

# BREAKING NEW GROUND

LESSONS AND IMPACTS

from the **Weston Family Parks Challenge**





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The opinions expressed in this report are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the view of The W. Garfield Weston Foundation and the Ontario Trillium Foundation.



The W. Garfield Weston Foundation is a private Canadian family foundation established in the 1950s by Willard Garfield Weston, his wife Reta, and their children. Today the Foundation directs the majority of its funds to projects in the fields of land conservation, neuroscience, education, and scientific research in Canada's North.



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The Ontario Trillium Foundation is an agency of the Government of Ontario, and one of Canada's largest granting foundations. With a budget of over \$136 million, OTF awards grants to some 1,000 projects every year to build healthy and vibrant Ontario communities. More information and details are available at [www.otf.ca](http://www.otf.ca).

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The Weston Family Parks Challenge is an initiative of The W. Garfield Weston Foundation.

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Projects are being realized in collaboration with the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

## INTRODUCTION



Throwing seeds in the Scarborough butterfly trail – Toronto and Region Conservation Authority

*By Richard Louv*

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The W. Garfield Weston Foundation (WGWF) and the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) have long been devoted to encouraging and protecting the health of our environment.

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Now, with the Weston Family Parks Challenge (WFPC), which expands our concept of the urban park, these foundations move to the forefront of a worldwide movement to reconnect families and communities to the natural world.

The work is urgent. As of 2008, for the first time in human history, more people now live in cities than in the countryside. This unprecedented and continuing

demographic change will lead humanity down one of two paths: toward gradual decay of the already fragile relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world, or toward the rise of nature-rich cities. A new view of parks is an essential component in that second, more hopeful future. The Weston Family Parks Challenge has helped not only to break new ground, but establish Canada as the leader of the parks movement.



In my book *The Nature Principle*, I made the case that a conservation ethic alone is no longer enough; now we must create nature, because both nearby nature and wilderness are essential for biodiversity and human health. And that means we need to preserve as much as we can of what is left of wilderness even as we create more nearby nature.

As this report makes clear, the Weston Family Parks Challenge shares that vision. What might that look like? In addition to maintaining and increasing the accessibility and public use of urban parks, nature-smart urban leaders will establish new parks by repurposing available vacant lots; create natural habitat and natural play spaces at the edges of existing parks; dedicate under-used land to native species and natural play spaces; and create wildlife (and childlife) corridors. In this vision, when abandoned buildings are torn down, residents plant community gardens on that vacant land. Private property owners will turn gardens, yards, and green roofs into places where native species revive butterfly and bird migration routes. Educators will create school gardens. Nature-smart residential developments will blend energy-efficient housing with nature trails, vegetable gardens, rooftop gardens, and urban wilderness. Such efforts offer direct value to a city's economics, job market, citizen health, and its civic-marketing DNA.



In the garden – Rexdale Community Health Centre

"Nature-deficit disorder," as I defined it in *Last Child in the Woods*, is not a medical diagnosis, but it remains a useful term—a metaphor—to describe what many of us believe are the human costs of alienation from nature, as suggested by recent research. Among these costs: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses, a rising rate of myopia, child and adult obesity, Vitamin D deficiency, and other maladies. The human disconnect with nature is also associated with two trends: one is the fading of independent play, which is linked directly to what psychologists call "executive function," the ability to self-control; and the second to what medical experts are now calling the "pandemic of inactivity." The sedentary lifestyle not only contributes to child and adult obesity, but, according to a study published in *The Lancet*, it can lead to some of the same diseases as smoking even if the sedentary person is not obese. In other words, sitting is the new smoking.

Thankfully, the scientific community is increasingly interested in the impact of the natural world on human health and on our ability to learn and create. A growing body of research into this connection, much of it done in the U.S., Canada, Europe and Australia, has greatly expanded over the last few years. Because researchers have turned to this topic relatively recently, most of the evidence is correlative, not causal—but it tends to point in one direction: experiences in the natural world appear to offer great benefits to psychological and physical health, and enhance the learning abilities of children and adults. The research strongly suggests that time in nature can help many children learn to build confidence in themselves and reduce the symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; nature time may calm children and help them focus. Schools with natural play spaces and nature learning areas appear to help children do better academically. There are some indications that natural play spaces can reduce bullying. Play in natural spaces can also buffer child obesity, and offers other psychological and physical

health benefits. Time spent in nature is obviously not a cure-all, but it can be an enormous help, especially for kids who are stressed by circumstances beyond their control.

Parents, grandparents, educators, and others who encourage children to experience nature can ignite the senses, especially that important sense of wonder and curiosity.

Urban parks, particularly when natural habitat is available, make excellent classrooms. In education, a new body of research suggests that, in schools that use outdoor classrooms, there are student gains in social studies, science, language arts, and math; improved standardized test scores and grade-point averages; and enhanced skills in problem-solving, critical thinking, and decision-making. In addition, studies of creativity show that kids who play in natural or naturalized play areas are far more likely to invent their own games, far more likely to play cooperatively. “Natural spaces and materials stimulate children’s limitless imaginations and serve as the medium of inventiveness and creativity,” says Robin Moore, an international authority on natural school design, who heads the Natural Learning Initiative in North Carolina.

This is just a sampling of evidence that either shows correlation or causality. Howard Frumkin, chairman of the University of Washington School of Public Health, and former head of the Center for Environmental Health for the Centers for Disease Control, says, yes, we need more research, “but we know enough to act.”<sup>1</sup>

In the movement to connect children, families, and communities to the natural world, many people are taking action. For example, in Washington, D.C., Dr. Robert Zarr not only offers “park prescriptions” to the families of children he treats, but he has worked with local health care professionals to create a database of the city’s parks. Thanks to this database, D.C.-area pediatricians now know where to direct families for a dose of nature, of Vitamin N.

In the following pages, you will learn about the innovative approaches of the Weston Family Parks Challenge. The Challenge is one of—if not—the most comprehensive proposals for the future of parks, a strategy that serves nature, and the human beings that are part of it.

As I mentioned, the WGWF and OTF are already some of Canada’s leading supporters of conservation and the natural world. The results of the Challenge will have a long-lasting impact on how we think about parks and nature in cities. Through the lessons learned from the Challenge, WGWF, OTF, other funders and park practitioners will continue to help nurture a conservation ethic in future generations of Canadians (research shows that early direct experiences in natural settings are essential in the formation of that ethic).



MABELLEarts – Amy Turner

<sup>1</sup> To learn more about the research, please see The Children & Nature Network Research Library, which contains reports on over 400 studies about the deficit and the benefits of nature experience. <http://www.childrenandnature.org/documents/C118/>





Watering the garden – Rexdale Community Health Centre

As urban populations rise and the cultures of newcomers expand, the Challenge helps parks provide more and richer nature experiences; it inspires creativity from government and the private sector; it broadens the idea of what a park is, and transforms underused lands within hydro corridors, school yards, and public housing land, and even private lands in suburbs or high-rise neighbourhoods. By bringing together community partners, such as “park champions” and “friends of the park” groups in the design and use of the parks, it assures future support for new approaches to park development and services.

The Challenge also encourages schools to improve schoolyard property and offer nature-based community gathering places for entire neighborhoods. It encourages volunteer action as well as the creation of paying jobs, including “park animators,” and skill-building through classes and paid internships, especially for students and newcomers. It promotes stewardship of urban land not usually considered parkland, which will help promote not only new areas for nature experience, but also greater biodiversity. The Challenge also creates opportunities to learn from Indigenous peoples and newcomers from other cultures, including those practicing immigrant agriculture. It expands opportunities for people

to grow, cook, and share their own food, and at the same time grow social capital by bringing people together across perceived cultural gaps.

This report addresses some of the challenges and opportunities that future park systems face. For example, new forms of maintenance and the limiting of invasive species; new sources of philanthropic support; and the creation of programming that will maximize the use of traditional and new park lands. One of the most attractive features of the Weston Family Parks Challenge is that it not only promotes best practices, but also promising practices as well, thereby pioneering even newer approaches to parks and ways to connect people to the rest of nature—and each other. Fostering the connection of children and families to nature is one of the few issues that brings people together across political, religious, economic, and cultural divides. The reason may be found deep in our shared mitochondria. As hypothesized by Harvard researcher and writer E.O. Wilson, biophilia is our innately emotional affiliation to the rest of the natural world. We are genetically hard-wired to need nature experiences. This is part of who we are as a species, and this connection is essential to our humanity.

The Weston Family Parks Challenge is a deeply serious approach to correcting the current disconnection of human beings from the natural world, and offers hope that our cities can become incubators of biodiversity and engines of human health, through nature.

— Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, *The Nature Principle*, and *Vitamin N*.

# PARKS AND PHILANTHROPY IN TORONTO AND CANADA

While there is a long history in Canada of private donations of land to create city parks, there has been a limited culture of philanthropy for park improvements and programming.

This is especially true if one compares city park philanthropy in Canada to the US, particularly since the growth of the US park conservancy movement in the last few decades.

There are a complex range of factors affecting this lack of city park philanthropy in Canada. A key motivator of modern park philanthropy in the US has been a response to significant government cuts to park budgets, creating a crisis in park maintenance and sustainability. Thankfully, Canada has not seen similar major cuts to municipal city park budgets. In addition, there is a different culture in Canada regarding private, and especially corporate support for public spaces. Traditionally, there has been significant concern by elected representatives and the public that private park donations could lead to the privatization or corporatization of public space. In the US, there has always been more openness to private/public partnerships in public spaces.

Philanthropy in city parks is complex. Municipal governments own the spaces, have a mandate to maintain them using unionized city staff, and make decisions on how parks are planned, designed, and managed. With little history of philanthropy in Canadian city parks, there are few processes to accommodate and support philanthropy. While there has been some interest in the past from funders to

support city parks, these complexities have often led to funders using their philanthropy for other more traditional causes such as hospitals, universities, or museums.

Some of this is starting to change. There are far more pressures on city parks as cities densify and people use parks in more and different ways. Municipal governments have not been able to allocate the necessary resources to sufficiently meet these new pressures and demands. There has also been the emergence of independent NGOs, like Park People, that are working to develop trust and understanding between funders, government, and community.



Investigating milkweed – Friends of the Rouge Watershed



# CREATING AND LAUNCHING THE WESTON FAMILY PARKS CHALLENGE

Into this changing environment for city parks, the Weston Family Parks Challenge was launched in February 2013, made possible by a \$5-million commitment by The W. Garfield Weston Foundation, a private family foundation.

The purpose of the three-year program was to enhance Toronto's green spaces, involve communities in the revitalization of natural areas, and encourage private-public partnerships for the long-term sustainability of Toronto's parks. Longer-term, the initiative's goal was to support projects whose success will inspire further creative approaches from city leaders, residents, the private and philanthropic sectors in Toronto and elsewhere in Canada.

The Weston Family Parks Challenge supported projects that enhanced the natural elements in parks, engaged a broad range of partners and the local community, offered new solutions to manage and maintain parks, and had the potential to be replicated in other jurisdictions.

The program was built around the following core elements:

## Nature

Enhancing the natural elements of green spaces.

## Sustainability

Contributing to high-quality maintenance and management of parks for the long term through community engagement, strong partnerships, and diverse funding streams.

## Connection to Community

Enabling communities and organizations to come together to support their local park, encouraging stewardship at a personal and community level, and revitalizing their relationship with nature.

## Innovation

Generating new park solutions, designs, and partnerships that can be replicated elsewhere in Toronto and Canada.

Grants were available to applicants to support the full spectrum of costs for a successful project, including capital work for green infrastructure (e.g., habitat restoration, urban agriculture), but also, more unusually, program costs related to community engagement—in particular initiatives to encourage people’s connection with nature, especially for children and new Canadians—as well as staff to oversee the project and ensure long-term sustainability. Applicants had to show strong community buy-in for a project and include a range of partners to ensure a broad base of support and longer-term sustainability, such as a landscape designer or horticulturalist for projects with significant plantings.

The WGWF already had a strong history as one of Canada’s leading supporters of nature and conservation work, providing more than \$100 million to date to protect and steward environmentally-sensitive lands and provide Canadians an opportunity to connect with nature, supporting organizations such as the Nature Conservancy of Canada, and working with groups like Toronto and Region Conservation Authority on environmental education programs for children.



Flowers in the hydro corridor –  
Toronto and Region Conservation Authority

With so many Canadians living in cities and increasing populations such as newcomers having very limited access to nature where they live, the WGWF was interested in piloting an initiative to fund projects that would increase Torontonians connection with nature. They also wanted to test innovative new ways that the community, private philanthropists, and government could partner together to create and sustain green spaces.

The WGWF approached Park People as a partner because of Park People’s efforts to build and support creative partnerships in parks in Toronto. Founded in 2011, Park People was Canada’s first citywide parks partnership and advocacy organization. The organization was helping to build momentum for stronger community partnerships with the City for public green spaces, and supported the creation and sustaining of community park groups across Toronto.

The Ontario Trillium Foundation, already a significant funder of community efforts to build vibrant green space, began to notice that many organizations were applying to both WFPC and OTF separately to support the same project. In addition, OTF was interested in exploring social partnerships to leverage resources and impact. This spurred thinking that greater impact could be achieved if the two funders took a more deliberate, strategic, and pro-active approach to combine their funding and streamline approvals. Following the WGWF’s lead, it was announced in January 2014 that OTF would add another \$1.125 million to the \$5 million already being provided by the WGWF. It was the largest single grant OTF had ever awarded.

This was a very rare partnership amongst a private family foundation, a government arm’s-length agency, and an NGO. Park People administered the program and provided recommendations and analysis to the WGWF Conservation Committee members and OTF volunteers, who made the final funding decisions. While both funders supported the





Tending a new tree – Aptus Treatment Centre

program's core elements, each had its own particular priorities for project funding—the WGWF's key focus was green infrastructure and building sustainable partnerships while OTF's top priority was building community capacity and engagement to animate parks as vibrant community spaces.

This partnership was also ground-breaking in terms of the magnitude of philanthropic investment in city parks in Canada. As mentioned, private philanthropy for parks was not common in Canada. This presented opportunities, but also generated some debate with city staff and councillors.

Reaction to the program by City parks staff and many City councillors was welcoming, but also indicative of the challenges facing philanthropy in city parks at the time. As reported in the *Globe and Mail*, a Toronto City councillor was concerned about what might happen if the donor's view of how to manage or transform a park clashes with the view of the community or the parks department. The Councillor told the *Globe* he didn't want any one group of people to get control because, "every voice in Toronto has to have equal access to decision making."<sup>2</sup>

Lack of experience with these types of partnerships added to the initial concerns. Attempts by then Toronto Mayor Rob Ford's administration to significantly cut the parks budget and replace City park workers with volunteers added to a sense that this new philanthropy was going to substitute adequate public funding for parks, not augment City park resources.

Reaction to the program from the public was extremely supportive with 48 applications received in the first round. Groups had been interested in undertaking these types of city green space projects for some time but no major funder had stepped forward. As pointed out by Angela Elzinga Cheng, Senior Manager with Foodshare, the proponent for the Community Grown Flemingdon collaborative project, "Without this program, this project would never have happened. There is no one in Canada funding this kind of work in city green spaces at this kind of scale."



Summer Farm Campers – Everdale

<sup>2</sup> Gee, Marcus (2013), "How \$5-million and new ideas could transform Toronto's parks" in *The Globe and Mail*. From <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/how-5-million-and-new-ideas-could-transform-torontos-parks/article9291431/>

## THE LASTING LEGACY

To meet its objectives, the Weston Family Parks Challenge invested in a wide variety of projects across Toronto. These included, for example, projects that focused on green space revitalization in under-utilized areas, such as San Romanoway Revival near Jane and Finch; projects that restored critical ecosystems, such as tallgrass prairie at Downsview Park; and food-related projects, such as the Black Creek Community Farm.

There is much to be proud of in the direct impact of the WFPC. Just a few highlights of the impact to date include:

- \$4.1 million in grants to support 26 projects across Toronto
- A lasting green and natural legacy of 203 acres of new or improved green infrastructure created through the planting of over 723,000 trees, plants, and shrubs
- Over 10,000 volunteers supporting the projects and over 86,000 program participants
- Plus \$4.1 million in additional funding for the projects leveraged and 424 new partnerships formed

But there is another, broader lasting legacy of the WFPC. In the three years following the announcement of the program, there has been a fundamental shift in Toronto where the City is now embracing innovative new ways to create and support great city parks:

- Announcement of major private philanthropy to support the Bentway under the Gardiner Expressway, the revitalization of Moss Park, and the Don River Valley Park.
- Creation of Toronto's first park conservancy, the Bentway Trust, approved unanimously at City Council.
- Support for creative new ways to meet the city's green space needs, such as the Green Line linear park, the Gatineau Hydro Corridor Revitalization, and Rail Deck Park.
- Support from City of Toronto political leadership and the public service to facilitate these innovative new projects.

Much of this was inspired by the new ground broken by the pioneering city park philanthropy and leadership of The W. Garfield Weston Foundation and the Ontario Trillium Foundation through the Weston Family Parks Challenge.



San Romanoway Garden launch –  
Toronto and Region Conservation Authority





## WESTON FAMILY PARKS CHALLENGE PROJECTS AND KEY PARTNERS

1. **Black Creek Community Farm** (*Everdale*)
2. **A Park of Many Paths at Mabelle Place Toronto Community Housing green space** (*MABELLEarts*)
3. **Small Park, Big World at Ritchie Parkette** (*Friends of Ritchie Parkette, Rotary Club of Toronto*)
4. **Community Eco Action Project at Roseneath Park** (*Friends of Roseneath Park and VIBE Arts*)
5. **Bringing Nature to the City at Regent Park** (*CRC Regent Park and Friends of Regent Park*)
6. **Bringing Back Nature to William Burgess School** (*William Burgess School Grounds Committee*)
7. **Revitalizing Thorncliffe's Public Green Spaces at R.V. Burgess Park** (*Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee*)
8. **Scarborough Gatineau Butterfly Trail – Phase I** (*Toronto and Region Conservation Authority*)
9. **Colonel Samuel Smith Park Improvements and Programs** (*Humber Arboretum, City of Toronto*)
10. **The Learning Garden Hub at Panorama Park** (*Rexdale Community Garden Network, Rexdale Community Health Centre*)
11. **San Romanoway Revival Project** (*Toronto and Region Conservation Authority*)
12. **OURSPLACE Urban Restoration Project at High Park** (*High Park Nature*)
13. **From Obscurity to Radiance at MacGregor Park** (*Botanicus Art Ensemble*)
14. **Youth and Community Natural Area Stewardship at Rouge Park** (*Friends of the Rouge Watershed*)
15. **Gardens for Nature Project at Humber Arboretum** (*Bird Studies Canada*)
16. **A Tale of Two Parks at Broadacres Park** (*MABELLEarts*)
17. **Ki Bimaadiziwin Project** (*Naadmaagit Ki Group and For Youth Initiative*)
18. **Pathways to Park 8 at Oakdale Park** (*Jane and Finch Boys and Girls Club and Green Change*)
19. **Downsview Park Tallgrass Prairie** (*Downsview Park and Tallgrass Ontario*)
20. **Aptus Teaching Landscape at Anthony Road School Park** (*Aptus Treatment Centre*)
21. **Alex Wilson Community Garden 20th Anniversary Restoration** (*Alex Wilson Community Garden*)
22. **Franklin the Turtle's Habitat Restoration and Bring Back the Wild Program** (*City of Toronto, Earth Rangers*)
23. **Chester Le Diverse Community Garden Project at Chester Le Park** (*Friends of Chester Le Park, Agincourt Community Services*)
24. **Scarborough Gatineau Butterfly Trail – Phase II** (*Toronto and Region Conservation Authority*)
25. **Community Grown Flemingdon at Flemingdon Park** (*FoodShare and Flemingdon Community Health Centre*)
26. **Morningside Heights Community Farm** (*Malvern Family Resources*)



## LESSONS LEARNED

Through analyzing the 26 projects funded through the Weston Family Parks Challenge, we've identified 10 lessons learned that showcase both successes and challenges.



1.

### Leverage space in hydro corridors, school yards, and private land to create new green community spaces

- Broaden your scope beyond just City-owned parks as there are many other open spaces in a city that offer opportunities for enhancement
- Recognize and prepare for the fact that different spaces—schools, hydro corridors, parks—contain different and sometimes complex regulatory hurdles

When we think of parks we often think of a traditional green space run by a city's parks department. However, cities have many other publicly-accessible open spaces that can be targeted to create new or enhanced community spaces and natural restoration sites.

A critical success factor for the WFPC was that The W. Garfield Weston Foundation agreed to a very broad definition of park by opening up the program to "publicly-accessible open-space" beyond city parks. This definition encouraged many new, innovative projects to apply, helped people think creatively about open spaces, and allowed a broader range of communities to benefit.

By broadening our idea of what a park is, we open ourselves to innovative projects that transform underused spaces. These include provincially-owned lands within hydro corridors, school yards, and land owned by public-housing agencies, like Toronto Community Housing.

It can also include private lands. Toronto is characterized by its multitude of high-rise towers, including many clusters throughout the inner suburbs. These high-rise neighbourhoods contain large grassy expanses with little to offer nearby residents who are often new immigrants or people living on lower incomes.

One exciting project that really showcases the possibilities of working in non-traditional green spaces is the **San Romanoway Revival Project**, funded in 2014. This project was located in a tower community near Jane and Finch, an underserved neighbourhood in the city that includes many newcomers and people living on lower incomes. Approximately 4,300 residents live in three high-rise towers set within a wide grassy area. Initiated by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority's Living City Foundation, this project aimed to create a new productive landscape that included a fruit orchard, vegetable gardens, and native plants.

Not only did this transform what was once a barren piece of land into something that residents could use (80 percent of residents said they wanted to grow their own food), it also increased biodiversity on the site by introducing native plants and natural habitat for pollinators and other wildlife. Over 400 tenants from the surrounding towers were involved in the project and many families now garden in 66 garden plots. The project has been so successful that the City of Toronto is interested in replicating this model in other tower communities.

*"Knowing that there was conditional funding on the table from prominent funders helped move these projects forward. [The hydro farms] never would have likely proceeded without this leadership from the funders."*

*—Lauren Baker, City of Toronto Public Health Unit*

It was a big leap of faith for the WGWF and OTF to do a project on privately-owned lands that could be sold. It was also a challenge having three different private landowners working together. But the landowners were very committed to the project and that made the difference.

Another strong example of innovative use of underused public spaces through creative partnerships are the **Morningside Heights Community Farm, GrowTO, and Community Grown Flemingdon**—collectively known as the **CEED** (Community Engagement and Entrepreneur Development) Hydro Farms.

Working closely with community members in three Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (Malvern, Flemingdon and Rexdale), these projects will collectively grow food on a total of 7.5 acres in hydro corridors—a virtually unprecedented scale in a hydro corridor in an urban area anywhere in North America.

These were very complex projects involving community engagement, multiple partners, soil quality issues, questions of ownership, and regulatory approvals. One of the projects did not break ground for two years.

A critical success factor was the funders' acknowledgement that these projects were experimental and their ability to be flexible and responsive to changing timelines and new regulatory challenges.

## KEY CHALLENGE

Transforming these underused spaces into innovative green space projects requires patience. While some regulators and property owners can pose challenges that could make the approval process expensive and time consuming, once a piloted project becomes a proven model, it could be more easily replicated elsewhere.





## 2.

### Engage communities in the long-term stewardship of natural areas

- Involve community members directly in the stewardship of ecological projects to increase awareness and ownership while ensuring groups are supported with actual expertise on plants/landscaping to help plants survive
- Increase biodiversity by finding opportunities to convert mowed turf to naturalized landscapes, recognizing that these opportunities may lie outside of traditional city parks

As cities continue to grow and intensify, it is more important than ever to find ways to increase green space and also ensure we are mitigating the stresses placed on natural environments from increases in population.

This challenge means strong community engagement in naturalization projects is critical. Involving community members in the stewardship of these spaces creates a sense of shared public space ownership that can help ensure natural areas are not damaged from overuse. A key component of this are the educational opportunities and programming that increase public awareness about respecting and stewarding naturalized areas.

Funded in two phases by the WFPC in 2013 and 2014, the **Scarborough Gattineau Butterfly Trail**, a project by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority's Living City Foundation, has transformed 124 acres of what was mowed grass into a thriving natural habitat for pollinators along a 3.5 km section of hydro corridor trail in an area of the city that lacks green space.

Students planting in the hydro corridor –  
Toronto and Region Conservation Authority



By converting grass turf in a hydro corridor into a native meadowland habitat, the project has increased biodiversity and provided habitat for birds, butterflies, and other pollinators through the planting of approximately 10,000 wildflowers and grasses. The strong community engagement in this project ensures the meadow will flourish for years to come. There have been hiking and biking tours of the new meadow as well as planting events with local school and community groups that have reached over 3,000 people.

Another project where the connection between ecosystem restoration and community engagement is strong is the **Downsview Park Tallgrass Prairie**, which was funded in 2015. An estimated three percent of Ontario's tallgrass habitat is all that remains of this vanishing ecosystem, despite a wide variety of species, particularly birds, which depend on this habitat. By recreating a tallgrass prairie on five acres at Downsview Park, this project, a partnership between Tallgrass Ontario and Canada Lands Corporation, educates local school children and a city-wide audience about the importance of biodiversity and habitat preservation.

"The community has been leading this revitalization from the very beginning. Whether it is a child experiencing their first opportunity to plant a wildflower, or a family watching the return of the Red-tailed Hawk; these transformative experiences are fostering the critical understanding of our relationship with the natural environment in the next generation, which, in turn, will redefine the future of conservation for Canada's largest urban region."

*Arlen Leeming, Manager, Don & Highland Watersheds,  
Toronto and Region Conservation Authority*

Strong partnerships support the planting of native species, community engagement, and the long-term maintenance of the site. For example, through partnerships that subsidize trips to Downsview Park, a number of surrounding schools in underserved neighbourhoods will visit the tallgrass habitat and engage in educational programming. In addition to school programming, a free community program, Nature Connection, will incorporate natural stewardship and educational opportunities on the tallgrass restoration site.

## KEY CHALLENGE

Natural restoration can give the impression of lessened maintenance costs because it means the City can let a space just go "natural" and stop maintaining it. However, these natural spaces still require significant specialized maintenance to limit invasive species and ensure proper habitat management. Funds are required to do that specialized work and educate and involve the public in their stewardship so that everyone understands the special care these areas need. Just as importantly, successful projects require hiring experts in plants and landscapes to ensure long-term plant survival. Too often, community groups do not have the expertise to choose the right plants, plant them correctly and give them the correct care to ensure they thrive. This can lead to new natural landscapes dying after only a year or two.



### 3.

## Support local community park champions

- Identify high-capacity, visionary community members who can galvanize others
- Build a broad base of project support through partnerships and wider engagement so that no endeavour is ever dependent on a single person

One of the most important outcomes of the WFPC is how it has supported visionary community leaders, providing them with the opportunity to test ideas and drive change through engaging others in green spaces in their community.

Deep, on-the-ground familiarity with a community and its potential is often the springboard of creativity, of seeing opportunities where others may see only challenges. Simply put, the people who live and work in the community are the most qualified to be the ones to orchestrate positive change.

These community leaders are crucial to the initial success of a park project, but also its long-term sustainability. Innovative, new models often spring from a person or group of people who are deeply rooted in their local community. We call such local



leaders “park champions” because they have the ability to rally support and integrate many voices into a clear vision. They embrace the ideas and efforts of other local residents. They seek out partnerships with funders, the City, local businesses, and non-profit organizations that can offer programming and infrastructure support.

With the **Bringing Back Nature to William Burgess School** project, Alex Maric Jones, a teacher at the school, was able to galvanize residents, parents, and school staff to form an innovative partnership to improve schoolyard property by creating a natural community gathering place for the entire neighbourhood.

To accomplish this, Alex had to encourage public, private, and community stakeholders to work together in new ways. Through trusted relationships with the school principal, parent council, school trustee, and the local City councillor, Alex and her team were able to support the Toronto District School Board in the development of new policies and procedures to allow the project to happen.



Trees waiting to be planted – Toronto Foundation for Student Success

The project includes a natural playground, discovery trail, and improved natural landscaping—transforming what was an underused school property into a new community green space in a neighbourhood that is low in parks.

“It is important to have someone involved from start to finish. Persistence is essential. Whenever someone said no, we reflected on why and then I changed the ‘ask’ to allow them to say yes while still remaining true to our vision. If we knocked on enough doors, I was sure we could find someone who could help us. But I could only do this because we knew that the vision was strong and that it came from the community.”

*Alex Maric Jones*

## KEY CHALLENGE

Relying too heavily on a single person for a project creates a risk that the project will unravel if they decide to take something else on or move out of the neighbourhood entirely. It’s important to work with a local leader to kick-start the project, but quickly work to build partnerships and community volunteers that can sustain a project even if key people move on. For example, High Park Nature’s **OURSspace** project was driven by a dynamic Executive Director who left the organization soon after the project got underway. But because there was very strong buy-in and support from their Board and staff, the project stayed on track.





## 4.

### Keep residents engaged through creative programming

- Ensure your engagement strategy considers how community members can stay involved for the long-term through programming, stewardship, and other activities
- Employ a community organizer or animator from the local neighbourhood to act as a pillar of support for volunteer activities, engagement, and partnership building

Community engagement in the design, programming, and maintenance of a public green space is critical to the success and sustainability of any park improvement project.

Community consultation is an ideal “front-end” approach to ensuring that new designs and programs respond to the needs of local residents or are

co-created by local community members. Every community has specific needs and desires and involving diverse people upfront can ensure a better outcome in terms of park design and amenities that reflect diverse cultural backgrounds.

However, community consultation generally stops once something is built and does not provide a “back-end” platform that engages residents in the long-term operation of that park, such as programming and stewardship opportunities. The long-term success of projects, including keeping them well-maintained, stem from an engaged local community that feels a sense of ownership and responsibility over the space through on-going involvement.

Creating a community park group, like a “friends of the park” group, is one way that we have found works well to ensure this long-term engagement. Essentially these groups act like a local residents’ association, except instead of a neighbourhood, they are focused on a park. These groups partake in any number of activities including advocating for park improvements, fundraising for new amenities, performing natural stewardship activities such as watering trees or park clean-ups, and organizing free community events.

It is the creation of fun, free programming in the park that really drives long-term engagement, getting people excited about becoming involved in their local park and helping to sustain that excitement over time.

A great example is **Friends of Regent Park**, a volunteer group of local residents in the Regent Park neighbourhood formed to animate and care for the newly-opened park. Through funding from the WFPC, CRC Regent Park, a local charity focused on food security issues, was able to hire a park animator from the neighbourhood on a two-year contract to engage local residents in forming Friends of Regent



Friends of Regent Park – CRC Regent Park

“So positive. Children, families, friends building a strong community. Seeing the same faces, learning about different cultures, eating amazing food!”

*Attendee at Taste of Regent Park*

Park. The grant from the WFPC specifically required that the CRC hire locally in order to build capacity and connections in the community.

Support from paid staff can greatly enhance the effectiveness of a park friends group in a diverse, underserved community where a lack of individual resources like time and money can create barriers to engagement. Non-profit support provides a fundraising mechanism for the group and provides access to many partnership opportunities. In this case, Friends of Regent Park and the CRC partnered with over 23 organizations to launch community events reaching over 3,000 participants.

The Friends of Regent Park have hosted a number of successful events in the park, including Taste of Regent Park, October Fun Fest, Sunday in the Park, and a Harvest Festival. Many of the events focus on food and include use of the bake oven that was a part of the new park.

## KEY CHALLENGE

Funding for an animator is important, but a key question is how a volunteer group sustains itself after funding ends for the animator position—a conversation happening with the Friends of Regent Park currently. It’s important to involve volunteers in decision-making and build the capacity of members to take on projects, organize events, and apply for funding so that if funding for an animator position ends, the group can carry on. While it is always challenging to fill a gap with volunteers when there is no longer funding for a paid position, you increase the chances of building community capacity by initially hiring locally.





## 5.

### Use food as a catalyst for community development

- Use the growing and cooking of food to bridge perceived gaps between people of different backgrounds and abilities
- Create programming around gardening and food-growing to build skills and create opportunities for physical activity outdoors

The growing, sharing, and cooking of food is one of the best ways to engage with people in public spaces. Whether it's a community gardening project, a foraging walk, a bake oven, a harvest festival, or a community dinner, there is something magical about food in parks. It's no surprise then that many of the projects funded through the WFPC focused on food as a way to bring people together and create new opportunities for learning and skill-building.

"We have been amazed by the impact of garden-based programs for both children and youth with complex disabilities and the greater community. Forested areas and food-growing gardens offer a calming environment with the opportunity for sensory integration which is essential for children with developmental disabilities such as autism. With the generous support of the Weston Family Parks Challenge, we have regular community programs which accommodate all participants. This inclusive environment brings everyone together to learn and share around the common goal of being in nature and growing healthy food."

*Elaine Garness, Program Supervisor, Apts Teaching Landscape*



The **Aptus Teaching Landscape**, a project funded in 2015, includes a weekly farmers' market and shared resources for gardening, orchard tree care, and cooking workshops. It's a project by the Aptus Treatment Centre, which serves children with complex disabilities and operates its campus in the heart of a residential neighbourhood. The food-centered teaching landscape provides a focus for vocational training, hands-on stewardship, and opportunities for students to connect with the local community through the growing and sharing of food.

In addition, food allows new immigrants and people from different backgrounds and cultures to share their own local knowledge and create new connections in their community. The ability to grow fresh fruits and vegetables is also important for people living in neighbourhoods where access to healthy, affordable food is not easy.



Watering plants – Aptus Treatment Centre



Assistant farmers learning about beekeeping from the Toronto Beekeepers – Everdale

Everdale's **Black Creek Community Farm** is a great example of food acting as a catalyst for community development and engagement. Launched in 2013 with funding from WFPC, the farm is located in the densely-populated neighbourhood of Jane and Finch—one of Toronto's designated Neighbourhood Improvement Areas.

The five-acre farm park connects local and city-wide residents to nature and sustainable farming, right in the city. BCCF also runs many different programs, including a farmer's market, food workshops, seniors gardening and cooking clubs, and a children's farm camp.

"Outside of the farm, my kids can't sit still or keep their hands off each other, but the moment they walk into the farm it's like they are different people."

*Parent participant*





## 6.

### Provide economic and skill-building opportunities

- Create opportunities for local employment whenever possible, especially for students, newcomers, and youth
- Provide educational and skill-building opportunities through paid internships, classes, and on-site training

One of the most over-looked benefits of parks and open space projects is that they can provide economic opportunities for residents, including skill-building, and job training. In particular, food-related projects in parks, including urban agriculture, park cafes, and markets, are great ways to create job opportunities for youth and newcomers. These projects not only create opportunities to learn farming and harvesting skills, but sales, marketing, and other business-related activities.



For example, the **Black Creek Community Farm** created eight full-time and 17 part-time youth internships in 2016 in the Jane and Finch neighbourhood. Many of the staff live in the neighbourhood and started out as volunteers. These farm staff gain growing and sales experience and participate in job skills workshops throughout the growing season. Food is sold through an on-site market, a vegetable stand set up at the Driftwood Community Centre, as well as 23 family Community Supported Agriculture subscriptions for five months of the year.

## KEY CHALLENGE

While community members in underserved neighbourhoods want to get involved in green space projects, some may find it difficult to volunteer their time. It's important to find ways to pay people for their contribution to projects, while being upfront that this funding may not be long-term. This not only recognizes the time commitment and energy that people bring to projects, but can provide work experience and skill training. Funders are often unable to offer compensation or salaries for people, and instead must allocate funding for physical improvements (like plants), so it was fortunate that the WFPC included the ability to provide compensation.



Black Creek Community Farm farmers – Everdale





## 7.

### Use seed funding to build capacity and evidence for larger transformations

- Build capacity of volunteer groups through “start-up” grants and simple projects
- Use pilot projects to test ideas and build a case for support through data collection and impact measurement

Sometimes a project idea is fantastic, but it might be too early to award a large, multi-year grant. Instead, a one-year pilot initiative is often wise to lay the ground work for a larger project, as a more modest funding allocation allows organizations to test and modify their idea.

Planning a one-year pilot project can provide time to do broad community outreach, which is especially important if an organization is not already deeply

rooted in the community. It can also help build capacity for groups to take on more complex projects down the road. If a small organization applies for a large, multi-year grant, it may be difficult for that organization to “staff-up” appropriately to deliver the project and to sustain it over the long-term.

Similarly, a pilot can also be a smart way to build the capacity of local leaders to transition into a project management role. Many local leaders initially pursue an innovative idea as a community volunteer. Over time, volunteers may engage with partners, apply for funding, and want to transition into a paid staff position. A pilot project can help build the skills needed to manage a larger project and create that economic opportunity.



Finally, for long-term sustainability, it is important to have diverse program partnerships and diverse sources of funding. However, it is difficult to form meaningful program partnerships or solicit funding until there is evidence of probable success. By funding a pilot project, organizations can establish project credibility so that they are able to reach out to other program and funding partners.



Ki Bimaadiziwin Project – For Youth Initiative



MABELLEarts – Liam Coo

A clear example of this is the **Ki Bimaadiziwin Project**—a partnership between For Youth Initiative and Naadmaagit Ki Group (NKG). Funded in 2015, the project creates opportunities to learn an Indigenous stewardship approach by improving natural habitat at six sites along the Humber River near the Mount Dennis Community—one of Toronto’s designated Neighbourhood Improvement Areas. In doing so, it also engages with Indigenous youth and elder volunteers in site restoration and community programming as a form of Indigenous cultural rejuvenation. Part of the project was also meant to seed the idea of an outdoor, Indigenous land-based learning centre on the Humber River to retain and share knowledge of Indigenous land management practices with a city-wide audience.

Originally, NKG came forward with a very ambitious, multi-year proposal requiring major funding. This was challenging to approve when their idea was so new and untested. This innovative, one-year pilot has allowed NKG to build the capacity of their youth volunteers and its organizational capacity. The pilot has also allowed NKG to test the model and document successes and challenges, building credibility with other potential funding and programming partners.





## 8.

### Sustain projects through diverse funding and partnerships

- Seek partners with different skills and/or resources
- Widen your lens to maximize creative partnership and funding opportunities – seek out diverse sources of funding and revenue to sustain projects

The work involved in a park doesn't end when the ribbon is cut—it's only beginning. However, it's much easier to galvanize funders, politicians, and residents around new infrastructure, than the long-term maintenance and care that every park and public space needs. As public operating budgets become more strained, it's necessary to look at how partnerships can help sustain parks.

Innovative partnerships and diverse sources of funding are the key to long-term sustainability for any public green space project, whether in parks or another type of publicly-accessible open space.

The WFPC was at the forefront of encouraging these types of innovative partnerships in Toronto, helping to further a culture of partnerships in public spaces that has led to such creative projects as The Bentway (formerly Project: Under Gardiner).

Diverse funding sources are also critical to the long-term viability of these projects. While some funders may adhere to an environmental mandate, others may be more focused on the arts or economic development. Just as a healthy ecosystem is defined by diverse species, so too is the financial health and longevity of a project increased through diverse funding streams.



Community groups are also vital to the long-term sustainability of any project, because they live in close proximity to the park and use it on a daily basis, they are an important driver of community engagement.

These groups can work with non-profit partners to animate and maintain parks in partnership with the City or other landowner. By leveraging the networks of these non-profit partners and community park groups—and their ability to bring creative, targeted programming to public spaces—the City can reach a wider audience than they could on their own.

For example, the proposal for the **Franklin the Turtle's Habitat Restoration and Bring Back the Wild Program** on Toronto Island evolved over time. The City of Toronto was interested in support from the WFPC to restore and improve the turtle pond, which had degraded, become overgrown with invasive species, and was no longer able to hold water. The original proposal from the City had no partnerships or community involvement.



A hands-on workshop – Earth Rangers

The proposal was significantly improved over time by adding in a partnership with Earth Rangers, local schools, and other funders. This project creates a thriving wetland ecosystem and nature-focused program at the pond in Franklin's Garden on Centre Island. As the new Toronto hub for the Earth Rangers' programs, this site will become an important centre of environmental education for school groups, recreational visitors, and local residents.

The sustainability of the project is ensured through strong partnerships and community engagement. The Earth Rangers have a reach of 20,000 students and 100,000 families through their promotions as well as a cross-Canada member network of 9,000. The Earth Rangers and TD Bank Group are providing additional funding, while program support will come from the community through the Friends of Toronto Island and the Toronto Island Nature School.

*"Connecting with the Earth Rangers program will expand awareness of this resource to even more families. Park staff will also benefit from this collaboration with learning that can then be extended to other parks and programs."*

*City Councillor Pam McConnell*



## 9.

### Develop trust and partnerships with municipal partners

- Ensure you do the necessary front-end work of speaking with City staff and local government representatives to bring everyone on board early on
- Recognize that City budgets for ongoing maintenance and operations are often strained (as opposed to capital budgets) and build these costs into project budgets

One of the WFPC's successes was encouraging new ways of thinking about green space. While this included funding projects in City of Toronto parks, it also included lands owned and managed by community housing, the federal government, the conservation authority, non-profit organizations, schools, and even privately-owned lands.

Interestingly, one of the factors influencing proposals to come from projects outside of city parks was that these other landowners were generally more open

and flexible to creative and cooperative ways of working with community partners to improve and animate green spaces. The City's Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division's priority for philanthropy was on raising private funds to support key City capital priorities such as new playgrounds and splash pads. The WFPC's focus, however, was on involving diverse community partners and new ways to program and use parks, which was generally new to PFR.

Additionally, City budget and planning cycles are often focused on the long-term for capital projects in parks, which can present challenges. A funder may be interested in funding a new project with a community partner, but as the City's capital planning process lands two or more years out, it may not be able to allocate new dollars to that project for many years. This means that cooperative planning for a capital project between a funder and a municipality may take a number of years and some funders may not be able to commit over an extended timeframe.



Significant effort needs to be made to build strong relationships between funders and municipal partners in order for philanthropy in city parks to be effective, particularly for new types of initiatives such as the WFPC. In hindsight, a mistake was made not to spend significant time well before announcing the program to build a better common understanding and working relationship between funders and City staff.

The end result of building this relationship was in the success of the WFPC allocating its largest grant of \$700,000 over three years to the City to support the creative **Franklin the Turtle's Habitat Restoration and Bring Back the Wild Program** on Toronto Island.

It is also crucial to remember that bringing philanthropy and other private funding sources into parks and public spaces is not about replacing City funding and staff resources, but about adding value.

“For the past 17 years, the City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation department has been an unwavering source of support for the High Park Nature Centre. Our move to the historic High Park Forest School, and the creation of our new outdoor classroom/ecological restoration project (OURSpace), would not have been possible without PFR backing. City staff played a critical role in realizing the project by helping to create the overall vision; providing funds for much needed capital upgrades to the Forest School; securing land for the outdoor classroom and offering support for our educational programs.”

*Diana Teal, Executive Director, High Park Nature Centre*

Often this added value resides in increased programming or community engagement funding, while the City brings its capital and operational funding to support the project. A very successful example of this is **High Park Nature's** nature-focused outdoor classroom in High Park. PFR staff played a crucial role in facilitating and nurturing the project that brought City funding to the table to do capital upgrades to a heritage building, while the WFPC funded green infrastructure and programming—all coordinated by an NGO, High Park Nature.



Fall Celebration – High Park Nature Centre

## KEY CHALLENGE

New park projects can result in additional maintenance and operational costs for cities, so one learning from the WFPC is that budgets for maintenance for capital investments are crucial to ensure that these projects remain well-maintained and sustainable after the ribbon is cut. One option is for proponents to consider creating a maintenance endowment and include that in partnership agreements with the city.





## 10.

### Leverage the power of funders working together

- Partner with an on-the-ground organization that can meaningfully connect funding to community-based projects
- Ensure open communication and understanding if more than one funder is involved, especially if their strategic objectives differ

Just as the WFPC was ground-breaking for parks philanthropy in Canada, it is also a relatively uncommon example of funders formally partnering together. Philanthropy in Canada can be very

compartmentalized. But with the WFPC, there was a private family foundation-led initiative being realized in collaboration with a government foundation with the whole project being administered by an NGO.

Having two funders involved in the program proved to be very successful. While both funders supported the core program elements, each had its own particular priority for project funding—the WGWF’s top priority was supporting green infrastructure and OTF’s priority was to build community capacity and



engagement to animate parks. The funders were able to bring their complementary funding priorities together to cooperatively and more comprehensively support and increase the impact of a community green space project.

Furthermore, by using Park People as the program's administrator, the two funders were able to leverage our relationships with other funders and our previous investments and efforts to build the capacity of small community-based groups who otherwise would never have had the ability to take on a WFPC project.

This strong hands-on role was critical. Many of the applicants were from smaller-scale community-based organizations and did not have the project management or fundraising expertise to design a strong application. Park People played an important role in assisting and supporting small-scale applicants. As well, many of the projects were innovative, new ideas for public spaces involving a multitude of partners and stakeholders. Park People helped broker and nurture high-quality projects as well as provided support to already approved projects to help overcome any hurdles and challenges.



Learning to garden – Rexdale Community Health Centre

Two good examples are **Friends of Chester Le Park** and the **Rexdale Community Garden Network**. Both organizations were kick-started with staff support and micro grants from Park People's Parks 44 (funded by the Metcalf Foundation) and TD Park Builders (funded by TD Bank) prior to the WFPC. This early hands-on work with these grassroots organizations built their capacity to eventually apply and deliver larger-scale WFPC funded projects successfully.

Having two funders involved in the program provided added complexity. Each had its own culture and business-operating rules—an inevitability given the differences between a family-run foundation and a government funder. And Park People had to learn and adapt as it grew into its role as program administrator. There were sometimes challenges to coordinate elements such as media releases, key messaging, and reporting requirements. But overall, having the two funders in the WFPC resulted in far more significant impact for the program.

## KEY CHALLENGE

Clear understandings of all partners' needs and open, clear communication and flexibility among partners involved in a joint initiative are essential. When establishing a program, in addition to developing the process for joint administration, it is just as important to land key messaging and communications protocols.

## CONCLUSION



Examining a butterfly – High Park Nature Centre

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With the innovation of the Weston Family Parks Challenge, The W. Garfield Weston Foundation and the Ontario Trillium Foundation broke new ground for both park philanthropy and for creating new ways to connect people in cities to nature, both in Toronto and for Canada as a whole.

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The aim of the Weston Family Parks Challenge was just that—a challenge. A challenge to residents, to local government, and to community organizations to bring their energy, enthusiasm, and creativity to

enhance public spaces and connect people with nature across the city. The projects featured in this report show how communities rose to that challenge and what we can learn from their experiences.



The program, and its impacts in communities, has already inspired innovative new creative uses and models for parks and new park conservancies such as the Bentway Trust. It has produced creative, sustainable models for operating and programming in parks through partnerships, and for engaging communities in the long-term care of naturalized spaces. It has helped reframe how we look at open spaces in our cities, like hydro corridors that can be used as pollinator habitats and productive farms, and open lawns around apartment buildings that can offer space for native plants, communal gardens, and orchards.

Park People has also learned from our work administering the WFPC and from preparing this report. We are already moving forward, incorporating these lessons learned in our park granting programs and our continued efforts to improve and animate city parks as we expand across Canada.

The goal of this report was to highlight key learnings from the WFPC with the intention of inspiring and guiding the work of additional potential funders in city parks. We hope this report provides some helpful lessons and further expands interest in community, government and philanthropic partners working together to maximize the environmental, social, economic and health impacts of great city parks.



Downsview Park aerial view – Tallgrass Ontario



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