Designing Toronto's Parks: How Community Ideas Shape Toronto's Park Planning Process

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Abstract:

Community engagement has become an important component of municipal park planning. Yet questions remain about whose ideas are represented and how public feedback is translated into physical park design. This research examines how community engagement practices are structured within Toronto's parkland planning process and how citizens' ideas influence planning and design outcomes. Using a qualitative case study approach, this study combines policy and document analysis, semi-structured interviews with municipal planners and community organizers, and observation of participants in park planning engagements.

This analysis focuses on Toronto's Parkland Strategy and municipal and provincial planning policies and engagement summaries conducted over various years. The engagements showed that community ideas can influence park design. Still, their impact depends on who participates, how ideas are communicated and categorized, and whether they align with municipal policy and funding—technical requirements within existing planning priorities. The research argues that participation in Toronto's parkland planning is meaningful but institutionally mediated, designed through a process of interpretation and translation rather than direct decision-making. More equitable outcomes therefore require accessible engagement, shared language, transparent feedback processes, and clear connections between community input and final design decisions.

Keywords: Community engagement, Park planning, Participatory planning, Environmental Justice, Park design, Toronto Parkland Strategy.

Foreword:

My major paper marks the completion of my MES (Master in Environmental Studies) degree and Plan of Study (PoS). My area of concentration, Participation, Urban Planning, and Environmental Policy helped me organize my work around three interconnected components. With the guidance of my advisor and supervisor, my research allowed me to apply these components and learning objectives to the study of community engagement in Toronto's Parkland process. I fulfilled York University's MES program requirements and specialized in the environmental planning stream through written papers, research projects, and presentations that demonstrate my skills and the knowledge I have gained over the years.

My first component, which focused on public participation, included three objectives. My first learning objective was to gain a deeper understanding of participation through goal setting in environmental policy planning, which I achieved through document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and observation of participants. In my analysis of Toronto's park planning engagement documents, I examined how the City established engagement goals, selected consultation methods, and organized public feedback. Interviews helped me understand how these schools are applied in practice and how public participation allows planners to introduce engagement objectives and design activities that encourage participants to communicate their priorities.

My second learning objective was to understand how partnerships between developers, municipalities, and community organizers reshape the government's public spaces. Through my research, I was able to identify how state and non-state actors involved in Toronto's parkland planning process, including provincial decision-makers, municipal planners, consultants, developers, community organizers and residents, work together to help each other understand one another. At the same time, my policy analysis showed that municipalities and provincial institutions retain considerable authority over funding and the implementation of community ideas.

My third learning objective for this component was to gain a working knowledge of policymaking as a planning tool and understand the advantages and limitations of public participation. Through thematic coding, I observed how engagement activities encourage participants to identify preferred park features, recreational facilities, and accessibility improvements. I also reviewed how engagement summaries are categorized and communicated to project teams.

My second component is environmental policy, including three learning objectives. My first learning objective was to gain a deeper understanding of municipal and provincial environmental policy frameworks and their influence on planning outcomes. One of my approaches was to include a planning policy analysis through various Toronto official plans, the Toronto municipal code, and provincial legislative changes, and the central case study of the parkland strategy and its related planning documents. These frameworks help to track how provincial legislation

establishes municipal authority and how municipal policies guide parkland improvement and design. My research showed that community ideas do not enter the design process independently, as they must be interpreted through categories and funding streams. I was able to strengthen my ability to interpret legislation and understand how different levels of government influence local planning outcomes.

For my learning objective 2.2, I examined policy barriers that prevent virtualized communities from benefiting from sustainable development, using environmental justice analysis, demographic review, document analysis, and interviews. I reviewed engagement reports and discussion notes on accessibility, representation, language, transportation, and barriers to participation. Interviews provided further insight into how engagement approaches may not reach all community members. My research found that participation can be uneven because of limited awareness, language barriers, inaccessible meeting formats, digital exclusion, transportation challenges, and distrust of government. As a result, engaged participants may not fully represent the demographic experiences of their surrounding ward. These findings help me understand what environmental justice theory is about: the equitable distribution of parks and the inclusion of communities in those decisions.

My final learning objective, 2.3, was to assess gaps in environmental policy frameworks and the influence of intergovernmental knowledge on environmental planning projects. I compared stated goals in municipal policies with evidence from engagement summaries, interviews, and participatory observation. I triangulated these sources to determine whether commitments to equity, accessibility, and meaningful engagement were reflected in practice. My findings identified gaps between policy objectives and implementation, including limited demographic reporting in in-person engagements, an unclear link between public feedback and final decisions, funding constraints, and the influence of provincial legislation on municipal park planning. My research fulfilled the objective of examining how institutional responsibilities and intergovernmental decisions affect the city's ability to implement environmental planning goals, such as providing high-quality parks to all Torontonians.

My third component, titled Urban and Regional Planning, includes three objectives. My first learning objective for this component was to acquire the knowledge and skills required to meet OPPI and CIP candidate membership requirements. This objective was met through my major research, which required me to design and complete an independent planning research project using document analysis, planning policy analysis, interviews, and participatory observation. Through this process, I strengthened my professional skills in research design, policy interpretation, stakeholder engagement, qualitative analysis, and written communication. I also gained experience communicating with municipal planners and community representatives to evaluate a current municipal planning process.

My second learning objective for my third component states: analyze how land use policies influence equitable access to ecological amenities. I examined how parkland dedication

requirements, municipal planning policies, development patterns, and funding arrangements influence the creation and improvement of parks. My analysis demonstrated that access to green space is shaped by institutional and spatial decisions. Policy influences where parkland is acquired, how it is funded, and which community priorities can be implemented. The case study approach also helped me connect broader policy frameworks with their practical effects on neighbourhoods and their residents.

The final learning objective of my third component is to gain a working knowledge of the spatial distribution of green space to improve community access. I was able to complete this learning objective by reviewing the Parkland Strategy's assessment of parkland provisions. I examined community engagement findings concerning various themes. These strategies help me understand that spatial access and falls are more than the amount of parkland available; equitable access also depends on location, transportation, physical accessibility, signage, programming, and residents' ability to participate in decisions about their parks. My major paper therefore strengthens my understanding of how spatial planning, environmental policy, and community participation work together to influence access to Toronto's Park system.

Overall, my main learning objectives throughout my major paper were planning policy analysis, document analysis, semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, thematic coding, and stakeholder analysis. Together, these strategies allowed me to apply knowledge developed through my MES courses and demonstrate how I fulfilled the learning objectives identified in my plan of study.

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AI disclaimer

With the agreement of my research supervisor, generative AI tools were used only to enhance my learning or expand my understanding of the material and not to produce or complete the work on my behalf. ChatGPT were used to research difficult-to-find documents, and Grammarly was used to format and simplify my research findings. My use of generative AI complies with York University's Senate Academic Conduct Policy and Guidelines for Graduate Students. This assignment is my original work; all sources are properly cited.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of my major paper is to summarize how community engagement is structured within Toronto's parkland planning process and how residents' ideas influence park planning and design. I'm interested in the institutional process used to shape ideas into actionable design outcomes; in doing so, I reflect on the City of Toronto's parks plans, supportive policy frameworks, and consultation summaries. My findings show that community ideas can shape park priorities and design features. However, their influence depends on who participates, how clearly ideas are communicated, and how City staff interpret and categorize feedback. Ideas must also align with municipal policies, parkland requirements, and available funding before they are implemented. Overall, my research demonstrates that meaningful engagement requires accessible participation opportunities, clear communication, ongoing relationship-building, and greater transparency about how public feedback is translated into planning outcomes.

1.2 Background and Context

In this section, I introduce the subject of my research, the City of Toronto's Parkland Strategy, as well as providing additional context around the current policies for parkland provision. Together, these are the basis for my research. In 2019, the Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division, in partnership with the City Planning Division, developed the Toronto Parkland Strategy and Toronto Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan. Together, these frameworks provide the City of Toronto with a long-term, 20-year vision for Toronto's Park system (City of Toronto, 2019b, p. 2). The main purpose is to protect Toronto's over 1,500 parks and support the roles they play for Torontonians as the City intensifies and grows with more high-rise residential buildings: protecting recreation, ecological benefits, social gathering spaces, public health benefits, and access to everyday urban parks.

The plans focus on two elements of the City of Toronto's parks system: the Parkland Strategy, which primarily addresses the landscape, guiding decisions on where new parks should be developed and prioritized, and how municipal tools such as parkland dedication or cash-in-lieu help the city respond to growth. The strategy also identifies 'parkland priority areas' and uses data to invest in parks and distribute them across various neighbourhoods. The Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan focuses mainly on both indoor and outdoor recreation facilities across Toronto, identifying residents' needs and priorities by determining where improvements and new developments should be planned.

To support Toronto's parks system, the Parks, Forestry, and Recreation Division invites participants through various community engagements to help set priorities for its five-year review, providing an opportunity to assess what is working in parks and where needs and concerns should be addressed. Between 2024 and 2026, thousands of Torontonians provided feedback on local concerns that may not be visible in technical planning practice, linking community input to park priorities and outcomes. This brings me to my research question: ***how are community engagement practices structured in Toronto's parkland planning process, and how do citizens' ideas influence park design?***

My research examines how community engagement practices are structured within the City of Toronto's parkland planning process. I aim to better understand how the public uses urban parks, how participants provide meaningful feedback to City staff on design, use, and improvements, and whether those contributions are ultimately incorporated into parks. I am also interested in identifying the factors that enable, or limit participants' influence in the park planning process.

Publicly accessible parks are essential to urban living in a global city like Toronto. I find the city's park network to be a critical part of its urban fabric, supporting ecological innovation, social interaction among citizens, and serving as cultural hubs. The public should have a meaningful role in parkland planning and community engagement, as their involvement should directly influence park functionality and shape equitable access to green infrastructure. Parks serve as a bridge between work and home life and to interact with and discover various parts of a community, functioning as destination attractions or city-wide hubs.

1.3 Research Rationale

Community engagement in Toronto's Park planning process requires evaluation because participation and implementation often diverge. Participants may share ideas about accessibility, safety, shade, seating, washrooms, and Indigenous placemaking, but assessing whether those ideas appear in park designs is often lost in translation. Toronto's Park system has been shaped by various pressures over the last eight years, since the implementation of both park plans in 2019, which include: provincial policy changes, rapid growth of vertical developments, and the post-pandemic importance of urban parks. My evaluation of this research topic determined that engagement is a localized source of data from Torontonians' lived experiences to advance and improve parks.

Bill 23, *the More Homes, Built Faster Act*, 2022, changed Ontario's parkland dedication framework by reducing the amount of parkland or cash-in-lieu that municipalities can require for new parks. The alternate dedication rate was halved, from 1 hectare per 3,000 units to 1 hectare per 6,000 units, resulting in a 50 percent reduction in land conveyance potential. The cash-in-lieu formula was also weakened, which requires developers to provide cash in lieu of physical

parkland, from 1 hectare per 500 units to 1 hectare per 1,000 units of its cash equivalent (Costello et al., 2022). Parkland dedication is one of the main ways the City of Toronto secures new park space or funding for existing parks. When provincial legislation limits municipal tools, City staff have less flexibility to acquire land, improve existing parks, and respond to urban growth pressures. Therefore, the role of community engagement in directing those scarce resources becomes more politically important and more necessary to evaluate. As a park and natural heritage planning manager said, 'Communities built post-Bill 23 will have less parkland than pre-Bill 23 communities' so there is likely to be a bit of an inequity over time (Park People, 2023). As City-owned land for new parks becomes scarce, the rise of POPs (Privately Owned Public Spaces), implemented in 2014, has introduced designated open spaces through a development application and review process to maintain a specific type of open space that the public is welcome to access under the owners' rules (City of Toronto, 2017d). Experiments with delivering adjacent pockets of more than 200 open spaces with green amenities similar to Toronto-owned parks can come at the cost of community interest in a possible localized green space. POPs raise concerns about private security surveillance, set entry hours, and restricted signage with 'dos' and 'don'ts' for a 'green space' (Tobin Garrett, 2023).

POPs weaken the meaning of public space by providing access without ownership, control over engagement, or a shared sense of belonging, unlike municipal parks. Under Ontario's Bill 23, POPs can count towards 50 percent of parkland dedication, allowing developers to meet required green space. This raises a deeper problem, as the parks process can be negotiated without the direct influence of participants, unlike in a public park project. As discussed, POPs are problematic in intensified communities; the aesthetics of parks can uplift dense developments, but they won't provide the size, flexibility, and democratic control. As summarized by the non-governmental organization Park People, 'In dense areas, you're not going to get a community or neighbourhood park, so you need a more collaborative approach with the owners of the land and the city' (Park People, 2023).

Bill 98, *the Building Homes and Improving Transportation Infrastructure Act*, 2026, gives developers greater discretion over which land may count toward parkland dedication by further amending the parkland dedication guides to include new rules for developer-identified parkland. Under these amendments, landowners may identify lands not traditionally considered full public parkland, including encumbered lands, stratified lands above infrastructure, and interests in land, such as privately owned publicly accessible spaces (POPs). If a municipality refuses the proposed land, the landowner may appeal to the Ontario Land Tribunal. If the proposed parkland meets provincial criteria, the municipality must accept it. These amendments limit municipal control over park location, quality, and functionality, reducing municipalities' ability to plan strategically and raising concerns for municipalities such as Toronto about whether new parkland will be delivered as smaller, less constrained spaces within private developments (City of Toronto, 2026b, p. 5).

Intensification has made park planning more urgent. According to Statistics Canada, the Greater Toronto Area's population surpassed seven million in 2024 and has over 100 skyscrapers, meaning that a high percentage of the population lives without private green space (Wessel, 2026). Toronto's parks have become the population's backyards, resulting in limited functionality, overcrowding, and increased wear on grass and park equipment. During community engagements, participants constantly discuss what a park should be like. Data also show that 19 hectares of parkland have been added in the last 10 years, while parkland per 100,000 people has dropped from 30 to 29 hectares, and it could get worse (Callan, 2024). This means that even when new parkland is added, population growth can still reduce the amount of park space available per resident.

Reduced parkland has highlighted disparities in daily maintenance across parks. In 2024, Toronto's Auditor General conducted a two-phase audit of daily park maintenance, park inspections, and physical infrastructure repairs. The reports found that City crews often failed to complete maintenance properly, indicating weak daily upkeep overall. More than 46 percent of daily logs lacked GPS records of routine park stops or confirmation that maintenance was performed (Toronto Auditor General, 2024, p. 2). Because Toronto's parks branch maintains more than 1,500 city parks and seasonal staff are responsible for preventive maintenance and non-capital repairs, these failures contributed to leaking foundations and broken or aging park infrastructure (MacMillan, 2025). The audit also found that just under half of repair-related deficiencies were not reported promptly or at all, and that responsibility for action was transferred without adequate integration of systems and processes (Toronto Auditor General, 2025, p. 3). As a result, the lack of documented daily activities limited tracking of park improvements and weakened data on Toronto parks.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of various indoor amenities and the emergence of social distancing as the new norm. Torontonians sought out parks to stay connected and safe. Park visits nearly doubled during the peak lockdowns of 2020-2021 (Wong, 2024). Data patterns have since solidified a newfound appreciation for park use, now higher than pre-pandemic levels (ParkPeople, 2023).

While people enjoying parks is positive, increased pressure to maintain and regulate design and use has fallen on the City's park department, which must manage park user concerns. The increase in visibility of Toronto's unhoused population since the pandemic has pushed encampments into divided discussions about safe design and accessibility to all. As of 2024, more than 200 tents across 72 City-owned parks were documented (Doherty et al., 2024), and widespread public concern led the City of Toronto Police to forcibly remove unhoused people from their encampments at Trinity Bellwoods Park in June of 2021, as shown in Figure 1 (Social Planning Toronto, 2021).



Figure 1: Protest against an encampment eviction, Trinity Bellwoods Park, Toronto, (Source: Hector Vasquez, 2021)

The City's management of public engagement around the removals raised further concerns and revealed the City of Toronto's lack of engagement skills in its toolkit for developing a human rights-based approach to providing amenities and services and for determining what is and isn't allowed in City-owned parks, resulting in extreme decision-making processes. Parks departments are increasingly addressing issues beyond traditional park management and are taking on an evolving role.

According to a Park People report, more than 92 percent of Canadian cities agree that, in recent years, pressure to address social equity, reconciliation, and climate change has gone beyond the 'traditional park issues' which residents address (Park People, 2024, p. 22). As discussed by Gilman et al., collaborative governance offers a model for shifting power to ordinary people and rebuilding their trust in government (2025). At the City of Toronto, this shift in public engagement is evident in innovative approaches such as a civil lottery and the creation of the Toronto Review panel. The City of Toronto also asks what meaningful participation is and how a community is better understood through its needs and discussions with local city councillors, helping define how collaborative governance works between all actors (Gilman et al., 2025).

1.4 Toronto's Parks Plan

Both Toronto's parks plan and the Toronto Parkland Strategy serve as long-term guiding frameworks for growth and investment in these spaces across the city. The Toronto Parkland Strategy reviews, at a macro level, where the city should add new parkland and improve existing parks. The Toronto Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan reviews, at a micro level, current gaps and future needs driven by population growth, and includes policy recommendations and a financial strategy to commit to facility investments and management.

The various facilities can account for nearly 700 sports fields, 118 indoor and outdoor swimming pools, 52 outdoor ice rink locations, and hundreds of sports courts. Parks plans are subject to a five-year review to ensure the changing needs and priorities of Torontonians are reflected. The review is conducted through a two-year community engagement process that gathers participants' concerns about both future and existing parks. For the purposes of my research, I focus on participants' feedback on the design needs of facilities located within parks. During my proposal stage, I was originally interested only in the Parkland Strategy's engagement summaries. Both plans are discussed, including participants' needs for recreation services in those selected Toronto parks with programmed design features. Both plans are part of the many evolutions of Toronto's parkland planning process, as shown in Table 1, which showcases the delivery of engagement for the city's urban parks.

Table 1: The Evolution of Toronto's Parkland Planning Process

2004	Our Common Grounds	Established Toronto's long-term vision for environmental stewardship, active living and community focused recreation, creating the earliest policy legislation for involving residents in park and recreation planning.
2013	Toronto's Parks Plan	Strengthen the city's commitment to connecting with park users and communities, and communication for public input were becoming formal parts of the park planning process.
2015	Bill 73, the *Smart Growth for Our Communities Act*	Required Ontario's municipalities to develop and prepare an available parks plan, strengthen the connection between community needs, and municipal planning decisions.
2017-2018	Toronto Parkland Strategy and Toronto Parks and Recreation Facilities Community Engagements Summaries	Documented how the city collected, categorized and translated participants' priorities into city-wide directions for park designs.
2019	Publishing of Toronto Parkland Strategy and Toronto Parks and Recreation Facilities Plans	Formalized community feedback with long-term policies and priorities showing how residents' ideas can influence strategic planning while still being filtered through technical, financial and city-wide considerations.
2022	Toronto Parkland Strategy Data Refresh	Updated the evidence used to identity parkland gaps and priority areas, shaping where future engagement, investment and improvements would be directed.
2022	Bill 23, *More Homes Built Faster Act*	Reduced and capped parkland dedication requirements, limiting municipal resources, affecting how easily community requests for additional or improved parks.
2024-2026	5-Year Review of Toronto Parkland Strategy and Toronto Parks and Recreation Facilities Community Engagements Summaries	Provide the current evidence of how Toronto structures engagement, who participates, what residents prioritize and how the city communicates the incorporation of public ideas into revised parkland and recreation policies.

2026	Bill 98, the *Building Homes and Improving Transportation Infrastructure Act*	Further altered municipal planning authority and parkland dedication process, including provisions concerning developer-proposed parkland, potentially limiting Toronto's ability to prioritize community-identified park design needs.

After providing background and context for the City of Toronto's community consultation on the Parkland Strategy, I review the scholarly literature on participatory planning, urban political ecology and environmental justice in the next section. I then outline the research methodology and present key findings on how engagement is structured and how community ideas are translated into park planning and design. My paper concludes by considering the implications of these findings for more inclusive, accessible and meaningful community engagement in Toronto's parkland planning process.

2. Literature Review

My literature review examines scholarship on park planning processes, focusing on how parks are socially constructed spaces that depend on social capital, making participants' feedback about their parks central. Community preferences directly shape physical outcomes. Public ideas are selected, interpreted, categorized, and constrained by institutional processes that determine whose knowledge is recognized and which ideas are considered feasible. In doing so, theories of urban political ecology, environmental justice (specifically procedural justice), and public participation provide the context for understanding the role of community engagement in producing actionable results.

2.1 Socio-Ecological Processes in Park Planning

Parks have always been reconstructed and designed by humans as socio-ecological spaces, reinvented by the historical and geographical relationships of their neighbourhoods. From Frederick Law Olmsted's perspective, one of America's preeminent park makers, urban parks were created for the bourgeois leisure class. He advocated large, aesthetically pleasing grounds to promote social interaction between the middle and upper classes and the urban working classes (Birge-Liberman, 2010, p. 1392). Thus, the evolution of park planning today incorporates equitable community engagement practices implemented through legislation and governance structures.

The park planning process uniquely navigates community ideals, as parks function as a production of nature. Scholarship in urban political ecology addresses the organization of human and non-human urban spaces (Heynen et al., 2006, p. 2) and how environments are shaped amid class-, ethnic-, racial-, and gender-based conflicts and power struggles (Heynen et al., 1998, p. 4). Thus, decisions made within the process of producing park space are not only about commodification and the neoliberalism of public space (as suggested by Keil, 2005) but also about how municipal governance practices translate, delay, or defer participants' ideas from the park planning process, even within regulatory frameworks governing park uses. As much as I wanted to understand the intersectionality within participants' engagements, I also wanted to understand whether differences in race, class, gender, and other social positions influence ideas, as recognized during Toronto's engagements. Limitations on my ability to introspect on these differences in depth led me to suggest that inequalities may still be operating indirectly, including who is able to participate and whose inputs are more legible within institutional municipal planning systems.

Post-structuralist critiques of urban political ecology argue that 'nature in the city is a social creation rather than existing devoid of political input' (David & Edge, 2022, p. 3). The authors suggest that both state and non-state actors construct ideas about urban nature and its function. Taken together, these shared understandings constitute an environmental imaginary, which bridges data and desirable environmental conditions (Gabriel, 2014, p. 40). The concept of

environmental imaginations helped me interpret ideas as competing understandings of what parks should look like, who they serve, and which activities should be permitted within them. My findings showed that these imaginations are not only diverse but also actively negotiated during engagement processes, where some visions are prioritized while others are reframed or excluded through planning constraints. Ideas must be shaped by planning documents and legislation when translating these imaginaries into physical outcomes.

Talen (1997) explains that plans express goals for future communities through mapped land-use and development objectives (p. 576) and emphasizes that clear linkages between planning aims and outcomes are essential for implementation. Although Talen doesn't explicitly discuss municipal zoning or conformity with the official plan, her conformance framework evaluates whether outcomes align with broader municipal planning objectives before they are shaped by design. Even so, conformity should not remove accountability to participants. Loh (2011) cautions that unimplemented plans can waste the trust and goodwill of those who participated in their formation (p. 272), underscoring the importance of clearly explaining how community ideas are accepted, modified, deferred, or excluded in the context of legislation. These readings also helped me understand my findings that ideas do not directly move into park design but must first be interpreted through municipal policies, planning objectives, and funding requirements. This suggests that the filtering process is not neutral, as it systematically shapes which ideas are considered feasible and which are set aside.

Urban nature is not simply natural or untouched; all decisions about parks are shaped by funding, ownership, maintenance, design, and public access. Existing power relations in equity and planning choices reveal the need to address wants and needs in parks. While park planning processes operate at the institutional level, these systems are still subverted and challenged by individuals and communities in their everyday lives (Davis & Edge, 2022, p. 3). Thus, the role of consultation brings into focus how the socio-political landscapes of urban parks are shaped by a collective imagination through a diverse range of actors.

When operating within a bureaucratic system, the city is constrained by limited resources, limiting how much can be translated into park design features. As discussed by Boulton & Dedekorkut-Howes (2023), governance factors, including governance structures, tools, and political leadership, that shape urban green space provisions have complex interrelationships, with governance at its core in supporting roles (p. 3). One of these key factors is municipal funding, and citizen support and community expectations influence bureaucratic leadership, which then looks to direct provisions and funding to support new features (Boulton & Dedekorkut-Howes, 2024, p. 11). Municipalities are particularly dependent on local government budgets to fund greenspace provisions, suggesting that community ideas are filtered through municipal budgets and governance tools, alongside political priorities, to be facilitated.

Although urban political ecology focuses more heavily on power dynamics and socioeconomic inequalities, the structure in which urban parks operate is centred within the

capitalist flows of urban-nature spaces. From this perspective, community ideas are not translated into park design on equal terms; instead, they are filtered through planning and funding policies, land values, and development pressures. Urban political ecology accounts for the influence of public participation by considering not only whose constructive ideas are considered, but also whether those ideas align with the political, economic, and institutional structures of government park planning.

2.2 Participatory Planning

Participatory planning scholarship focuses more directly on the relationships between engagement and decision-making. Notably, Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (1969) remains a starting point for understanding how participation is redistributed and how it creates the appearance of public involvement. However, this depiction tends to oversimplify participatory planning as a linear progression from manipulation to citizen power. As Gearin and Hurt (2024) discuss, the role of public participation is more multifaceted and context-dependent, with projects both empowering participants and risking superficial engagement across decision-making processes (p. 5). These readings encouraged me to assess Toronto's engagement not only by whether participation occurred, but also by the level of influence participants were given and the extent to which their contributions could shape planning decisions. My findings suggest that, while participation is consistently present, the degree of influence varies depending on how ideas are processed within municipal decision-making structures.

Reed et al. (2018) argue that engagement outcomes depend on the social, cultural, institutional, and political settings in which participation occurs (pp. 5-7). Participation can range from relatively passive consultation to active two-way deliberation and co-production, in which participants help develop goals and outcomes. The authors argue that participatory approaches can reduce conflict, build trust, and encourage learning, making participants more likely to support and implement decisions over the long term (Reed et al., 2018, p. 1). Thus, trust is not only an attribute held by participants but also the outcome of transparency and well-structured engagement. Reed et al. (2018) specifically associate effective engagement with transparency, sustained involvement throughout the project, and the integration of stakeholder knowledge and values into decision-making (p. 6). This argument is reflected in my findings that accessible in-person dialogue, engagement, and relationship-building help participants feel more comfortable sharing ideas and returning to the engagement process.

Shared language provides a method for establishing a baseline of understanding, breaking down concepts to avoid heavy jargon, and creating comprehensive terminology. As a standardized public participatory method, Legend et al. (2023) discusses how community ideas have been translated through Toronto's Parkland engagement process, specifically using the International Association for Public Participation Spectrum, which is used in Toronto's park planning process. Shared language establishes minimum expectations and gives planners a sense of structure and clarity (p. 333). It is deemed a supportive use, helping convert citizens' everyday

experiences into recognizable park design features. The scholarship supports my findings that engagement frameworks can provide consistency and structure but do not guarantee that community ideas will retain their original meaning or meaningfully influence decision-making.

Shared language among professionals doesn't ensure that community members interpret planning and design terminology in the same way. As discussed, 'the IAP2 bubble, we all know exactly what that means, whereas participation outside that setting remains a very messy place' (p. 334). The authors raise a concern that shared language in this participation process becomes 'less human' and more rigid or oriented towards public relations (p. 333), showing why the mere presence of activities, including web-based surveys, public meetings, design charettes, and focus groups, does not create meaningful influence in capturing ideas. Notably, Toronto's model has removed the 'Empower' feature, which would place 'decision-making in the hands of the public' (p. 332), suggesting that shared understanding among participants would not facilitate well. The authors raise an important point that shared leadership within the empowered model opens up new possibilities for engagement, including citizen committees, citizen juries, and community indicator projects. Thus, the activities that occur should always be assessed by how they are facilitated. Forms of dialogue influence park design; therefore, clear communication and a traceable connection between what participants express, how it is interpreted, and what finally appears in a park design are essential.

The types of activities are also discussed in the public participatory literature. Residents' lived experiences and place attachment can provide valuable input to local planning processes and energize the community around change. Pre-engagement is also presented as a strength preceding in-person participation. As Gearin and Hurt (2024) note, meeting residents where they are and taking the time to understand their environment are important. In-person engagement is a major strength that should be used more often, as survey fatigue, especially among disenfranchised communities, can discourage efforts to build consensus on a project (p. 5). As Boyco et al. (2024) discuss, digital platforms that may appear to expand participation by giving residents convenient access to surveys, maps, forms, and project information do not guarantee that these goals are achieved, as digital engagement must still be carefully planned around the needs and circumstances of a given community.

Governments then act as platform administrators, determining which projects consult the community via the platform and which tools and levels of participation can be enabled (Boyco, 2024, p. 58). This aligns with the point that pre-engagement may be invited only after staff have already defined the problem and narrowed the available options. In the context of park planning, cities might ask residents to rank features without asking how they understand the park, what problems they experience, or whether predetermined categories reflect these priorities. Boyco et al. (2024) briefly discuss AI-driven insights, such as feedback and sentiment analysis (p. 50). Although they do not discuss the integration of AI in much depth, Boyco (2024) warns that planners need to critically examine the hidden technological processes operating within

impeachment platforms, including proprietary algorithms that may moderate democratic debate online or process participant input (Boyco, 2024, p. 58).

Innes and Booher (2018) explain that the key feature of public participation is a collaborative dialogue that involves 'negotiating meanings' about problems and evidence and builds shared meaning in those outcomes (p. 23). Community ideas, therefore, do not remain unchanged throughout the engagement process. Their meaning is interpreted and reconstructed as participants, facilitators, and planners communicate with one another. Although this transformation of information can produce shared understanding, language, institutional assumptions, and power relationships may also 'shape and distort knowledge' (Innes and Booher, 2018, p. 24). In my research, I was particularly interested in how participants' ideas, as articulated in the planning process, were transformed into park design.

Unclear terminology or inconsistent explanations can cause community ideas to lose aspects of their original meaning before they are translated into a design feature. The authors explain that dialogue transforms confusing and conflicting ideas into something meaningful: 'It is within dialogue that ideas and choices emerge and are confusing and conflicting views and knowledge can be transformed' (Innes and Booher, 2018, p. 117). Dialogue is then seen as a 'stream of meaning' through which a new understanding can emerge. Although the original idea may not be simply preserved, it may become a new collective interpretation produced by the group. However, when participants don't have an opportunity to verify a new interpretation that staff later use to develop park design, it may no longer reflect what residents originally intended. Prolonging the engagement process and disregarding participation within engagement. This argument directly supports my finding that participants' ideas are transformed through dialogue and interpretation, as demonstrated by the different meanings participants and facilitators can take away from activities.

Taken together, participatory planning scholarship helped me examine my findings that the influence of community ideas depends on the quality of communication, the accessibility of engagement methods, and the transparency of the process used to translate feedback into design.

2.3 Environmental Justice

The City of Toronto's parks have been uplifted for years by participants' dedication to parkland planning. Non-profit charities, friends of groups, and neighbourhood associations play a significant role in the parkland planning process. These groups continuously advocate for residents who do not fit into the city's traditional engagement methods. Take Toronto's largest urban park, High Park, which was saved at the turn of the century by the Toronto Guilds of Arts after a tough fight with the city, which believed the park, then outside the city boundaries, was not worth preserving (City of Toronto, 2004, p. 23). Accountability does not stop with city staff requests. The role of participants and procedural justice is essential to the park planning process.

Scholarship on environmental justice emerged from struggles against the disproportionate exposure of racialized and low-income communities to hazardous facilities and other environmental hazards (Anguelovski, 2014, p. 32). However, the field has since expanded to examine unequal access to environmental benefits, such as parks. Environmental inequities are not accidental; they are linked to broader processes of urban development and often stem from policy and planning decisions that affect neighbourhood quality and stability. Anguelovski (2014) notes that environmental justice is concerned not only with the number and location of parks but also with safety conditions and usability (p. 31). A park may technically exist near a community yet provide little meaningful benefit if it is poorly maintained, unsafe, and does not meet residents' needs. Scholarship thus supports my finding that the existence of parkland alone does not guarantee equitable benefits, because accessibility, maintenance, safety programming, and the responsiveness of park design to community needs also shape how residents experience parks.

Research by Dong and Miller (2024) on Toronto's green space accessibility reveals substantial spatial inequality. The bottom 20 percent of Toronto residents, in terms of accessibility, have access to only 7 percent of their green spaces, while the top 20 percent have access to approximately 40 percent (p. 51). Using this demographic information to identify neighbourhoods requires more targeted investment and engagement. Demographic diversity within a neighbourhood doesn't necessarily translate into equal representation in community engagement, and it is weakened when unrepresented groups do not attend sessions. Environmental justice theory calls on planners to distinguish the neighbourhood's demographic profile from that of engagement participants and to identify which populations are absent, unrepresented, and less influential. This literature supports my findings that adversity and diversity within a neighbourhood were not always reflected among engagement participants, meaning that the final feedback could be disproportionately representative of older, more vocal, and more available residents.

Procedural justice supports public engagement. As Hassen (2025) notes, findings from a public park survey in the City of Toronto showed that racialized and marginalized communities lacked meaningful participation in green space planning and called for historically excluded voices to be deliberately centred rather than included tokenistically (p. 6). The findings indicate that targeted engagement with advisory boards, community organizations, and specific demographic groups can broaden participation, but the process must show how those contributions enter the final stage. The findings also conclude that when residents provide suggestions but can't see how decisions were made, consultation may preserve the status quo rather than redistribute decision-making influence. Ensuring that these voices are heard, acknowledged, and responded to in urban green space processes links to transparent and meaningful citizen involvement (Hassen, 2025, p. 6). This argument reflects my findings that targeted engagement with community organizations, advisory groups, newcomers, youth, and other equity-deserving groups is necessary to make absent or unrepresented perspectives more

visible. Environmental justice scholarship therefore helped me understand that meaningful park engagement requires more than inviting the public to participate. It also requires identifying who is absent, addressing barriers to participation, and demonstrating how marginalized communities' contributions influence final planning and design decisions.

Overall, my literature review demonstrated that community engagement and park planning are shaped by political, institutional, and social processes rather than by a direct transfer of public ideas into park design. Urban political ecology, to a lesser extent, helped me understand how community preferences are filtered through municipal policies, funding structures, and land use priorities. As with participatory planning, scholarship highlighted the importance of trust, accessible engagement methods, shared language, and ongoing dialogue in determining whether participants are meaningfully influential in shaping park design. Environmental justice scholarship directed attention to whose voices or presence remained underrepresented and to whether barriers related to language accessibility, time, and trust affect participation collectively. These readings supported my findings that citizens' ideas can influence design. Still, their influence depends on who participates, how feedback is interpreted and categorized, and whether their ideas fit within existing political, financial, and institutional frameworks.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This section of my major paper reflects on the approach I used to examine Toronto's parkland planning process. My research focuses on community engagement in Toronto's Parkland Strategy and, to a lesser degree, Toronto's Recreation and Facilities Plan. To assess how engagement practices are carried out and examined by the actors involved, I draw on planning policy and legislation, on-the-ground reporting, interviews, and participatory observations (Table 2). Together, I will focus on how engagement is structured and supported, who participates in discussions, and how engagement outcomes are used in park planning and decision-making in Toronto.

Table 2: Approach Structure

Methods	
Planning Policy Analysis	**Ontario's *Planning Act*** (1990), particularly Section 42, to examine the provincial framework of parkland dedication in cash-in-lieu contributions.
	City of Toronto's Official Plan (Chapter 4) (2026), To assess municipal priorities concerning park accessibility, connectivity, usability, natural heritage, and design.
	Toronto Municipal Code, Chapter 608 (2024), to identify regulations governing park uses, permitted activities, amenities, safety and public access.
Document Analysis	**Toronto Parkland Strategy** (2019), Focusing on its principles, Parkland provision, priorities, goals and proposed engagement practises.
	Toronto Parkland Strategy Data Refresh (2022), examining Updated measures of population growth, access and areas of Parkland need.
	Toronto Budget Notes, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, (2025), Used to examine municipal funding staffing. Capital priorities and financial constraints affecting Park improvements.
	Toronto Parkland Strategy Engagement Summaries (2017-2018) (2024-2026), review the feedback to be coded into recurring themes.
Semi-Structured Interviews	Two Municipal Planners and One Community Organizer via. Zoom. Meant to. Focus on. Engagement, design and materials used. From the perspective of those who conduct engagements.

Observation of Participants	Phase 1: Towards a Vision, Phase 2: Exploring Designs Options, Phase 3: Setting the Direction, Focus on meeting structure, staff facilitation. Demographics, accessibility, and group discussions and interactions between participants, planners, and consultants.

3.2 Qualitative Case Study for Parks Plans

Toronto's Parks Plan, which includes the Parks and Recreation Facilities and Parkland Strategy, uses community engagement summaries and park design data to assess public opinions and concerns. As MacCallum et al. (2019) note, a case study examines a phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when the relationship and its outcomes are not immediately apparent (p. 44). Because community engagement in park planning is interconnected, the case study approach is effective for examining its influence on priorities and park improvement practices. This method also supports a citywide understanding of residents' needs and priorities, informing planning decisions. The parks plan establishes a citywide framework for understanding how Toronto plans, prioritizes, and invests in its park system. In this context, a case study is defined by the relevant time period, external pressures, the community engagement processes consulted by the city, and the actions taken to address park-related concerns. Evaluation of the strategy is supported by triangulation, which cross-verifies information from multiple sources (MacCallum, 2019, p. 46).

A critical question is whether long-term plans to collect participants' feedback on park design constitute a consistent feedback loop for developing new and improved parks. The central question is whether the City of Toronto effectively incorporates this feedback into planning processes. While the City regards the Parks Plan engagements as effective at capturing public opinions and suggestions, the key issue is whether this feedback is meaningfully reflected in planning outcomes. As City staff develop and implement engagement practices, they should examine the impact of participant feedback more closely.

3.3 Research Process

My approach aims to understand how engagement practices shape park planning. Within Ontario's planning hierarchy, documents and policy analysis are the central sources for park planning. To analyse the parkland planning process, it is essential to examine how these policies and documents address community engagement, funding allocation, and equity concerns in park design practices. In my policy analysis, I reviewed *The Planning Act* (1990), *Toronto's Official Plan* (2024), Toronto Municipal Code, Chapter 608 (2024), Toronto's Budget Notes, Parks, Forestry and Recreation (2025), and the engagement summaries for the 2017-2018 and 2024-2026 park plans. I used the 2017-2018 engagements as background to assess changes in community engagement practices, data collection methods, and demographic diversity. To analyse feedback from the engagements, I used a coding approach to identify three major themes

across all phases of the most recent engagements. MacCallum et al. (2019) define coding as breaking larger data sources into manageable parts to identify themes (p. 145). This method helped organize recurring concerns related to park design and apply consistent subthemes. Latent coding was then used to interpret underlying meanings, refine the main themes, and identify relevant subthemes.

I also conducted 30- to 45-minute virtual semi-structured interviews with municipal planners and a community organizer involved in the parkland planning process and in the community engagements for the park plans. This method was intended to examine how state and non-state actors assess current community engagement practices, identify the barriers and successes they have observed, and determine the motivations that lead participants to continue developing their neighbouring parks. As located in both Appendix 1 and 2, I, the student researcher, explore these questions.

My last method is observation of participants, according to MacCallum et al. (2019) as recording informational and interpretive data of a given study (p. 16). I, the student researcher conducted observational research as a passive researcher, going unnoticed to record as much detail as possible (p. 170). I, the researcher, evaluate how engagement practices currently operate, through a checklist, as shown in Table 3, including who attends in-person meetings (demographics, timing, language, and physical accessibility standards); the structure of presentations and activities; and how feedback is collected and acted on.

Table 3: Observational Checklist for Engagements

Category	Observation Checklist	Notes
Who attends?	☐ Number of participants ☐ Residents ☐ City staff/planners ☐ Community organizations ☐ Youth/older adults/families represented ☐ Diversity/representation observed	
Timing	☐ Weekday ☐ Evening ☐ Weekend ☐ Timing may create barriers for work, school, or caregiving	
Language	☐ English only ☐ Translation/interpretation ☐ Plain-language materials ☐ Language barriers observed	
Physical accessibility	☐ Accessible entrance ☐ Accessible seating ☐ Washrooms ☐ Transit/parking ☐ Lighting/sound ☐ Other barriers	
Presentation	☐ Purpose/agenda explained ☐ Presentation provided ☐ Questions encouraged ☐ Policy/funding constraints explained	

Activities	☐ Open discussion ☐ Small groups ☐ Mapping/design activity ☐ Survey/poll ☐ Participants generate their own ideas	
Participation	☐ Facilitators encourage different voices ☐ Some participants dominate ☐ Quieter participants invited ☐ Disagreement welcomed	
Feedback	☐ Verbal feedback ☐ Written feedback ☐ Survey/digital tools ☐ Participants told how feedback will be used	
Influence	☐ Suggestions acknowledged ☐ Previous feedback referenced ☐ Changes linked to community input ☐ Constraints used to limit suggestions ☐ Next steps provided	
Researcher reflection	Who was heard? Who was missing? What influence did participants appear to have?	

This method allows me to track how concerns from the citywide engagements are addressed and, in design discussions for formal park projects, to observe whether designs are communicated adequately to the staff involved and whether participants feel engaged and have meaningful influence in the parkland planning process. Additionally, the park planning process involves many non-state and state actors; as shown in Table 3, their key features and roles are presented.

Table 4: List of Actors involved in the parkland planning process

Actor Group	State / non-state	Role in the process
Government of Ontario and provincial ministries	State	Establish planning legislation in Parkland, dedication rules that define Toronto's authority and funding options.
Toronto City Council and councillors and committees.	State	Approve policies, budgets, land acquisitions and major capital park Projects.
Toronto Parks and Recreation Department.	State	Leads the parkland strategy and facilities plan along with park design, recreation planning, engagement, programming and maintenance.
Auditor General of Toronto.	State	Evaluates Park management, spending, maintenance, and implementation.
City advocacy groups	State Linked	Provide advice on accessibility, disability, seniors and lived experience.

Participants and Park Users	Non-State	Provide local knowledge and preferences through surveys, meetings and workshops and other engagements research.
Consultants and design professionals	Non-State	Translates city requirements and public feedback into park designs.

3.4 Limitations in Research

During my research, I was unable to pursue several elements that would have advanced my findings and provided more insight. In my observation of participants findings section, I was unable to attend an in-person community engagement session for a Phase 3 park project due to the project's longer timeline. This prevented me from observing how community feedback was presented, interpreted, and refined during the latter stage of the planning process.

My research also included only one community organizer in the interviews I conducted. Interviewing more organizers may have provided a broader range of perspectives on participation barriers, trust-building, representation, and the extent to which community influence shaped park planning decisions. Additionally, I was unable to attend a Parks Plan engagement session, so I relied on the City's published engagement summaries, which provided useful information about participation activities and community priorities. Had I attended, I would have been able to directly observe how discussions unfolded, how ideas were interpreted by participants and staff, and which perspectives may have been omitted from the final report.

4. Findings

Citizens' ideas do shape park design in Toronto's parkland planning process. However, this influence is neither automatic nor evenly distributed. Citizen ideas shape park design through participants who attend engagement sessions, complete online surveys, serve on advisory committees, or are encouraged to participate through community engagement around a neighbouring or city-wide park. As a result, park design is shaped not only by 'community feedback' but also by the specific participants whose ideas become visible to City staff, landscape architect consultants, and decision-makers.

This section presents the research I gathered through all my listed approaches to decipher and understand park design in the planning process. My findings ranged from policy and document analysis to semi-structured interviews and participatory observation. First, I outline how provincial legislation, municipal frameworks, and funding tools in city planning frameworks shape the types of engagement ideas that are carried forward. Then, I present findings on how engagement methods, accessibility, relationships, and participant representation affect who ideas are collected from. I examine how city staff and consultants organize, interpret, and translate feedback into broader themes and potential park design features.

4.1 Planning Policy Analysis

4.1.1 Planning Act

The Planning Act, 1990, is the guiding legislation for land use and development in Ontario, with sections dedicated to municipalities' development obligations to the province. Section 42 provides municipalities with the authority to require developers to convey land and/or pay 'cash-in-lieu' (an equivalent financial payment in lieu of providing physical parkland) for parks and public recreational purposes as a condition of development (City of Toronto, 2021b). This was not always the case for how parkland was divided in the City of Toronto. Ontario's first Planning Act, 1946, did not set standards for public parks for municipalities, due to prewar land development patterns (Taylor & Van Nostrand, 2008, p. 32). Chapter 51 of the Ontario Planning and Development Act of 1973 first set standards for the management of public-private open space, such as golf courses, City-owned parks, and recreational spaces. These standards were eventually incorporated into the City's Official Plan in the 1950s.

Parks legislation then became formative in Ontario Planning Act, with the earliest forms of parkland legislation outlined in Section 5 (a) (iii) of Ontario's Planning Act of 1973: '*A development plan may contain the general location of industry and commerce, the identification of major land use areas and the provision of major parks and open space and the policies in regard to the acquisition of lands*' (Province of Ontario, 1973, p. 500). Parkland dedication rates continued to increase into the 1980s. The 1983 Planning Act, found in Chapter 1, Section 41, set the standard for land conveyance: 2 percent of the land area to be conveyed to the municipality for park or other public recreational purposes for commercial and industrial purposes, and 5

percent to be conveyed to the municipality for park or other public recreational purposes for all other land uses. Newly created requirements include the alternative rate requirement, allowing municipalities to require developers to provide one hectare of parkland per 300 units, instead of the standard rates and cash-in-lieu contributions, allowing developers to allocate funding to the provision of urban parks and other public recreational purposes (Province of Ontario, 1983, p. 44).

Under the most recent version of the Ontario *Planning Act, 1990*, the standards for land conveyancing and alternative rates for Toronto's parks were set. Since Toronto's amalgamation in 1998, park space has been unevenly distributed across the city, relying in part on cash-in-lieu contributions to support new parks. However, in built-out areas such as the downtown and midtown neighbourhoods, high-density development placed more residents on smaller parcels of land, making it difficult to secure new parkland and, in turn, widening the gap in available land for parks despite rising population growth.

In light of this structural gap of publicly accessible parks, Bill 73 (*Smart Growth for our Communities Act, 2015)* has, since 2015, amended Section 42 of the *Planning Act*, *1990*, to include Subsection (4.1), which requires a local municipality to complete a publicly available Parks Plan that examines the needs for parkland in the given municipality. The preparation of the parks plan includes the municipality (a) consulting with every school board and (b) any other persons or public bodies that the municipality considers appropriate (Province of Ontario, 2026). With this information in mind, the provincial government has not outlined any additional content for the Parks Plan. The plans' management and creation are left to the city to implement.

4.1.2 Toronto Official Plan

The City of Toronto Official Plan, adopted by Toronto City Council and approved by the Province of Ontario, was consolidated in 2024 and governs long-term growth by setting policies that balance development with environmental, economic, and social interests. Various sections guide planning for parks, parkland, and open space. Chapter 4, Section 4.3 outlines Parks and Open Space Areas, and subsection (4) presents the City's local parkland as of December 2025, covering approximately 13 percent of the City's total land area and comprising over 1,500 parks (Figure 2).

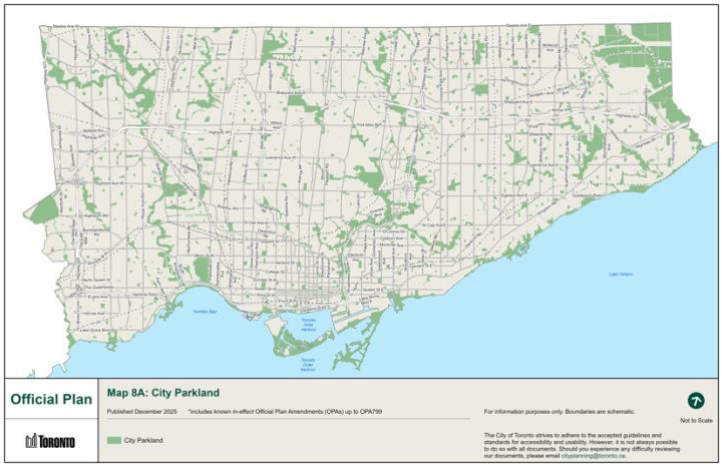


Figure 2: Map 8A: City Parkland (Source: Toronto, 2025)

Section 4.3 (6) presents development criteria for Toronto parks, focusing on protecting natural heritage features, improving and preserving public visibility and pedestrian access, creating continuous linkages between parks and open spaces, expanding size and usability, and respecting the physical form, design, and character (City of Toronto, 2025m). Further policies that highlight how design should be considered look to 3.1.1 The Public Realm, with subsection 5, which promotes quality design through allocated funding, design review panels to promote the public interest, and the use of skilled professionals in the design and construction process (City of Toronto, 2024d, p. 4). This policy highlights that those actors, specifically landscape consultants and state actors, have a greater say in the creation of public amenities, suggesting that public input is required but is not necessarily the guiding or legislated method for developing design.

Park design can, of course, vary based on what participants deem important. As Chapter 1, Section 1.7 further discusses, individuals and communities should actively participate in decisions and changes that affect them, and the section encourages Torontonians to attend city engagements (City of Toronto, 2025l). The official plan identifies broader themes and categories to balance against development requirements and municipal funding, supporting public participation while retaining institutional policies on how ideas are modified, prioritized, and/or excluded from park designs.

4.1.3 Municipal Code, Chapter 608

Toronto's *Municipal Code, Chapter 608 (2024),* defines the General Manager of Parks, Forestry and Recreation as the key administrator responsible for City-owned parks. The code itself does not outline community engagement practices*;* Article III, 'Park Uses', reveals how parkland planning and use are structured under municipal authority, especially through the permanent system and zoning that apply across all City parks (City of Toronto, 2024g, p. 14). This suggests that community members' ideas don't automatically shape park design but are translated through administratively accepted uses, amenities and permissions.

The code defines a 'designated area' as a park established and constructed for a specific use. This is an important feature for understanding park design, as many features discussed in engagements only become embedded based on spatialized use (City of Toronto, 2024g, p. 16). Various specific park amenities, including playground splash pads, sports fields, skateboard parks, outdoor swimming pools, picnic shelters, public washrooms, etc., must fit within these municipal categories. Interestingly, tobogganing, a very well-loved winter activity that brings many families with children, was initially prohibited at many Toronto parks in 2024 (Draaisma, 2024). While community members may see a hill as a public recreational site within its park, the City may view the same hill through the lens of safety, liability, maintenance, and operational concerns. This means that a park design feature is not automatically available just because people use it. It must be formally accepted as safe and appropriate within the City's regulatory zoning by-laws.

The code also includes definitions and rules related to people with disabilities, service animals, and accessible parking. These themes are addressed throughout engagements. For example, the code defines disability by reference to the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005.* According to grey literature research, more than 78 percent of municipalities indicated that universal accessible design is one of the more important features needed in parks, and more than 10 percent of city residents indicated that insufficient accessibility features discourage them from enjoying or attending city parks (Park People, n.d.).

Throughout the community engagement process, advisory boards are set up to fill gaps in planning legislation, which do not clearly reflect a forward-thinking and collaborative approach. However, these advisory boards must be supported by municipal staff when coordinating projects. A common theme within the park planning process is a bureaucratic approach and the many barriers that must be navigated in order. For inclusive and accessible engagement to be present, many municipal codes will present these themes but not follow up with actionable steps, requiring many non-profits to support community efforts.

4.2 Document Analysis

4.2.1 Budget Notes, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 2025

Engagement consultations rely on funding to turn park design ideas into actionable plans. The 10-year Capital Plan provides a measurable account of progress in park maintenance, improvements, and amenities. The city reported that more than 25,000 Torontonians participated in more than 60 engagement processes in 2024, indicating that engagement is a recurring and organized part of park planning (City of Toronto, 2025b, p. 8). The budget shows how funded park improvements, such as benches, shaded structures, and washrooms, reflect common priorities raised during park engagements. The budget channels requested community features through various programs, including the Back on Track Park and Tree Enhancements Program (2024), which includes the installation of 122 park benches, 70 additional portable washrooms, four new shade structures, 11 combined tennis and pickleball courts, and two stand-alone pickleball courts (City of Toronto, 2025b, p. 8). This example shows how common engagement priorities for seating, shading, washrooms, and recreation opportunities can be translated into tangible physical improvements. As early as 2025, the city also allocated $1 million to the Restoring Local Gathering Spaces or Parks Beautification initiative. This funding is intended to create additional benches, shaded seating, picnic tables, and portable washrooms (City of Toronto, 2025b, p. 8).

Participants' ideas can then be shaped by tangible park features, but they are ultimately grouped into broader service categories before receiving funding and becoming actionable. Budget approval is a major stage between engagement and implementation; as shown, proposed design features must compete for the allocated operating and capital funding across all of Toronto's parks and recreation projects, so participants' ideas are measured by how much funding a given project has.

The influence of these ideas is mediated by the municipal budgeting process and depends on council-approved funding before they can be implemented. This is evident in the capital plan numbers for 2025 to 2034: approximately $4.3 billion in gross capital expenditures are allocated, with about 7.4% dedicated to structuring the parks plans (City of Toronto, 2025b, p. 20). This shows how large capital programmes create opportunities for community preferences to influence new and revitalized parks, including Bathurst Quay and Common, and Leslie Lookout, to name a few. But public ideas must be incorporated into a much wider portfolio of hundreds of competing projects. Community input, therefore, shapes park design and operations, but is mediated by municipal budgeting, administrative categorizations, and long-term maintenance capacity.

4.2.2 Toronto Parkland Strategy 2019 and 2022's Data Refresh

The Toronto Parkland Strategy: Growing Toronto Parkland framework (2019) provides the City with a comprehensive review of ways to enhance Toronto's Park system. The strategy focuses on elements such as the engagement summary, vision, principles and values, and municipal tools in place to meet needs and inform studies that support strategic planning for Toronto's Park system. The vision statement from stakeholders during the engagement phase states, 'Parks are essential elements for a good quality of life by supporting personal well-being, social connection, healthy living and ecological sustainability. Toronto's Park system will expand and improve as the city grows to ensure that parkland is accessible, functional, connected, and resilient.' (City of Toronto, 2019b, p. 7).

This suggests that park design includes various multifunctional elements to support all Torontonians, with distinct features. A section titled 'What Makes a High-Quality Park' includes Prominence and Visibility, identifying safety and security in the public realm; Identity and Character for a sense of place; User Experience and Physical Characteristics to provide a range of activities; and Thermal Comfort to design visual interest and a range of year-round programming (City of Toronto, 2019b, p. 11). Parks are also classified for strategy through various categories, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Classifying Parks for the Purposes of the Parkland Strategy (Source: Toronto, 2019)

The City of Toronto understands that various typologies, including the size, function, and type of park, are not well suited to the +1,500 City-owned and operated parks, and that understanding the classifications helps determine which park features are best (City of Toronto, 2019b, p. 15). From this classification, percentages of asset categories allow us to group the various categories, indicating that the majority of Toronto's Parkland area consists of parks greater than 8 hectares. At the same time, Toronto's smallest parks make up 39 percent of Toronto's parks, although they make up one percent of land area (City of Toronto, 2019b, p. 17).

The strategy framework goes on to examine Parkland needs in the city through six lenses, including parkland provision, the impact of growth, park range distribution, equity, access and connection, and climate change. Parkland provision examines the amount of parkland available to residents using Toronto census data. As shown in Figure 4, the range of percentages is presented; on average, residents had access to 28 metres of parkland per person at the maximum possible rate (City of Toronto, 2019b, p. 23). Regarding the impact of growth, which determines the amount of Parkland per population growth, 2018 data on Parkland deficits indicate that 87 percent of all census blocks will see a decrease in parkland (City of Toronto, 2019b, p. 23). This is expected in more intense developments, such as the downtown core and Yonge and Eglinton Centre, which will continue to grow.

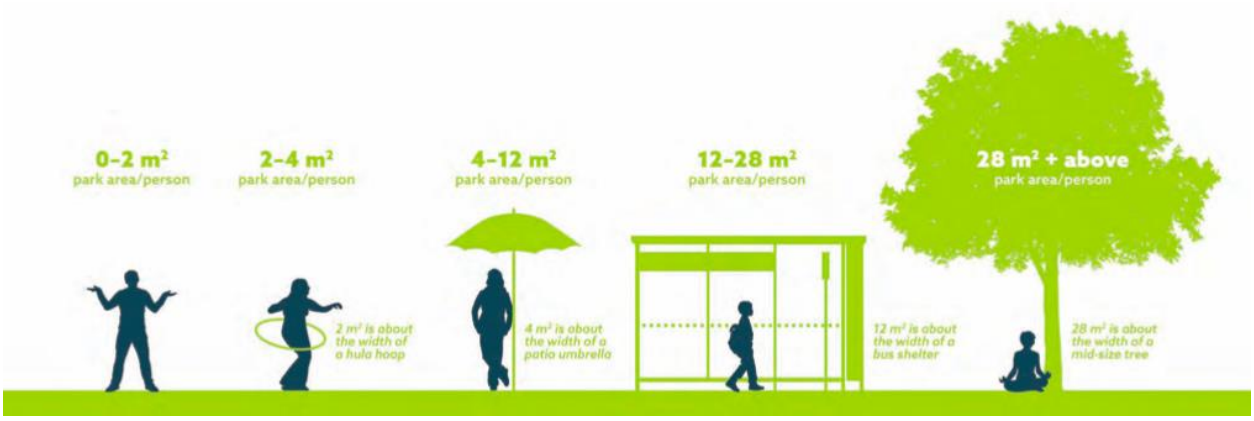


Figure 4: Parkland Provision Ranges (Source: Toronto, 2019)

Classification of park ranges and distribution has identified gaps in the system, including accessibility to Toronto's larger parks, the full range of programming as determined by The Parks and Recreation facilities master plan, maintaining aging facilities in a state of good repair and responding to future facility needs, and equitable benefits in accessibility needs and investment in new park design (City of Toronto, 2019b, p. 23). Parks have also become an integral part of Toronto's green infrastructure and must be maintained and preserved in the face of climate change. Parks also play a microclimate-adjusting role in reducing the impact of the urban heat island effect to improve air quality (City of Toronto, 2019b, p. 26).

The 2022 data refresh was developed to provide key data on the changing nature of parks, including population growth, development activity, new and future parkland, mobility networks,

and other inputs, to ensure they are as up to date as possible for City staff, the public, and partners to make informed decisions about current and future Parkland needs (City of Toronto, 2022a, pp. 3-4). The updated analysis also included over 70 new parks, corrected park boundaries, land exchanges, and other changes to the Toronto Park system. It also included future parks expected by 2034, including the Port Lands flood protection parks and parks secured through development applications (City of Toronto, 2022a, p. 6). The main updated Parkland provision statistics, which saw the most significant change, indicate that even after future parks are incorporated, Toronto's average parkland provisions are projected to decline by approximately 10 percent by 2034 (City of Toronto, 2022a, p. 9).

The growth impact map in Figure 5 also shows that the decline will be uneven, with some high-growth areas projected to see parkland provision decrease by more than 25 percent, and in some areas by more than 50 percent (City of Toronto, 2022a, p. 14). The refresh demonstrates how Toronto translates parkland needs into technical categories that include parkland supply, population growth and development activity. Community needs therefore do not directly determine park investment. Features are interpreted using municipal datasets, mapping methods and mapping priorities before influencing park planning decisions and actionable features.

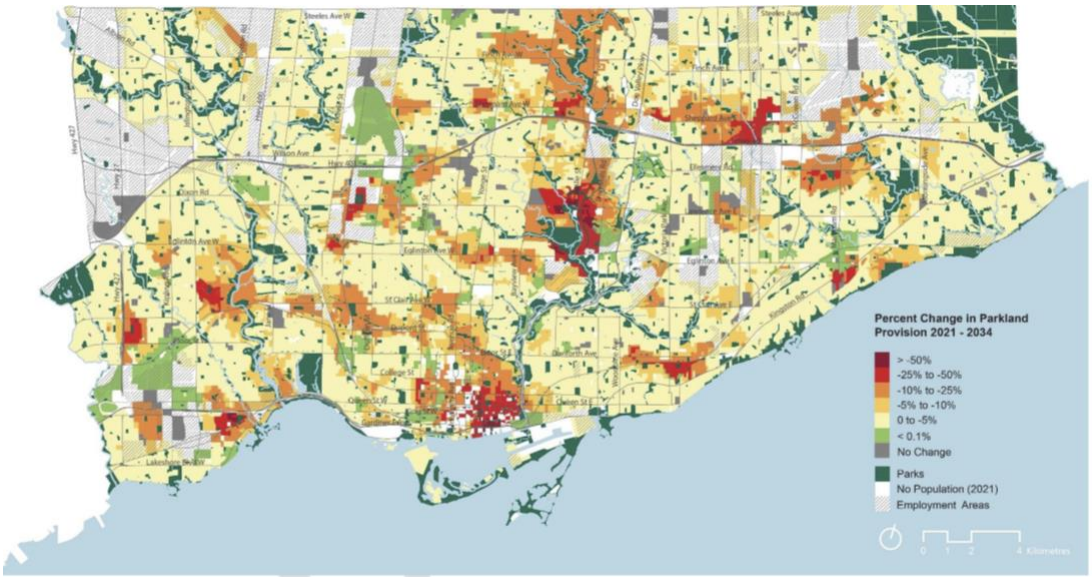


Figure 5: Impact of Growth on Parkland Provision, by Percent Change (Source: Toronto, 2019)

4.2.2 Parks Plans Community Engagement Summaries (2017 to 2018)

Toronto Parkland Strategy

As part of the Toronto Parkland Strategy, City staff began community engagement to develop a framework for addressing parkland needs. Phase 1, initiated in May 2017, used six participatory methods: four in-person engagements (internal and external stakeholder workshops, advisory board and council presentations and discussions, pop-up sessions, and open houses) and two online engagements (a website launch and an online survey).

The in-person engagements during Phase 1 addressed challenges and potential solutions related to parkland needs. The initial engagement in May 2017 included 31 internal stakeholders (City staff) and 32 external stakeholders (community groups, businesses, and non-profits). These participants helped frame questions later posed to the public, focusing on equitable access, such as improving wayfinding and signage, balancing naturalized environments with recreational use, incorporating Indigenous placemaking through culture and history, and ensuring diverse community voices were included (City of Toronto, 2017a, pp. 10-11). Combining feedback from both stakeholder groups made it difficult to distinguish between their respective comments.

In September 2017, City staff met with two advisory boards: the Planning Review Panel, a representative group of 28 randomly selected Torontonians convened to inform public input on major planning initiatives (now disbanded), and the Aboriginal Affairs Committee, which oversees the social, cultural, economic, and spiritual well-being of Indigenous peoples. The Planning Review Panel identified the need to improve connectivity and programming opportunities for trails and pathways, incorporate more shaded areas and wind protection, ensure year-round use and access, support regular maintenance, create multifunctional spaces for sport, and minimize user conflicts through design (City of Toronto, 2017a, pp. 11-12). The Aboriginal Affairs Committee held an informal presentation and discussion on the importance of Indigenous land-based education (City of Toronto, 2017a, p. 12).

Guided by stakeholder input, City staff refined questions about park design to initiate Phase 1's in-person engagements for Torontonians from August to September 2017. Pop-up sessions were held at 21 community events, festivals, and community centres, engaging 1,300 participants through one-on-one conversations and by distributing project postcards to raise awareness and encourage participation in the online survey (City of Toronto, 2017a, p. 7). Open houses were held across four districts—Scarborough, Toronto & East York, Etobicoke York, and North York—on weekend evenings in September 2017. Feedback from these public engagements was consolidated and categorized into three major themes: Expanding, Sharing, and Connecting (Table 4).

Table 4: Themes created during Toronto Parkland Strategy engagements (Source: Toronto, 2017)

Expand (How to plan for new parkland)	Share (How to plan for equitable access)	Connect (How to improve access and address gaps)
• Smaller parks. • New unconventional parks. • Improvement of parks in lower income neighbourhoods. • Improve the quality of parks;	• Enjoy naturalized parks and active spaces. • Use CIL (Cash-in-Lieu) funds to improvement existing parks. • Diversity of uses and amenities in parks (e.g. benches, public washrooms, water fountains, tree canopy/shade, dog parks);	• Long travel times to destination parks. • Wayfinding • Increasing connectivity between parks and hydro corridors and existing rail paths. • Safer pedestrian crossing and dedicated cycling pathways • Golf courses as a barrier;

The 'Expanding' theme focused on assessing satisfaction with existing parks. Participants identified overcrowding as a significant concern and suggested that designing smaller parks (parkettes) could help alleviate congestion. Additional recommendations included creating parks in unconventional spaces, such as shared use of schools and golf courses, and improving park quality, particularly in lower-income neighbourhoods (City of Toronto, 2017a, p. 16).

The 'Sharing' theme examined equitable access and the perceived value of park spaces. Participants emphasized the need for diverse amenities, including temporary pop-up stations in winter, lighting, benches, public washrooms, water fountains, tree canopy and shade, and bicycle parking. The need to balance naturalized and active or recreational spaces within parkland was also highlighted (City of Toronto, 2017a, p. 16).

The 'Connecting' theme focused on solutions to improve access to parks. Participants suggested expanding TTC shuttle services to connect people to neighbouring parks, as travel times to destination parks could be as long as 45 minutes, according to open house feedback (City of Toronto, 2017a, p. 20). Additional recommendations included improving wayfinding with better signage and mapping tools, enhancing communication about parks on online platforms, and ensuring connectivity for cyclists and pedestrians by linking public spaces (e.g., rail paths and hydro corridors) and public-private green spaces (e.g., school yards, golf courses) (City of Toronto, 2017a, p. 20).

The online survey, conducted from August to October 2017, included targeted questions about respondents' city district, age, parental status, and access to green space. Over 65 percent of respondents were from Toronto and East York and were aged 25 to 44. Most respondents reported having access to their own green space, either a backyard (48 percent) or a shared space

(15 percent), while 37 percent had none (City of Toronto, 2017a, p. 13). When asked about the most important use of parks, 31 percent cited enjoying nature, 43 percent keeping active, 8 percent connecting with communities, and 17 percent rest and relaxation (City of Toronto, 2017a, p. 17). Regarding transportation, 79 percent walked to parks, 12 percent biked, 8 percent drove, and only one percent used transit. The first phase of engagements informed an updated vision for the Parkland Strategy, incorporating input from Councillors, stakeholders, and the public.

Phase 2 began in January 2018 and continued through September 2018. The original three themes (Expand, Share, and Connect) were revised into four principles: Expand (growing parkland), Improve (enhancing activities and programming), Connect (improving connectivity to other open spaces), and Include (ensuring accessibility for all users) (City of Toronto, 2018a, pp.1-2). The 'Share' theme was removed during an added workshop, although the specific session was not identified, and 'Include' was introduced to better communicate the principle's intent (City of Toronto, 2018a, p.5). The objectives of Phase 2 engagements were to communicate and educate about the benefits and challenges of the parkland system, maximize participant outreach, and incorporate meaningful input (City of Toronto, 2018a, p.5).

Phase 2 comprised five community engagements: four in-person events and one online survey. The first stakeholder workshop, held in March 2017, updated the same group of stakeholders who had previously been solicited for input on the future of the park system. Participants were asked, 'What do you want the park system to look like in 100 years?' and helped develop a vision statement. Stakeholders identified priorities, including a better-connected, greener, and more equitable park system with inclusive programming for all Torontonians (City of Toronto, 2018a, p. 9).

The vision statement is quite long, breathing life into the 'City in a park' phrase coined by the city. It highlights Toronto's green space network with phrases such as 'parks are an extension of homes and living spaces, the centre of neighbourhoods and contribute to the sense of belonging,' 'Toronto is and will continue to be a City within a park,' and 'improved connections in and between our parks and open spaces will not only provide better access for people, but also better link land and water...'. However, none of these phrases were included in the final strategy, as a subsequent workshop with internal City staff led to significant revisions of the draft vision statement (City of Toronto, 2018a, pp. 9-10).

During the winter of 2018, 29 pop-up sessions were held at 14 community centres, two community malls, and various community events, engaging 852 individuals in discussions with City staff. Phase 2 specifically targeted North York, Etobicoke, and Scarborough to address the underrepresentation observed in Phase 1 (City of Toronto, 2018a, p. 7). However, detailed results from these sessions were not explicitly reported.

In May, City staff hosted the first TOparks talk, titled 'Growing Toronto's Parkland,' featuring a panel that included the parks department's general manager, the executive director of

the Toronto Youth Cabinet, and four panellists representing each theme. The event included a live participation feature and a hashtag search, allowing attendees to contribute questions and comments in real time. The Q&A format showed that Torontonians were not simply passive listeners but actively raised concerns about how parks function in their neighbourhoods. This reflected the broader purpose of the strategy, which was developed through public consultation to respond to local needs and lived experiences. The discussion highlighted that Toronto's parkland challenges are highly place-specific, such as Eglinton Flats, Mount Dennis, and the Jane and Eglinton area, with many participants explaining how barriers, such as fencing, poor connections, unclear access points, and limited awareness, can make parks feel disconnected from the surrounding community.

In this sense, small design changes in planning interventions can make a major difference in how people use and value parks (City of Toronto, 2018b). Additional feedback included concerns about parks neighbouring POPs (Privately Owned Publicly Accessible Spaces) and raised questions, especially about whether they are designed around community needs. Environmental protections were a major theme, and natural areas are essential parts of Toronto's park system, but they may not always be fully protected by bylaws or consistent management. Lastly, accessibility was discussed as a strong and ongoing challenge. Accessible Park planning should be incorporated into all park features, regardless of age, ability, or background, but this was not being properly addressed at the time.

The online engagement tool was used again from May to June, yielding a more balanced distribution of survey responses: 20 percent from Etobicoke York, 16 percent from North York, 13 percent from Scarborough, and 51 percent from Toronto and East York. Respondents were primarily aged 25-34 (22 percent), 35-44 (29 percent), and 45-54 (18 percent) (City of Toronto, 2018a, p. 13). Key findings indicated that improved programming and increased activities in parks were priorities for both neighbourhood parks (54 percent) and City-wide parks (44 percent), with this trend particularly notable among Scarborough residents (City of Toronto, 2018a, p. 14). Additionally, 46 percent of respondents reported using other green spaces to meet their outdoor needs rather than their local neighbourhood park, a pattern mirrored for City-wide parks.

Toronto Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan

The Facilities plan engagements began much earlier, from December 2015 to June 2016, to determine which recreation facilities residents wanted to use most and how to improve them. For my research, I will evaluate the results in relation to park design for recreation facilities, with greater emphasis on the benefits of park features. Table 5 presents the range of engagements, the dates, and the number of participants for Phase 1.

Table 5: Toronto Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan Phase 1, 2015-2016 Engagement Organization (Source: Toronto, 2016)

Engagement Method	Date	Number of Participants
Online Survey	December 2015 to January 2016	3,320
Town Halls	February 23rd and 24th and March 2nd and 3rd, 2016	140
Focus Groups	March 22nd and 31st, 2016	324
Stakeholder Advisory Group Meetings	November 26, 2015	20 organizations
	April 12, 2016	14 organizations
Website Feedback Form	November 2015 to June 2016	120
Toronto Planning Review Panel	May 14th, 2016,	28

All the provided engagements included the most common denominator of challenges presented to city staff. For my research. Providing quality facilities, working with others to meet needs and improving accessibility and funding challenges were the most prevalent feedback on park design found within the facilities engagement plan.

Across the 2016 consultation activities, participants supported park designs that were flexible, accessible, and responsive to changing community needs. Rather than designing spaces for only one activity, participants preferred multifunctional areas that could accommodate different sports, formal recreation, cultural activities, and users of different ages. Participants suggested converting underused facilities for emerging users, creating adaptive fields and courts, and providing spaces that can function throughout the year (City of Toronto, 2016c, pp. 2, 6-8).

Accessibility was understood as both a physical design feature for parks and as people's ability to reach and comfortably use them. This included persons with disabilities, equity and diversity. Senior and youth focus groups called for accessible pathways, parking, transit and active transportation connections, standardized accessibility features and signage, and design that accommodates people with disabilities, seniors, children, and caregivers (City of Toronto, 2016i, pp. 3, 6-8). Participants also wanted welcoming entrances, lobbies, and gathering spaces that encourage interaction and make people feel safe and included (City of Toronto, 2016b, pp. 3-4). The Toronto Planning Review Panel also identified accessibility for people with disabilities as a design priority. Panel members argued that both older and newly constructed facilities should accommodate people with disabilities and create inclusive, welcoming spaces (City of Toronto, 2016g, p. 5).

Participants consistently linked good design to maintenance and everyday functionality. They requested cleaner, safer spaces, timely repairs, updated equipment, improved sports fields, maintenance, and supporting amenities such as washrooms, seating, lighting, changing rooms, water fountains, and shade (City of Toronto, 2016b, pp. 10-11). Toronto-East York participants

specifically requested more benches and pathways at Earls Court Park, storage space for Regent Park, a bake oven, and community gardens (City of Toronto, 2016i, pp. 2-4).

Facilities were expected to be both attractive and practical, durable, and capable of supporting year-round use. Feedback also emphasized designing parks according to neighbourhood demographics and population growth (City of Toronto, 2016i, pp. 2-4). New or improved parks and recreation spaces were requested in growing, high-density, and underserved areas (e.g., Wynford Drive, central Etobicoke, and the quarry lands near Victoria Park and Gerrard). Participants wanted designs to respond to seniors, youth, newcomers, and low-income communities, including youth-friendly spaces, community kitchens, warm pools and formal drop-in areas, intergenerational spaces, and opportunities for cultural and environmental activities (City of Toronto, 2016b, p. 2; pp. 11-13).

The resident survey generally found satisfaction with existing facilities but also indicated demand for targeted improvements. 62 percent of respondents were satisfied with Parks and Recreation facilities (City of Toronto, 2016h, pp. 4-7), while many believed updates were still needed. Preferred smaller facilities located closer to home and outdoor facilities more commonly identified as insufficient included bike parks, outdoor pools and basketball courts.

Phase 2 evaluated draft ideas on which new or improved facilities were needed most and their locations across the city. Table 6 shows the engagements, dates and number of participants. Across the Phase 2 engagement activities, participants generally supported renewing and improving existing park and recreation facilities before prioritizing new construction. Participants also wanted facility renewal decisions to reflect local conditions rather than applying a single design solution to every neighbourhood.

Table 6: Toronto Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan Phase 2 Engagement Organization (Source: Toronto, 2016)

Engagement Method	Date	Number of Participants
Resident Survey 2	November 4th – December 2nd, 2016	1,025
Pop-up Consultation Sessions	November 2016	800
Stakeholder Working Session	November 23rd, 2016	37
Youth Working Session	January 10th, 2017	20
Stakeholder Advisory Group	October 19th, 2016	10 organizations
Website Feedback Form	July to December 2016	143
Toronto Planning Review Panel Meeting	April 2nd, 2016	28

Accessibility was one of the most consistent design priorities. In the resident survey #2, 91 percent of respondents considered improved washrooms in change rooms important, while 84 percent prioritized accessibility improvements for seniors and people with disabilities. Improved

mechanical systems, facility appearance, and access to public transit were also highly rated (City of Toronto, 2017b, pp. 5-7). Participants proposed accessible washrooms, appropriately timed automatic doors, highly contrasting pool railings, braille signage, tactile pathways, audio instructions for exercise equipment, and staff trained to assist people who are deaf or blind. Pop-up participants also raised the placement of washrooms near entrances, accessible toilet seat heights, parking and emergency exits, and seating for seniors (City of Toronto, 2017c, p. 2; City of Toronto, 2016d, p. 2). Stakeholders argue that accessibility inclusion should be explicit principles in the master plan rather than assumed to fall under a broader commitment to equity, and called for clearer definitions explaining how these principles would guide facility design and investment decisions (City of Toronto, 2016f, p. 2).

Feedback indicated that parks and facility designs should provide more seating, shade, lighting, washrooms and comfortable gathering areas, with participants again requesting year-round park washrooms and picnic shelters. Open spaces and improved security and lighting, especially in parks during evenings and throughout the year (City of Toronto, 2017c, p. 2; City of Toronto, 2016d, pp. 2-3). Safety was connected to both accessibility and physical design. Respondents recommended unobstructed activity spaces, reducing glare from large glass walls, adequate lighting and design that promotes stability. These features were understood as making facilities safer and more useful for people with different mobility, sensory and recreational needs (City of Toronto, 2017c, p. 2).

Participants wanted facilities to respond to climate change and shifting seasonal use patterns. Recommendations included more shade along pathways, over benches, and beside sports fields; environmentally sustainable buildings; and facilities capable of supporting longer or year-round recreation seasons (City of Toronto, 2017c, p. 2). The stakeholder advisory groups also recommended treating climate adaptation as a design consideration, including additional shade, artificial turf where appropriate, and planning for shorter outdoor skating seasons (City of Toronto, 2016e, p. 2). Participants wanted community involvement to continue after the master plan was completed. Stakeholders recommended consulting with participants when facilities are upgraded, creating ongoing engagement and involving non-users and future users during implementation (City of Toronto, 2016f, pp. 1-3).

4.2.3 Parks Plans Community Engagement Summaries (2024 to 2026)

This analysis focuses on qualitative feedback from the City of Toronto Parks and Recreation engagement process, highlighting recurring themes and community priorities related to park design. As part of the City-wide, multi-phase community engagement process that guided the development of the updated Toronto Parkland Strategy and Toronto Facilities Plan, the engagement summaries for the five-year review covered the period from October 18, 2024, to January 6, 2026, and included online surveys, social media postings, stakeholder meetings, in-person pop-up events, community-led and classroom workshops, and virtual meetings, totalling 53 community engagements.

To analyse feedback from the engagements, I used coding. As mentioned, this process organizes recurring concerns in park design and assigns codes across all recent engagements. As themes are documented, latent coding develops ideas and clarifies subthemes. As MacCallum et al. (2019) state, underlying themes and subthemes become visible, even when participants do not state them explicitly (p. 146). I analysed Phases 1 (Exploring the Options) and 2 (Setting the Direction) over the last two years. Phase 1 identifies the needs and priorities of various communities through 10 forms of participatory community engagements over 5 months, with feedback collected from 12,221 participants. Phase 2 builds on the needs and priorities identified in Phase 1 to focus on draft directions and how these directions were refined, with advisory boards and groups returning and Torontonians having an opportunity to provide additional feedback, for a total of 2,666 participants.

Through latent coding, common themes and features in park design were grouped into subthemes. The development of each theme is based on my own research and categorization of the engagement summaries.

Major Theme 1: Accessibility, Equity & Inclusion

Accessibility, equity and inclusion emerge as a major theme across the engagement findings. Participants emphasized that Toronto parks should be designed, distributed, maintained and governed in ways that respond to the diverse needs of residents. The feedback extended beyond physical accessibility to include equitable inclusion and cultural representation for communities to participate in park governance. Four related subthemes were identified that fit into the larger theme.

Subtheme 1.1: Universal Accessibility and Mobility

This subtheme focuses on physical transportation and service-related barriers that can prevent residents from fully accessing and using parks. Participants supported an inclusive and safe design for all, which was discussed in 7 of the 9 same engagements across both phases. Participants supported an inclusive and safe design for all Toronto residents. LEAG (City's Lived Experience Advisory Group) said that the lack of accessibility-by-design limits some people's access to parks outside their district and to the services available to them (City of Toronto, 2024e, p. 10). Phase 2's online survey also discussed High Park's public consultation process; many participants felt that reduced car movement had made the space primarily accessible to local and non-disabled residents at the expense of accessibility-focused users such as seniors, people with disabilities, and multigenerational families.

Car accessibility was deemed essential for families and people living with disabilities, and its removal was seen as the city investing in movement strategies or redesigns without consulting diverse voices (City of Toronto, 2025i, p. 33). Accessibility also extended beyond park pathways and outdoor design to facility services that enable residents to use recreation spaces. This was identified through features such as limited walking distance, access to centres, and unreliable

public transit as barriers, and called for more ramps, elevators, accessible bathrooms, gender-inclusive change rooms, improved interior wayfinding, and accommodations for people using wheelchairs, strollers, and other mobility devices (City of Toronto, 2024f, pp. 12-14).

Through community advisory bodies, initiatives were discussed, including working with people with disabilities and neurodiverse people, and applying an equity lens to park design (City of Toronto, 2025f, p.1). Disability by design should include universal path access, additional seating for seniors and people with disabilities, water fountains usable by wheelchair users and opened early for seniors, accessible washrooms, increased parking spaces for larger parks, easy-to-find entry and exit pathways, enhanced stroller-friendly paths and wheelchair ramps, and inclusive play equipment (City of Toronto, 2025i, pp. 17-21). Specifically, during Phase 2 of the Toronto Accessibility Advisory Committee, members explained that the Parkland Strategy does not establish its own accessibility standards; rather, it refers to the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA), 2005, for new or renewed parks. Many participants want the City to think outside the box, and with the incoming policy changes to the official plan, this is a future consideration before the Parkland Strategy is put forth to Council (City of Toronto, 2025j, p. 22).

Subtheme 1.2: Equity in Park Distribution and Investment

This subtheme focuses on participants' concerns about poorly maintained park infrastructure and unequal maintenance across the city. Participants expressed strong sentiment that Scarborough, East York, and neighbourhood improvement areas do not receive the same level of maintenance, beautification, and creative design as other neighbourhoods, including the downtown core. Participants called for equitable access to City-wide high-quality parks (City of Toronto, 2025i, p. 15). They also proposed targeted amenities for high-density neighbourhoods and ageing populations, including benches, shade, increased tree canopy cover, washrooms, and resting places to support mobility. A needs-based criteria approach was discussed. Similar inequalities were identified in facilities and programming, with participants reporting that some sport and recreation opportunities were unavailable in Scarborough and that suburban communities often lacked reliable transit or walking-distance access to recreation centres (City of Toronto, 2025i, pp. 12-14). During the Phase 2 engagement, an emerging direction explicitly proposed prioritizing Indigenous, Black, equity-deserving, and underserved communities and determining where new facilities, maintenance, and upgrades are required (City of Toronto, 2025i, pp. 15-18).

Subtheme 1.3: Cultural Representation and Belonging

This subtheme focuses on how park design can support inclusivity through cultural representation. Indigenous naming, multilingual signage, and land acknowledgements were among the design features discussed during meetings between the Indigenous Advisory Circle and the 2SLGBTQ+ Advisory Committee (City of Toronto, 2025a, pp. 18-19; City of Toronto, 2026a, pp. 7-8). City parks should incorporate Indigenous Indigeneity to educate the public about

the land's history, and plaques and signage serve as symbols of representation, ensuring residents' experiences are inclusive for all (City of Toronto, 2025a, p. 19). This subtheme also shows that signage can shape the interpretation of space and belonging in other municipal contexts, such as traffic cameras, encampment notices, and ferry signage. Indigenous or multilingual signage in parks is not produced as quickly, but advocating for welcoming environments through recognition is one such signifier. DIY community kits for school boards include art installations such as rewilding nature, educational features for children, multi-faith spaces, and botanical and pollinator gardens (City of Toronto, 2024b, p. 9). Lastly, visual representation and diverse cultures and identities should be celebrated through festivals and programming at larger parks, which can host year-round events via temporary installations (City of Toronto, 2024e, p. 19; City of Toronto, 2025h, pp. 15-18).

Subtheme 1.4: Community Governance and Participation

The final subtheme of my first major theme focuses on supporting resident-led and grassroots organizations. The Confronting Anti-Black Racism Advisory Committee highlighted working with equity-deserving groups, rather than agencies, as well as with the parks and recreation division, and noted that resident-led associations often animate spaces on their own budgets (City of Toronto, 2025c, pp. 9-10). Responses to resource gaps were said to be addressed to a greater degree by residents' associations through community benefit agreements and social development plans. The city is limited in what it can require of developers, and changes to provincial legislation would affect parks. As noted, community benefits have been limited in resources, resulting in a negative impact on the ability to provide more funding for co-governance models.

My next major theme, developed through the coding process, was safety, maintenance, and everyday functionality, which emerged as a recurring theme across participants' feedback. My findings indicated that the design of parks and features must simply be well kept being used. In this sense, participants do not view maintenance as separate from design. Instead, maintenance was understood as a central part of creating high-quality parks.

Major Theme 2: Safety, Maintenance & Everyday Functionality

Subtheme 2.1: State of Good Repair and Maintenance

My first sub-theme, 2.1, State of Good Repair and Maintenance, focuses on participants concerned about the ongoing conditions, cleanliness, and upkeep of parks and recreational spaces. Across online surveys, DIY (Do-it-Yourself) workshops, and pop-up event engagements, participants raised issues of cleanliness and broken infrastructure across Toronto's parks. Design features already present in parks include unclean washrooms, garbage, deteriorating infrastructure such as benches, seating, and lighting, neglected trails, invasive vegetation, and tree overgrowth (City of Toronto, 2024a, p. 11; City of Toronto, 2025i, p. 14).

In the online survey, participants reported feeling neglected, using phrases such as ‘ignored for decades’ and/or ‘rundown’. The facilities plan raised similar maintenance concerns for affected community recreation centres and noted that state-of-good-repair issues affected not only the appearance of public spaces but also the ability of facilities to provide reliable services (City of Toronto, 2024f, pp. 13-15). Participants called for faster repair cycles and routine long-term maintenance funding for both Scarborough Park and High Park, which were cited as examples of parks with poor maintenance (City of Toronto, 2025i, p. 15). Additionally, lack of maintenance creates physical barriers by making paths less navigable and contributes to perceptions of safety risks.

Subtheme 2.2: Safety and Security

My next sub-theme examined participants’ concerns about whether parks feel safe, visible, and secure during everyday use. Park features included improved lighting, the installation of emergency call buttons, the creation of visible, open park layouts, and the use of CCTV cameras in Toronto parks. Safety concerns were raised in the virtual public meeting, the equity-deserving advisory group, phase 2’s online survey, and the senior forum. Participants explained that encampments have led to open drug use and garbage issues. Participants also said they did not want to bring their children to parks because of the amount and type of garbage generated. An added safety design concern was incorporating more leashed dog areas (City of Toronto, 2024c, p. 9); discussions included broken gates, inaccessible services, and the need for separate spaces for dogs and people. Policing in parks is a key concern raised by the chair of the Confronting Anti-Black Racism Advisory Committee board, along with the need to protect those communities (City of Toronto, 2025c, p. 13).

Subtheme 2.3 Core Amenities and Comfort

My next sub-theme focuses on the basic facilities and design features that make parks comfortable, practical, and useful throughout the year. Participants prioritized year-round publicly available washrooms in the city. Drinking fountains, water-bottle filling stations, and shaded areas such as shelters, picnic areas, or pergolas were discussed. The discussion of year-round amenities, such as heated washrooms and heating boxes, was suggested to encourage use of parks during colder months (Toronto, 2025g, p. 13). Encouraging more diverse pop-up events in parks, such as food access through cafes, concessions, food trucks, and community gardens, was suggested, as was the redevelopment of recreational facilities such as splash pads, sports courts, and playgrounds (City of Toronto, 2025i, p. 19; City of Toronto, 2025c, p. 12).

Subtheme 2.4: Transportation and Connectivity

This final subtheme of my major theme focused on transportation networks and wayfinding systems that shape residents’ ability to move through parks. Many participants emphasized the need for TTC (Toronto Transit Commission) access to parks and waterfronts, integrated with other modes of transportation, including cycling and car traffic. The online survey noted that

transit can connect people to new parks in high-population-growth areas, such as Sheppard East Park and Glendora Park, and that both Cherry Beach and Scarborough Bluffs have only limited seasonal TTC service (City of Toronto, 2025i, p. 18).

Safer bike parking and more separated cycling and pedestrian paths should be integrated into Toronto's parks; a participant in the online survey noted, 'The West Scarborough Rail Trail, a project proposed over 50 years ago, is a 'keystone trail that would complete a continuous cycling and pedestrian trail.' (City of Toronto, 2025i, p. 18) Additionally, connectivity design features should include placing bus stops at or near park entrances and integrating better maps, signage, and wayfinding, as these are missing or insufficient, particularly in larger parks. The final major theme I identified included ecological sustainability, nature, and well-being. From my findings on the engagements, a recurring notion about naturalized parks within the City of Toronto was that parks themselves do not need amenity spaces or high levels of programming to be valuable. Protecting parks' greenery is essential.

Major Theme 3: Ecological Sustainability, Nature & Wellbeing

Subtheme 3.1: Nature-Based and Climate-Resilient Design

My first subtheme focused on feedback regarding participants' needs for naturalized parks. Design features included protecting mature trees, ravines, wetlands, and natural habitats. To preserve ecological sustainability, participants suggested planting more trees for shade and noise buffers around busy intersections, such as parks near Jane Street and Finch Avenue, or adding more native plants and buffers to create small parkettes with high biodiversity (City of Toronto, 2025i, p. 19). Protecting natural spaces through parks can also include community gardens and eco-friendly areas for relaxation. To support climate-resilient design beyond ecological restoration for Parks and Recreation buildings, participants have suggested creating energy-efficient buildings, increasing tree canopy, and installing shade structures and greenhouses to provide environmental protection and human comfort (City of Toronto, 2024f, pp. 9-14).

Subtheme 3.2: Balancing Recreation and Conservation

This subtheme reflected the tensions between recreational access and ecological protection. As noted during phase 1's in-person pop-up event, 'This or That: Park Edition. What do you prefer?' drew 1,065 participants, with 83 percent preferring a natural park over a landscaped one (City of Toronto, 2024c, p. 8). Regarding the protection of High Park's nature, participants in the online survey explained that the park should not be overrun with programming and commercial activities (City of Toronto, 2025i, p. 34). Protecting ecologically healthy natural lands was considered important, alongside requests for carefree parks, concerns about cycling impacts, and a desire for both active and relaxing elements.

Subtheme 3.3: Parks as Spaces for Health and Well-being

This subtheme focused on how parks can support healing and mental health. Participants emphasized connections to nature over park activations, including rewilding parkland by restoring natural, uncultivated habitats and reintroducing native flora and fauna. As noted by the Confronting Anti-Black Racism Advisory Committee, green spaces were described as 'the most healing thing'; the committee also noted that community gardens support holistic health and wellness and can provide greater relaxation (City of Toronto, 2025c, p. 11). In both a virtual public meeting and an online survey, participants explained that safe air, shade, and access to nature are wellness priorities that should be managed through Toronto's parks. Providing outdoor active equipment in parks was also believed to create healthy spaces. Feedback on the facility's plans also framed health and well-being through active recreation, social connection, food access, and year-round community services. These facilities were valued not only for exercise but also for reducing isolation, supporting youth and seniors, providing food and health services, and creating places for community gathering (City of Toronto, 2024f, pp. 15-17).

Subtheme 3.4: Indigenous Stewardship and Relationship to Land

My final subtheme focused on Indigenous-led stewardship and land-based education across all 6 Indigenous Advisory committees' meetings. Indigenous community members discussed visual representation through naming parks with Anishinaabe or Mississauga names and by developing local history and language through signage and Indigenous art (City of Toronto, 2025d, p. 4). They also described ceremonial community spaces, including horticultural spaces, pow-wow spaces, sacred fire sites, and co-location, with Indigenous services included in existing parks (e.g., kitchens, studio spaces) (City of Toronto, 2026a, p. 7). Education and programming on cultural competence and crisis response training for City staff, along with hiring more Indigenous designers, architects, and City staff, can demonstrate co-leadership through community consultation and design. Additionally, regarding honoraria, which provide financial compensation, many were reportedly delayed (City of Toronto, 2026a, p. 13). Participants questioned the importance of ethical, prompt, and inflexible compensation as a core part of building trusted relationships with Indigenous communities.

Therefore, based on my findings, coding all the themes and subthemes helped me demonstrate that residents evaluate park design through everyday experiences of access, safety, maintenance, comfort, representation, and mobility. The findings show that community ideas are not limited to preferences for individual design features; instead, participants connect park design to broader questions of equity, cultural belonging, transportation, public investment, and long-term maintenance. This suggests that a park can only function as an inclusive and meaningful public space when it is accessible, well maintained, safe, culturally represented, and supported by ongoing municipal resources. The summaries show that public input through engagement is important, and that the public is well informed about what they want and the actionable steps to achieve it. Overall, the themes reflect those participants viewed park design as

both a physical and social process, which shapes who can use, reach, and feel welcome in Toronto parks.

4.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

To thoroughly capture and understand the public participation process, interviews were conducted with community organizers and municipal planners. These interviews explored how park designs are integrated into the final planning design by Torontonians who participate and provided further insight into community engagement.

The first interview was with a community organizer. He explained that his career goal was to help people, whether through nature, communities, or both, and that this goal shaped his work. In designing and delivering programs, his role expanded to include project management, and he worked toward hiring a team. During the Parkland Strategy engagements, the City of Toronto approached the organization to host community conversations, gather feedback, and turn it into a formal action plan. He said, 'My role specifically, I coordinated with the City of Toronto in the briefing meetings, understanding what their goal was with the purpose of the community conversations.'

The engagement approach was designed to 'feel more conversational,' and 'we wanted community members to interact with each other.' The organizer noted that participants wanted parks to be accessible, safe, focused on community gathering, and representative of their communities. They described how discussion and activities were used to encourage communication, typically with 45 minutes for a presentation about a given park and a break with complimentary snacks, followed by a 30-minute activity and closing remarks. The organizer explained that many ideas emerged naturally when people felt comfortable engaging with one another: 'It wasn't just about gathering information – it was also about connection.' The organization also used shared language throughout the engagements to avoid jargon and minimize misinterpretation of park design. The organizer also discussed how participants were engaged in the first place. 'About 20 to 30 people per event were given $100 honorariums,' which helped compensate participants for taking three hours of their day, typically in the evening during the work week. It also recognized financial struggles participants may be experiencing and aimed to ensure they were adequately compensated for their input through an incentive.

Interviews with municipal staff were also conducted. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to staff as planner #1 and planner #2, both of whom work within the City's Parks and Recreation department, to examine how engagement processes are developed from their perspective.

Planner #1 emphasized that the Parkland Strategy is a 'foundational document to help inform and educate the public so they understand the kinds of things we're looking for overall.' Their role is to work with the project team and determine the appropriate level of participation based on a park project's complexity. Planner #1 said a good community engagement process

has many layers. Early engagement with participants, community groups, and stakeholders can inform the vision, values, and guiding principles for projects. 'We try to do upfront surveys, Social Pinpoint exercise, and public-life studies. We are looking at how spaces are used, what's working and what is not working.' This helps ensure the final outcomes reflect what has been heard from communities while balancing other requirements.

Questions about trust-building with participants are also considered important throughout the process. 'It's easy to lose trust. We have projects right now where the road is rocky—not for lack of effort—but because people aren't always wanting change, and they're often suspicious of government, municipal government in this case.' Planner #1 stated that including more community advisory committees in the Parkland Strategy 2026 review strengthened the inclusion of voices that had not originally been included. 'Ten years ago, reconciliation and what it means for park design and park planning weren't talked about nearly as much. It's a big part of it now.' Planner #1 explained that staff are also seeing more discussion among participants about topics beyond physical improvements. 'We hear a lot about programming, operations, maintenance and visitor experience. Visitor experience is becoming a more important part of what we do.' Planner #1 stated that community engagements are informative for City staff, but they also face key barriers, including the challenge of representing all voices. As they discussed, 'the loudest voices are not always representative of everyone.' Ensuring the City reaches the right people and hears from a broad range of communities remains one of the biggest challenges for equitable planning.

Planner #2, who works closely with community engagement throughout the Parkland Strategy update and various park redesigns for the city, defined their role as 'leading the engagement process from beginning to end.' A range of engagement processes were used for the Parkland Strategy, with community advisory committees and council advisory bodies described as 'one of the more focused engagement channels': volunteer-led or stakeholder-comprising panels that provide recommendations to City staff and council and offer opportunities for people to bring forward issues for consultation. 'There is a 2SLGBTQ+ council advisory body, a confronting anti-Black racism advisory body, an Aboriginal Affairs advisory body, an accessibility group, and several others.'

The process for selecting groups takes into account the demographics of the surrounding area, such as a 2- or 2.5-kilometre catchment area. An open callout then follows, using social media, targeted social media ads, council channels, and community organizations to match the committee's membership as closely as possible to the area's demographics. Quote: 'It is really meaningful to walk into a community room and see the community reflected in that way.' Typically, a community advisory committee might include 18 to 20 community members, along with about five community organizations, depending on who applies and the scale of the project.

'Do-It-Yourself (DIY) Workshop Kits,' which worked with the Social Development division and community development clusters, was one of the most focused engagements. Quote: 'The idea was that instead of City staff directly running every engagement session, members of

the community who already had trust and relationships with Indigenous, Black, and equity-deserving groups could lead those workshops themselves.' The DIY kits (which include a presentation, a discussion guide, and an online submission form to help groups determine the features they need) provided open, trusting spaces for people to share feedback: 'Sometimes community engagement is really about meeting people where they already are. If people are already part of a weekly program or community group, it can be more effective to go to that space and gather feedback there.' Additionally, Planner #2 stated that city staff tend to continue using the terminology adopted during community-led projects, with shared language being balanced among participants and city staff when discussing design.

The engagement process was shaped by a shared language, which Planner #2 stated was essential. Quote: 'Ultimately, it is a group of strangers coming together. They may not know one another yet, but they are going to be working quite closely together throughout the process, sometimes for about a year.' A shared values exercise is typically used in the first phase of engagements. Participants write down the values important to them, which helps build collective decision-making across all groups. This activity also encourages two-way dialogue and trust-building, bringing together listening, respect, and shared decision-making.

Community engagement activities discussed by Planner #2 include a found objects activity, typically completed during phase 1 of the engagements (Figure 6); 'We bring in buckets of different objects, often simple materials like pipe cleaners, popsicle sticks, shells, rocks, little trees, or other small items. Then we ask a question such as, 'Can you name a time you really cherished being in a public space, and what did that mean to you?' From my discussion, visualization in engagements has become a strengthening tool that staff use, allowing everyone to learn more about one another and giving people the opportunity to share stories and understand each other's worldviews, perspectives, social locations, and interests as they enter the project.



Figure 6: Found Objects during Engagement (Source: City of Toronto, n.d.)

Planner #2 notes that, as a facilitator, it is important to recognize that people prefer different ways to participate. Some prefer to speak, while others prefer to write. Creating space for these

modes of participation makes feedback more accessible and less bureaucratic. Planner #2 stated that the city uses 'equity by design' and 'universal design' throughout the design process, not as afterthoughts or add-ons. Information from Parkland Strategy engagement summaries, specifically the Toronto Seniors' Forum, included the quote: 'When you serve one population, you often end up serving everyone.' This suggests that participants often have more in common with one another, and that multi-use, supportive feedback can support equitable design.

Accessibility was another avenue for engagement in park planning, including providing advance materials to participants, ideally 'at least two weeks before the meeting.' Including slideshow materials, the room's accessibility features, the types of food and beverages, and an agenda in advance is also particularly important. The question remains: what it means for people with different abilities, languages, and schedules to participate, and how can the city go beyond AODA (*Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*, 2005) standards.

Feedback from participants could include signage, another way to promote visualization in engagements: 'For example, if English is not your first language at home, images on signage can be helpful. That also supports accessibility more broadly. It helps with wayfinding, and for neurodiverse people, visual signage may be easier to understand... valuable is translating park signage into the top languages spoken in the neighbourhood'.

Art installations are another way to enhance cultural accessibility. Barbara Hall Park, which is home to the AIDS Memorial, is one example. One of the design suggestions includes a ribbon-like pathway, like the red ribbon that symbolizes HIV/AIDS awareness. That pathway supports wayfinding by creating a wide route that helps people find the AIDS Memorial. Cultural symbols can help signify safe and meaningful community spaces (Figure 7).

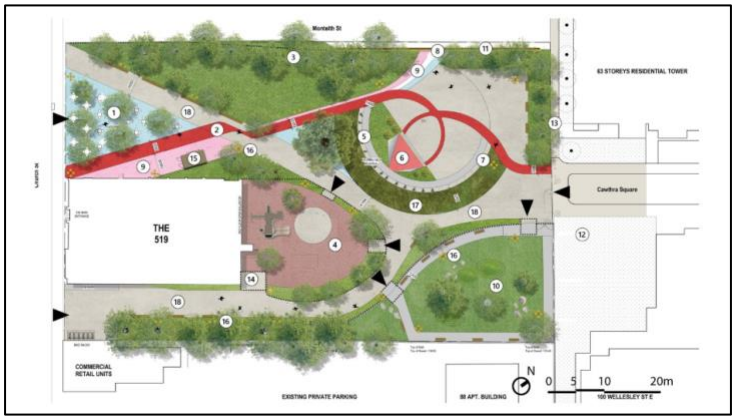


Figure 7: Barbara Hall Park Improvements, Design Option 3: The Ribbon Stage (Source: City of Toronto, 2024)

Planner #1 reiterated the same barrier: balancing participants' diverse needs can be challenging. Planner #2 said, 'Barbara Hall Park is a good example because there are so many communities and intersections connected to that space,' and explained how deliberative processes can help find a collective decision. Another challenge included 'Communicating

engagement opportunities through more than just traditional channels. We need to meet people where they already are.' Partnerships with existing community organizations and staff attending programs or spaces where people already are building trust with people already connected to the programs, and having others involved leads to City staff.

Overall, these semi-structured interviews showed that community engagement in Toronto's parkland planning process extends beyond collecting public feedback. It is relationship-based, with deliberative processes shaped by trust and accessibility—shared language, representations, and methods used to reach participants. The community organizer and urban planners noted that conversational formats, honorariums, advisory committees, community-led workshops, and visual activities can help participants express their ideas more comfortably and meaningfully. However, the interviews also highlighted ongoing challenges in reaching residents who do not normally participate, balancing conflicting needs, and ensuring that the most vocal participants do not disproportionately shape outcomes. These findings show that citizens' ideas are more likely to influence park design when engagement occurs early, participants can contribute in different ways, and city staff clearly translate community values and experiences into practical design recommendations.

4.4 Observation of Participants

The process for designing and developing parks in the City of Toronto follows a five-stage approach from early planning through to construction. Three of the five stages constitute the community design process (Figure 8). Attending each stage of a park engagement helps identify participants' needs and desires during an in-person meeting and provides insight into each phase and the participation methods in action (City of Toronto, 2022b). The team also follows the IAP2 spectrum of public participation, which the city uses to determine the level of engagement for each project, with Inform, Consult, Involve, or Collaborate (Empower is excluded due to a lack of funding to support public decision-making) (Figure 9).

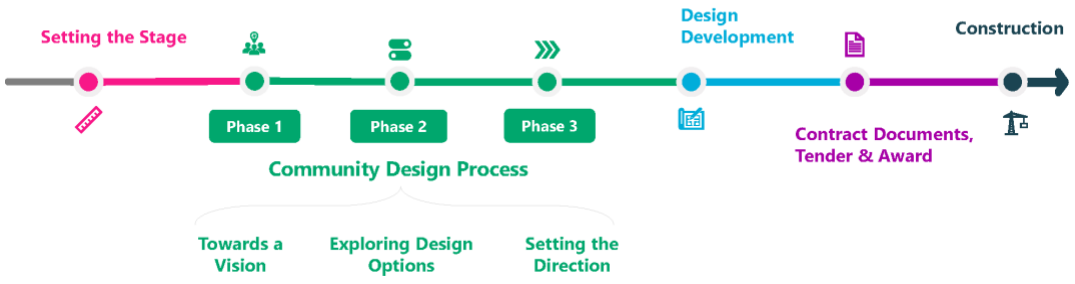
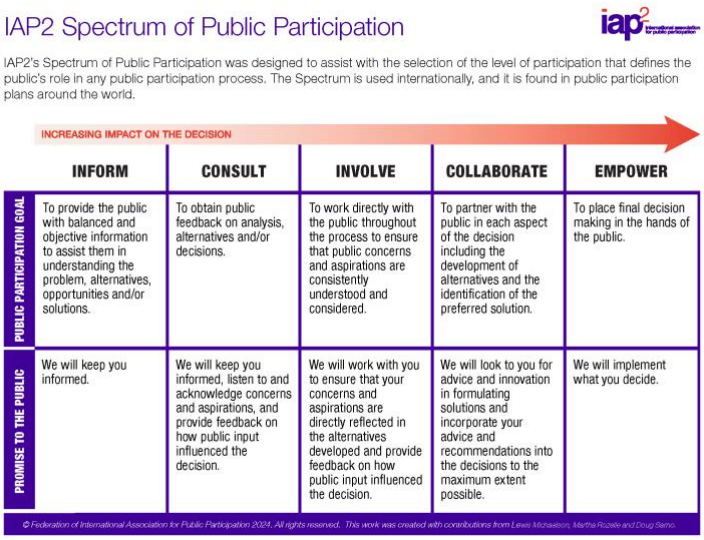


Figure 8: Park & Recreation Facility Design & Development Process Timeline (Source: Toronto, 2026)



IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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Figure 9: IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation (Source: IAP2, 2024)

Phase 1: Towards a Vision

The first in-person engagement explored the project team's work with the community and stakeholders to develop a vision statement for the community's ideal future park. Guiding principles, rooted in the community's key values and ideas, informed the design of desired outcomes. Big moves identified the park's main design priorities. I attended phase 1 in-person community engagement for 2901 Bayview Avenue on Monday, June 8th, from 6:30 pm to 8:30 pm at a local community centre.

The engagement brought community members together to discuss ideas for the new northeast park and review the pre-engagement survey results, which informed the landscape architects' design options. It began on time at the community centre near a TTC-accessible station. The centre included accessibility features such as an elevator and signage directing participants to the room. Name tags and no-photography stickers were also provided. The agenda included the councillor's remarks, which were interactive and demonstrated knowledge of the park process. Co-working during the engagement was essential.

Jane Rosenberg & Studio gave a brief presentation showing the park's location and five surrounding parks, along with their amenities, to provide contrast and perspective on the approach to this new park, as shown in Figure 10. Initial feedback included questions about how the adjacent development plan will work around the park and how the division between those sites can be clear for community members to enjoy without entering the neighbouring developments' POPs (Privately-Owned Publicly Accessible Spaces).

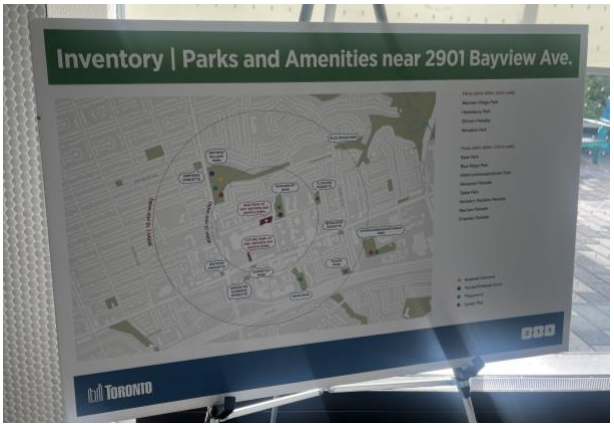


Figure 10: 2901 Bayview Avenue Parks and Amenities Map (Photo Credit: Natalie Koper, June 2026)

Residents began raising concerns and outlining what they wanted to see in their park early in the initial feedback, based on the site and background context. The participants included 22 women, one woman with accessibility needs who used a wheelchair, and 9 men. The age range was mostly retirees, with participants generally older, and a few working-age participants.

The next part of the meeting covered the results of the ThoughtExchange survey, a pre-engagement tool that revealed what community members are looking for in a newly designed park. In response, the top results across the board included a naturalized, flexible, multi-use park with ample seating, landscape design, and programming. The survey also highlighted major concerns about a shade structure, naturalized planters, and a relaxed park.

The Community Engagement Officer assembled the vision statement and guiding principles and presented them based on the ThoughtExchange results. To confirm, inside-circle and outside-circle exercises were used. This activity balanced input on the results, allowing chat on the vision statement in the outer circle and listening to participants' input. The same was done in reverse for the guiding principles. Most participants believed that including words such as flexible, accessible, and open was important to add to the vision statement. Participants also felt that the green oasis and culturally diverse community lists should reflect the needs of many age groups. They felt there should be more flexibility in the type of design they feel is best for this park. As for guiding principles, many participants believed universal design was missing. Participants explained that this phrase includes elderly populations, children, and those living with disabilities, who should all be able to function in the same space. More year-round activities, although challenging, could be an important value for community members.

The final element of the engagement was the 'Big Moves' or 'Play Your Best Hands' activity (Figure 11). This set of interventions was intended to define the project's overall design direction. It included a 12-image card set and two wild cards, each displaying features that could be included in a park design. These included active recreation, dining, flexible lawn, flexible plaza, flexible play, adult play equipment, water features, outdoor movie seating, naturalized planting, shade

structures, tree grove, and site furniture. Participants were divided into four tables and had 10-15 minutes to select their top three from the 12 cards.



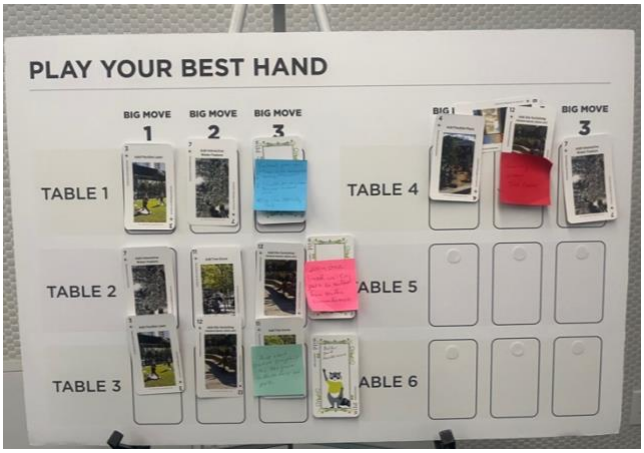


Figure 11: Big Moves Card Sets (Photo Credit: Natalie Koper, June 2026).

Figure 12: Results of the Big Moves (Photo Credit: Natalie Koper, June 2026)

Across all tables, the top three big moves were the water feature, tree grove, and flexible site furniture. The card discussion should be read more closely: some groups used the tree grove card to discuss broader topics, diluting its specific meaning and moving away from its intended vision. Each group used a wild card or a pair of cards, and some cards included additional information about the group's decision process.

Further feedback addressed maintenance, including how the park would be maintained during the fall and winter seasons and how seating would operate during those seasons. The meeting concluded with next steps: three design options set for fall 2026, and phase 3 to review the final design and any additional feedback in the winter of next year. The conclusion noted that social media postings will provide updates to community members and that a sign-up sheet will be available on the City's designated website.

Phase 2: Setting the Direction

This stage provides an update on design options for the park, based on feedback collected during the previous engagement phase. Depending on the level of engagement, options are either developed directly with the community and stakeholders in a workshop or by the project team. I attended Phase 2 in-person community engagement for Historic Red Oak Tree Parkette at 76 Coral Gable Drive, held on February 10th from 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm at a local community centre.

The purpose of the engagement was to review three concept designs prepared by the Plant Architect consulting team in collaboration with City staff (Figure 13). The proposed parkette would cover 700 metres and include amenity spaces (pathways, seating, planting areas, and interpretive features) around the 250-year-old red oak tree. A few details stood out before the

meeting began. The meeting was announced to include food and snacks as an incentive to encourage attendance. Registration was also said to be required before the meeting; however, participants were not asked to confirm registration or provide contact information when entering the room. The meeting was held on the second level of the community centre, accessible by elevator. A microphone was also available for participants and presenters, which helped support those who may have had difficulty hearing clearly.



Figure 13: Displays of Various Designs (Photo Credit: Natalie Koper, February 2026).

During the observation, several attendees approached the design boards before the formal presentation began. Many also brought their own notebooks and appeared prepared to take notes. City staff greeted many guests as they arrived. The room was arranged in a presentation format, with seating facing a projector at the front. The meeting included 15 community members, including 11 women and four men, all European origin. Most attendees appeared to be older adults and/or retired residents. Interestingly, the area's demographics are predominantly couples with children (38.9 percent) and working age (25-64) (54.1 percent), which does not accurately represent the community (City of Toronto, 2021a).

The engagement began with a land acknowledgement that reflected an understanding of Indigenous relationships to land and emphasized the importance of living with the land. This flowed into an acknowledgement of the red oak tree itself, which has existed longer than much of the surrounding urban development and is a central reason for the project. This blended into the 'protect' principle of the Parkland Strategy. As part of the presentation, a video created by Carole King discussed the tree's origin and history, and a poem reflected its significance. It was shown at the beginning of the session, including remarks from the ward councillor. The project overview explained that the tree is currently being supported by an abandoned house on the property and that community interest helped move the project forward with the City. The arborist and demolition work were in place, and this seemed to be new information for some attendees. The presentation then moved to design considerations and options. The Plant Architect design team presented three designs, as shown in Figures 14, 15 and 16 of the proposed designs; many attendees took notes during the explanation of the options.



Figure 14: Top left: Option 1: Embracing the Tree; Figure 15: Top right: Option 2: Honouring the Tree; Figure 16: Bottom centre: Option 3: Following the Roots (Source: City of Toronto, 2026)

An allocated question-and-answer period began, and although the agenda allotted only 20 minutes for discussion, the Q&A lasted more than 45 minutes. This suggested that the presentation's formal structure didn't serve as an informative model. Many community members appeared deeply knowledgeable about the project and had clearly been involved in previous discussions about the site, which reflected a sense of place attachment. Some raised detailed questions about the site configuration, the arborist's role, and the potential impacts of specific design choices. There seemed to be particular interest in the second design option. Parking became a major part of the community discussion. Participants raised concerns about visitors parking near the site, particularly given the lack of sidewalks and the vehicles already parked along the curb. Residents also noted that signage prohibiting parking could create additional safety concerns, as the existing site already attracts visitors.

City staff explained that the proposed parkette would function as a neighbourhood park rather than a Citywide Park, reducing the likelihood of vehicle traffic. However, they contrasted this with a nearby park, Vero Beach Park, which they described as attracting many cars, making it difficult for residents to access because of traffic and parking issues, and drawing more families travelling by car. Residents appeared hesitant to fully elaborate on this distinction with staff. Some residents had broader concerns about adding seating and gathering areas, which could bring more people to the site rather than limit use to nearby neighbours. Safety concerns related to homelessness or unwanted activity could be an issue, and participants said that more lighting, fencing, and the possibility of installing CCTV should be considered. Another participant, a neighbour adjacent to the proposed parkette, noted that students and teachers already visit the tree, describing these visits as a source of noise and distraction, and eventually showed City staff photos of the tree.

Towards the end of the meeting, the ward councillor arrived after being delayed by City budget discussions. The councillor joined the conversation and proposed creating a smaller subcommittee to provide input on design options. While this could allow for more detailed discussion, it could also limit broader public engagement; ultimately, it would demonstrate due diligence in engaging community members to guide the design process. The meeting also discussed funding and the City's capacity to create the parkette. Overall, the engagement showed strong community interest in protecting the historic red oak tree, but it also revealed tensions among public access, neighbourhood safety, parking, design programming, and the role of local residents in shaping the final parkette design.

Phase 3: Setting the Direction

The final engagement uses feedback from the previous engagement phases to develop a preferred design for the park, with final feedback on the design confirmed and then uploaded to the project's webpage. Due to the limitations and frequency of phase 3 engagement, which is a yearly-long engagement consultation for park projects, and my limited time to conduct my research, I was unable to attend a phase 3 engagement. This section will explain the process I would have used to examine my findings. If I had, I would have observed whether ideas addressed by participants carried from phase 1 to the final phase 3 engagement consultation, and whether ideas were reshaped subject to tweaks due to funding, fitting into municipal categories, or transparency on the suggested design.

I would have observed the meeting's overall functionality, including the presentation structure and meeting agenda, the time allocated to each item, interactive activities, and the types of practices used in the final discussion. I would have observed and accounted for the participants involved, including the landscape architects, the manager group (if the land is being allocated for a city-owned park), and city staff. Additionally, I would have assessed whether the participants' demographics reflected the ward's park; key elements include age, gender, ethnicity, and family size, with follow-up from the available statistics on the City's website. I would have documented and photographed elements of the engagement, including the activities used and maps and illustrations of the park project.

Overall, the participatory observations demonstrated that Toronto's Park design engagements provide meaningful opportunities for residents to influence park priorities, design options and guiding principles. Activities such as visioning exercises, design boards and interactive sessions translate participants' preferences into language and features that could be used by City staff and landscape architects. However, the observations also showed that participation was uneven, as attendees were primarily older residents and did not reflect the demographics of the surrounding community. Community ideas are also shaped by the structure of meanings. Interpretation of categories, available funding and competing concerns must be explicitly communicated to participants during these engagements to promote transparency in the process.

5. Discussion

My major research findings are that citizens' ideas do shape park design in Toronto's parkland planning process. However, this influence is neither automatic nor evenly distributed. Citizen ideas shape park design through participants who attend community engagements, complete online surveys via pre-engagement platforms, serve on advisory committees, or are enticed to participate through community engagement around a neighbouring or city-wide park. As a result, while park design is shaped by 'community feedback', it is shaped by the specific participants whose ideas become visible to City staff, landscape architect consultants, and decision-makers.

5.1 Ideas Filtered Through Policy and Funding

My first finding is that community ideas do not translate directly into park design outcomes because provincial legislation, municipal policy, and the City of Toronto's Park planning frameworks filter them. Citizens' ideas are filtered through policy, funding, and institutional interpretations of engagement. This creates a disconnect because the policy language guiding public participation does not align with how citizens' ideas appear in parks. Community engagement remains important but operates within the City's limits and depends on City resources and available funding tools.

Provincial legislation, such as the Planning Act, sets the legal framework for securing parkland through development and funding mechanisms, including parkland dedication and cash-in-lieu contributions. Bill 23 reduced parkland dedication systems by lowering alternative dedication rates and weakening cash-in-lieu collection options. These changes limit the land or funds Toronto can collect for parks, especially in higher-density communities. As a result, when community members identify a need for a new park or improved amenities, the City may have fewer financial tools to address those concerns. These legislative changes constrain the scale, location, and quality of parks that can be delivered in Toronto.

The City of Toronto's Official Plan provides policies that guide parks and open spaces by protecting, improving, and connecting parkland, and by supporting the Parkland Strategy. Section 4.3 helps translate broader goals into municipal priorities, including public accessibility, pedestrian connections, usability, and design quality. Because citizens' ideas align most closely with these priorities, they are most likely to influence design when they match them. Broader concerns such as democratic control of public space, encampments, policing, or unequal investment are harder to translate into park design because they do not fit physical design categories. Toronto's Municipal Code, Chapter 608, also shapes how citizens' ideas translate into design outcomes.

While the code governs permissions and regulations for urban parks, it does not directly outline community engagement practices. Instead, it regulates how parks are used, and which

amenities and features are formally permitted within Toronto's parks. This framework shows which design features and amenities fall within City-approved categories, including playgrounds, splash pads, sports fields, washrooms, and other amenities. For example, a park hill may be seen by citizens as a recreational space, while the City may view the same space through the lens of risk, safety, and liability concerns, as was the case with the 2024 ban on tobogganing. This example shows how municipal regulations shape what can be approved. As a result, ideas are filtered through municipal regulations that determine what can be approved.

Ultimately, the gap between community desire and municipal feasibility shapes park design outcomes. Community engagement can influence park design, but provincial and municipal legislation set the conditions for what the City can deliver, and those conditions continue to shape the final outcome. When participants request specific amenities or spaces, those requests may be paired with additional features, such as more seating and shading options to improve accessibility, or more lighting in parks to address safety concerns.

5.2 Access, Relationships and Representation Matter

My second finding examines how the collection of ideas through park design depends on accessibility, relationships, and participation. Community organizers and municipal planners understand engagement as relationship-building, not information collection. Innes & Booher's (2018) discussion of collaborative dialogue helped me interpret engagement as a process of relationship-building and meaning negotiation rather than simply the collection of information.

In-person and virtual formats, which are less bureaucratic, help participants view engagement as relational, accessible, and grounded in trust. During my interview with the community organizer, they highlighted ongoing dialogue as key to creating welcoming environments. As a result, residents feel comfortable sharing their perspectives and ideas and, in turn, engage consistently. Trust-building and a shared language help participants build confidence, exchange ideas, and engage more meaningfully. Meeting and socializing with other participants foster a sense of community, reinforcing engagement as a relational process. A shared language also supports community knowledge, which becomes influential when interpreted through Official Plan categories and reflected in the municipal code. As Reed et al. (2018) show, trust is not something participants automatically bring to an engagement but is developed through transparency, ongoing communication, and evidence that community knowledge is accounted for in the planning process.

Municipal planners valued in-person engagement, but they also placed high importance on early-stage tools, such as online thought-exchange surveys, public life studies, and social pinpoint exercises, to guide the initial visioning of projects. They explained that these tools can reach a broader audience and collect feedback before phased engagement begins, but they are not sufficient on their own. Taken together, my research findings show that relying solely on digital or formal engagement methods can exclude many individuals. This exclusion stems from limited awareness of pre-engagement tools, digital and language accessibility needs, trust in government

processes, and a sense of being equitably represented. Boyco et al. (2024)'s analysis of digital participation supports the view that online platforms do not automatically broaden participation, even though these tools can make engagement more convenient. City staff and platform administrators still determine which questions are asked, which options participants can select, and how responses are measured.

This finding shows that who participates directly affects which ideas become visible and influential. In the engagement process, ideas for park designs often reflect the perspectives of those most able or willing to attend. Municipal planners noted that vocal participants can dominate discussions, while quieter individuals or absent groups may not be represented in the design of their park. My Observation of participants also showed that certain demographics, such as older Anglo-European adults, were most present in engagement sessions. By contrast, working-age residents and families were less visible and unable to offer their own suggestions. Taken together, this lack of diversity shows that citizens' ideas shape park design unevenly.

This led to a broader discussion about 'meeting people where they are', especially when they already attend other neighbouring programs weekly. Gearin and Hurt (2024)'s work helped me interpret this practice as more than just an outreach technique. Meeting participants in existing community spaces can help address procedural inequalities by reducing the time, knowledge, transportation, and institutional barriers associated with formal City-run engagements. In that setting, feedback can be gathered, making it a key principle of inclusive engagement. Engagement becomes more effective when it is integrated into existing community spaces, programmes, and networks, rather than requiring participants to attend formal City-run meetings or navigate unfamiliar systems. This contrast is particularly important for equity-deserving communities, including newcomers, seniors, youth, and racialized groups. Ultimately, park design outcomes reflect the needs of participants who are most present in engagement spaces, while the needs of absent or underrepresented groups remain less visible in final design objectives.

5.3 Clarity Matters in Translating Ideas to Design

My third finding is that engagement activities can translate community ideas into design features, but clarity and communication shape how those ideas are understood. By documenting in-person engagements, I captured hands-on knowledge of the activities used to communicate ideas, blending everyday experiences with technical design processes and allowing participants to prioritise features and visualise potential park elements. Practices such as the Big Moves 'Play-Your-Best-Hand' activity, which asked participants to stack three key design features they wanted in the park, showed how everyday perspectives translate into concrete design options for a project team.

Misinterpretation was a key indicator in these engagements. For example, a tree grove card was presented as one option, and many residents were told that a tree grove is a collection of trees. The definition was later expanded under the option to include amenity seating,

programming, and shading. The project team described this as ‘blurring of the lines,’ which led to confusion about the feature. Some groups said the tree grove meant a small group of trees and nothing else, while others added shading, programming, and other elements to the idea. When people are not on the same page about a feature they want presented in their park, it can lead to conflict throughout the engagement process. The illustration of the idea must be clear and concrete for designers to implement. If an engagement cannot be interpreted fluidly, focus can be lost over time; such activities in engagements are valuable because they make community engagement more actionable for design teams.

The IAP2 model designates the level and type of engagement to be facilitated. Legacy et al.’s (2023) critique of standardized participation language helped me examine whether public input was interpreted, carried forward, and reflected in design decisions rather than merely collected. My observations of participation showed that moving from abstract preferences to concrete design directions depended heavily on clear communication and shared understanding among planners, consultants, facilitators, and community members. Thus, completing the steps of the IAP2 model doesn’t necessarily guarantee meaningful participation.

Participants’ ideas from the Parkland Strategy and Parks Facilities & Recreation engagements show that residents’ feedback on park design, including maintenance, safety, and placemaking concerns, is grouped into broader planning themes before it can influence design. This grouping can make public feedback easier to use in design, but it may also reduce the specificity of certain community concerns. For example, a participant’s concern that seniors need access to a car to reach High Park is grouped under an accessibility theme, which can make the conflict between car-free park design and disability access less visible. This suggests that community engagement practices focus on interpreting the collection of concerns and comments. In practice, City staff and consultants decide which comments are grouped together, which themes become most important, and how those themes are reflected in park design. Staff then play an interpretive role, shaping how participants’ lived experiences are categorized and translated into design.

Clearly communicating ideas about design outcomes is essential to the development of parks. As mentioned, pre-engagement tools such as the thought exchange surveys are used to collect data before a Phase 1: Towards a Vision in-person consultation begins. The results from these surveys then inform the vision statement and guiding principles that frame the context and ideas for discussions. However, these statements are developed with the help of AI (Artificial Intelligence). As noted in my grey literature search, the process of interpreting participant information is organized by the application’s platform rather than by the project team. This practice is a harmful shortcut for faster results, rather than focusing on transparency and genuine participatory engagement in the process.

Interestingly, during a phase 1 engagement, I observed that the facilitator did not mention that the vision statement and guiding principles were created by Al, and instead stated that staff

had made them, a misleading claim that suggested staff had read and interpreted participants' ideas. The use of AI in developing the statement and principles also prolonged the in-person consultation process, as participants were asked to continue to workshop and reinvent, detracting from the designs and objectives participants wanted to start developing and discouraging participants. Although the vision statement and objectives are grounded in developing contexts for all actors involved, the use of AI in collecting these ideas can misinterpret and redevelop the true lived experiences participants brought to the process, which in practice can lead to tokenism.

Clearly communicating feedback, including the lack of language diversity, was another vital part of the observation of participants. Although this was discussed in interviews, participants could request a translator during engagements. For example, if 5 to 10 percent of a word for a new park is used more often in non-English languages, a translator may be requested. This practice should already be embedded in policy. To strengthen the conclusion, the City of Toronto should treat translation as part of the engagement budget so engagement can proceed with more tools and a clearer response to language needs.

5.4 Implementation and the Future of Toronto's Park System

Based on my analysis and findings, I conclude that the parkland process in Toronto has a successful engagement process for participants who are present and actively monitoring park projects. This raises the question of when Torontonians are present in community engagement and when they are not. This has led my research to better capture the parkland process as one of the many engagement practices and to examine how the organization of various phases influences and communicates with the public. From my analysis, major takeaways include the lack of funding to mobilize co-governance engagement practices beyond Section 37 of the Planning Act or Community Benefit Charges, the lack of representation of ward demographics, and the need to clearly communicate both legislation and policy documents relevant to the project to showcase what is permitted and what is restricted.

5.5 Recommendations

Section 37 of the Planning Act, or the Community Benefits Charge, allows a municipality to pay for capital costs of facilities, services and matters to support complete communities. One of the many features of the approach allocates city funding for projects on parkland improvements, public realm upgrades and additional community amenities. Participatory budgeting is a form of city funding used by a community as the executive stakeholder. Participatory budgeting originated in Brazil during the late 1980s, facilitating the empowerment of local communities to collectively identify priorities and allocate resources towards their most pressing needs (Muhammad, 2025).

This method of community engagement is not new to the City of Toronto, which ran a pilot project for two years, from 2015 to 2018. Across all the pilot projects, more than 2,500 interactions with participants generated 700 ideas and led to the voting on 37 capital projects

(City of Toronto, 2019c, p.4). The pilot found that residents sought and valued transparency in their involvement in local improvements and infrastructure planning, including how much operating costs were; this process invited them to build connections and alliances with neighbours to support community-driven design, and about 73 percent of participants indicated they developed greater awareness and would be more likely to participate in future decision-making opportunities (Toronto, 2019, p.8).

The pilot's weaknesses included the lack of direct communication with staff, which made participants feel disconnected and showed how idea sharing, along with voting, was difficult to balance. The voting process found the most similar ideas, only accounted for 10 percent of eligible funding, most of the park designs included park amenities (e.g. outdoor fitness equipment, lighting, shade, water bottle filling stations) and other priorities (not mentioned in the report) were subjected to operational funding not eligible for the participatory budgeting (City of Toronto, 2019c, p.9).

The voting process highlighted existing demographic divisions and inequities in parks. Despite some engagement, participation rates were low; only 0.8 percent of eligible residents voted in the pilot areas (City of Toronto, 2019c, p. 6). This increased the operating cost per participant and the time councillors spent on engagements. Another weakness was the limited timelines and funding, which did not align with other long-term investment plans or opportunities (City of Toronto, 2019c, p. 5). The key takeaway was that participatory budgeting could have potential impacts on capital planning, such as the state of good repair and other capital projects. This is why Section 37 (Community Benefits Charge) is used as the minimalized form of participatory budgeting (City of Toronto, 2019c, p. 11).

As of 2025, Section 37 incorporated only five projects for communities to vote on, and only one was for a park improvement (City of Toronto, 2025e). Although community engagement practices are gaining more awareness as the topic of urban parks as publicly accessible third spaces become more prominent in planning discussions, participatory budgeting can support accessible and transparent democratic decision-making in the parks planning process.

Civic budgeting is internationally practiced and is the norm for parks projects, such as Jardim do Caracol da Penha in Lisbon, Portugal, which transforms community ideas into a funded public-space project (Figure 17). Local residents organized to convert a vacant site, once a parking lot, into a public green space and submitted the proposal to Lisbon's 2016 participatory budget. The proposal received 9,477 votes, making it the most-voted project in the program's history, and was initially awarded 500,000 euros as a winning 'structural project' (Jardim do Caracol, 2017).



Figure 17: Do Caracol Da Penha, City of Lisbon Portugal (Photo Credit: Natalie Koper, August 2026)

This method would help municipal planners recognize that engagement has limits, as the loudest voices are not always representative of the whole. Interviews indicated that balancing vocal participants with quieter voices or unrepresented community members can limit who attends and who speaks most often, even when they do not represent the full neighbourhood. An online survey may not do the job that needs to be done. A thought-exchange survey, compared to a handwritten survey that includes community groups and neighbouring facilities such as long-term care homes, daycares, neighbouring schools, and even those working in the area, may better capture broader comments and help bring them forward. Diversifying options can better capture the needs of those unspoken voices through a participatory budgeting process.

6. Conclusion

My research examined how community engagement practices are structured within Toronto's Parkland planning process and how residents' ideas influence park design. Through policy and document analysis, interviews, and the observation of participants, my findings showed that community ideas do shape park design. However, their influence is neither direct nor equal; instead, ideas move through a structured institutional process in which they are interpreted, categorized, and assessed against municipal policies, provincial legislation, funding limitations, operational responsibilities, and existing planning priorities.

Across all engagements, participants emphasized that successful park design involves more than physical features. Parks must be well maintained, connected, inclusive, and safe. My research also found that participation remains unequal; not all residents have the same ability to attend engagements, access information, or communicate their needs. As a result, ideas that influence park design often reflect those who participate and how their feedback is interpreted and categorized.

Overall, Toronto's engagement process provides meaningful opportunities for public input, but greater transparency is needed to show how community ideas move from consultation into policy and design. Inclusive Park planning requires sustained engagement, equitable investment, accessible communication, and clear connections between residents' feedback and final decisions.

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Appendix 1: Questions for Community Organizer

1. How long have you been involved as a community organizer?
    - Can you tell me a little bit about your experience?
    - How did you come to be [current position]?

2. How are you (or have you been) involved in community engagement for the Parkland Strategy?
    - What is (or has been) your role?
    - What have you been responsible for?
    - What are you not responsible for?

3. Can you tell me about community engagement meetings that you have been to? Can you tell me about meetings related to the Parkland Strategy specifically?

4. What park design features do you think are most important to the community (e.g., recreation, social gathering, cultural practices)? How have you or other members of the community talked about or expressed their priorities to the City?

5. Do you think everyone's priorities are considered at meetings or through the consultation process?
    - Is there anything I should know about?
    - Do you feel that racism or language barriers are an issue to community members' full participation?

6. How much community participation and discussion occur outside of the formal City of Toronto engagement meetings? Are these ideas shared with City parks staff? Are these represented in articles or blog posts?

7. What strategies have you seen the city use (or that City staff use) to ensure that community voices are equally heard and considered in the community engagement meetings?

    - If so, do you believe the City is lacking in more diverse methodologies or skills with respect to understanding and learning from the city's various communities?

8. How much follow-up is conducted by staff with participants after engagement?

9. Is there anything else you think I should know?

Appendix 2: Questions for Urban Planners

1. How are you (or have you been) involved in community engagement for the Parkland Strategy?
    - What is (or has been) your role?
    - What have you been responsible for?
    - Who attended the meetings (thinking about the cross-section of Toronto communities, including race, class, gender)?
2. What do you think makes for a good community engagement process?
    - What kind of discourse approaches tend to work best? (e.g., shared language, two-way dialogue, trust-building)
    - If one of these is [trust-building, shared language or two-way dialogue], how do you and/or other City staff maintain this discourse?
    - How are [trust-building, shared language or two-way dialogue], built with citizens during the community engagement practices?
3. What information is provided to citizens before engagement happens?
4. Have you ever been involved in selecting engagement methods for the Toronto Parkland Strategy (2019) or the current five-year ongoing review?
    - If so, for the current five-year review, do you think the engagement process ensure the desired outcomes for park design are met?
5. In practice, how do principles of equity influence the design of park projects?
    - Can you provide some examples?
    - Do you think equity planning is an important aspect of parks planning?
6. How is accessibility considered in park planning?
    - For example, how do you ensure people with different abilities, languages, and schedules can participate and use parks?

7. In what ways do principles of inclusivity work together to guide the overall planning of parks?
    - Can you provide some examples?

8. In your experience, what barriers do you see when trying to ensure parks are planned equitably in Toronto?

9. Is there anything else you think I should know?
    - About community engagement?
    - About the Strategy?