these spaces and serve as the representation of “community” for those who wish to access them. One token Indigenous person cannot facilitate or sustain the building of “community” alone; it takes a team of competent and confident Indigenous staff who can share the workload, responsibilities, and care for the space.

## **3. Accessibility, Safety, and Cultural Integrity**

- Institutional processes, such as insurance requirements, liability frameworks, and risk-management protocols, often create barriers to Indigenous ceremonial practices, and the City must do more to remove these barriers that infringe on Indigenous people’s ceremonial rights. Ceremonial spaces must be guided by traditional Knowledge Keepers rather than colonial policy structures. Identifying these colonial barriers is necessary to expose how they impede practice. Participants 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.

- Participants supported increasing access to existing City spaces while acknowledging that bylaws, policies, and institutional processes can create barriers. The City should proactively review these barriers.
- Some public spaces are currently treated as de facto “private,” creating barriers for Indigenous peoples. City staff were encouraged to explore mechanisms that foster greater feelings of welcoming and belonging.
- Indigenous community spaces must balance accessibility with protection, underscoring the need for intentional Indigenous-led design. Spaces should be easy for community members to find, yet still shielded from unnecessary traffic or casual use that undermine the safety and sacredness of the space.
- 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.

#### **4. Multi-Use and Co-Located Spaces**

- Participants highlighted the importance of co-locating Indigenous services and cultural spaces within existing facilities, such as kitchens, dance studios, and gathering spaces, to strengthen cultural programming and accessibility.
- Centennial College’s A-Building contains Indigenous elements, located within a colonial structure overall. In this case, one participant noted that while there are drawbacks to Centennial’s Indigenous space being located within a colonial one (for example, when spaces are co-located, cultural safety is always harder to ensure), it is a good approach in the College overall. Integrating and co-locating spaces forces settlers to come face to face with Indigeneity and Treaties every day, and also encourages collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

#### **5. Land-Based and Cultural Programming Features**

- 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 Toronto. A participant noted that the City’s horticulture department could play a role in these plantings.

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

## 6. Community Value, Cultural Safety, and Resources

- Community members emphasized that the value of Indigenous spaces is measured through relationships, cultural safety, and intentional use, not by how many people use them daily. A quiet space that is used occasionally can still be deeply meaningful if, importantly, the community knows it is available when needed. It is beneficial for these spaces to be well-resourced, with essential items such as hygiene supplies, snacks, teas, water, and other necessities available. Especially as new Indigenous-focused spaces come into being, it will be important not to apply colonial expectations and measurements of “success” onto them, lest they be seen as failures before community has had time to establish itself in the space.



*Above photo: Centennial College, Basket Room, designed with Indigenous architectural elements and featuring circular seating.*

# Priority Theme #3: Education and Programming

## 1. Indigenous-Led Programming and Education

- Community members emphasized the importance of Indigenous-led, accessible programming, and education across the city.
- Feedback emphasized co-creation of programming, ensuring that initiatives are shaped by Indigenous peoples rather than merely offered to them. Participants also recommended strengthening relationships with Indigenous organizations, Indigenous staff at school boards, and community educators.
- Programming that supports individuals reconnecting with culture, as well as affordable or free activities, was especially valued. Indigenous programming should be available even when participation numbers are low, as consistent access strengthens community trust.
- There is a need for increased access to Indigenous-led programming in existing recreation centres, including sports, language classes, storytelling, gardening, and cultural activities.
- Programming opportunities must include both indoor spaces such as gyms, kitchens, multipurpose rooms, and outdoor park spaces. Participants highlighted the lack of accessible, affordable gym space for Indigenous sports teams and dancers, particularly in the downtown area and east-end.
- A participant 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 and Recreation of their needs and receive support without intrusion, benefitting learning across age groups and institutions.

## 2. Activity Types and Programming Content

- Desired activities included sports such as lacrosse, youth arts and crafts, gardening, language learning, storytelling, dodgeball, parachute games, puppet shows, and outdoor movie nights featuring Indigenous films.
- There is a need for more Indigenous staff within Parks & Recreation, especially within community centres where programming demand already exists. Centres such as East Bayfront and Ethennonhawahstihnen were noted as positive emerging models.

- While certain facilities such as corporate-run recreation centres are ideal 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.
- Culturally-grounded programming must remain flexible and responsive to community rhythms, noting that rigid administrative processes can impede participation and contradict trauma-informed practices.

### **3. Accessibility, Affordability, and Free Use**

- Free or low-cost programming is essential. Financial barriers, such as fees for ferries, facility rentals, or public space access, directly restrict Indigenous use of their own lands.
- Access to public spaces on Indigenous land should be free for Indigenous people. There need to be broader discussions on ferry fees, park access charges, and City policies that create financial barriers to use of public lands.
- There is also a demonstrated need for more Indigenous programming and spaces in the east end of the city.

### **4. Gardens, Land-Based Learning, and Cultural Spaces**

- There is strong interest in strengthening support for Indigenous garden spaces across the city, highlighting the value of existing sites such as the Regent Park facilities, Catherine Books' garden at the new Gitigaan (Garden), and the garden lounge at Anishinawbe Health, as well as the need to increase public awareness of these resources. Additional recommendations included expanding grant opportunities to establish more gardens and ensuring that City services, such as the compost group, actively collaborate with and support Indigenous garden initiatives.

### **5. Cultural Safety, Staff Capacity, and Training**

- All city staff, including staff within the Parks & Recreation department, must have cultural competency and crisis response training, as well as ongoing learning opportunities in order to create culturally safe environments. Community members expressed experiences of racism online relating to Indigenous programming in the city (e.g., misunderstandings about honorarium). Participants also raised questions about the city's readiness to respond to potential backlash

related to Indigenous programming, including considerations around who is delivering the programming and who has access to it.

- Capacity building for Indigenous staff was emphasized, particularly for those coming from community-based organizations. City of Toronto jobs for Indigenous people must be culturally safe and supported, with non-Indigenous staff receiving training to ensure respectful, informed collaboration.
- Participants advocated for sensory-informed and welcoming environments, including visual cues, quiet and low-traffic spaces, clear staff presence, and signage that immediately signal cultural safety and belonging. Many Indigenous families have children with exceptionalities and sensory needs which would make these spaces more inclusive and accessible for all.

## Priority Theme #4: Employment and Economic Opportunity

### 1. Indigenous Employment and Representation

- There is a need to expand economic opportunities by hiring more Indigenous designers, architects, and landscape architects who can shape spaces in culturally grounded ways.
- Increasing opportunities for Indigenous vendors and expanding the number of Indigenous City staff were also emphasized.
- Indigenous community members reiterated the importance of Indigenous representation across all levels of staffing (e.g., front-line roles, 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.
- There is a desire for Indigenous organizations, not only the City, to manage and operate certain spaces. Participants noted that one of the largest challenges in sustaining Indigenous spaces is staffing; strong community spaces rely on strong Indigenous teams. Recruitment, retention, and support for Indigenous staff are essential, and no single person should be expected to carry the work alone.

## 2. Indigenous-Specific Roles and Knowledge

- Indigenous-specific roles should not be limited by Western HR requirements such as mandatory university degrees, which exclude Knowledge Keepers with community-rooted experience. Job descriptions must reflect Indigenous ways of knowing and value lived experience and traditional knowledge.
- There is a need for long-term capacity building within the City, including dedicated funding lines within Parks & Recreation capital budgets for reconciliation-related roles, training, and Indigenous engagement.
- Participants 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 RFPs.
- There is a need for further Indigenous teaching opportunities, as well as Indigenous-led caretaking and support for Elders and seniors, reflecting the roles of aunties and oshkaabemis (helpers).

## 3. Accountability and Verification

- Concerns were raised about self-identification processes that allow people without community ties to claim Indigenous identity (i.e., Pretendians), taking positions intended for Indigenous people. The IAC recommended developing self-identification processes in collaboration with Elders and Indigenous communities to ensure accountability and integrity.
- Indigenous community members stressed the necessity of formal verification processes to ensure Indigenous-specific positions are held by Indigenous people with authentic community ties.
- Requiring status cards for access to training programs or services excludes Indigenous peoples without documentation or Status. Members stressed the importance of removing unnecessary documentation barriers so Indigenous peoples can access essential skills training and employment supports.

## 4. Staff Support and Sustainability

- There is a need for wraparound support for Indigenous staff, recognizing the emotional labour, racism, and community expectations Indigenous employees often navigate in institutional environments.

## 5. Vendor and Economic Development

- Participants 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 Indigenous community members recommending collaboration with Workforce Equity to ensure opportunities reach Indigenous communities directly.

## Priority Theme #5: Access, Accessibility, and Safety

### 1. Access, Booking, and Administrative Systems

- A clear “one-window” contact is needed for Indigenous groups seeking to book spaces or access park facilities to avoid fragmented or relationship-dependent processes. The system 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.
- Participants 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.
- Parks and public spaces need to be easier to access for Indigenous gatherings and events. This can be done by reducing administrative and financial barriers, removing requirements such as status cards, and prioritizing Indigenous peoples’ ability to use spaces in ways that honour sovereignty.

### 2. Safety, Trauma-Informed Access, and Cultural Protection

- 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.
- Contracted security staff should be required to undertake Indigenous awareness training to prevent harmful interactions and reinforce cultural safety.
- There is a need for safer, more private, and protected areas, spaces that are easy to reach but not exposed to constant foot traffic. This includes fencing, quiet locations away from loud or crowded programming, and thoughtful design that

supports feelings of safety and privacy. This might include an accessible circular seating area, picnic tables supporting events, and childcare centres in community recreation centres.

- There was also an emphasis on including joy and recreation for Indigenous people experiencing homelessness and unstable housing. This could include providing opportunities and experiences centered around positivity, lightness, and play (e.g., sport programs, workshops, community game nights, movie nights, music jam sessions, etc.). The overarching goal would be to create opportunities for community connection, creativity, learning, and play, thereby offering light-hearted moments of happiness and play.

### **3. Water Access, Canoe Launches, and Stewardship**

- 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 offering culturally-grounded access to water without financial barriers.
- Participants recommended creating Indigenous canoe launching sites on the waterfront to ensure barrier-free access.
- Free access to water-based recreation, including canoe use, was identified as essential, along with City-led land acquisitions that strengthen Indigenous connections to land and water for harvesting, ceremony, teaching, and gathering. Overall, community members called for inclusive, culturally secure, and accessible spaces that meaningfully support Indigenous relationships with land and water. Community organizations are essential partners in delivering programs collaboratively, particularly in ensuring safety and accessibility.
- Participants expressed support for identifying areas of interest for long-term stewardship opportunities, including water access, food security, harvesting, and ceremony.
- Participants supported shared stewardship and the Land Back movement.

### **4. Governance, Rights, and Policy Context**

- Municipal bylaws and Western concepts of equality may pose challenges, requiring nuanced changes to properly honour Indigenous rights to land and water.

## 5. Education, Relationship-Building, and Public Awareness

- Participants 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.
- Encompassing the previous insights, participants expressed a strong need for broader city-wide and social media communications about existing opportunities for Indigenous peoples. Increasing awareness of initiatives and spaces, such as Indigenous gardens, will support greater engagement and access.

# Acknowledgements

The work being done to update, adapt, and improve the City of Toronto's Parkland Strategy and Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan requires 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)