



2020

The Canadian City Parks Report

Highlighting the trends, challenges, and leading practices in 27 Canadian cities to inspire action, share learning, and track progress in city parks across the country.

park people
amis des parcs

Foreword

Our cities' green spaces have never been more important as communities grapple with the realities of a global pandemic.

Parks have been closed, and then opened, and then filled beyond capacity. Whether you are a frontline worker, a single parent with restless children, or are experiencing homelessness, our city parks have become essential spaces to restore our physical and mental well-being at a stressful and uncertain time.

The Canadian City Parks Report is an in-depth look at the state of these essential parks in municipalities across the country. This year's report focuses on the importance of urban biodiversity, and the role that city parks can play to support and connect valuable ecosystems. Increasingly, studies show the strong connection between biodiversity and well-being, making the theme of this year's report especially relevant.

Restoring and protecting biodiversity in Canadian landscapes is a key part of our Foundation's mission. Scientific data tells us that biodiverse ecosystems are our best defense to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change. But data is not enough—we know that in order to protect biodiversity, we need to feel connected to the land and nature that surrounds us. And as more and more Canadians move to larger urban settings, city parks offer one of the best opportunities to make those connections.

Thank you to the team at Park People for continuing to develop this valuable resource for city parks' management and staff. Our Foundation is proud to support this important work and are grateful for all that Park People does to improve equity and inclusion, and increase connections to urban parks in Canada.

I also want to recognize and thank the dozens of municipal staff who took the time out of already busy schedules to give Park People the data and stories needed to create this report. We hope you continue to find it a valuable and useful tool to share best practices and spark conversations for the betterment of our parks and our cities.

It is reassuring to see growing commitment to improving biodiversity in cities across the country from volunteers, staff and city leaders. Now more than ever we need our parks to be healthy and thriving to meet the needs of all communities. Our well-being depends on it.

Tamara Rebanks - Chair
The W. Garfield Weston Foundation

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This report came at a strange moment.

INTRODUCTION

As we worked on stories about biodiversity, creative park development, community engagement, and homelessness, the world changed around us. But it quickly became apparent that these stories were not made irrelevant, but more urgent than ever.

As COVID-19 has thrown into sharp relief, parks form a critical backbone of community infrastructure, strengthening our resilience during times of crisis. Parks are places where we grow our own food, where we let anxieties melt away on a nature walk, where we create social support networks, and even where we may find shelter during a trying time.

Work on this report started in October 2019 and while we incorporated the emerging impacts of COVID-19, much was still in flux at the time of this report's final writing in mid-May 2020. We've also seen a growing and necessary conversation about racism and parks, and specifically anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism.

Publishing this report is just the start of a longer conversation about Canadian parks. Over the next year, we will be reviewing the impacts of COVID-19 and continuing to spotlight issues of equity, building on the ideas in this report with additional content. To read more on our thoughts about parks and COVID-19, please read this [special blog post](#). And keep in touch with our continuing analysis on parks and COVID-19 on [social media](#) and by signing up to our [newsletter](#).

The Canadian City Parks Report is an annual report on the trends and challenges facing city parks. It's not meant to be an encyclopedia of everything. Each year will shift in focus as we shine a spotlight on made-in-Canada solutions in five theme areas: nature, growth, collaboration, activation, and inclusion. The 2020 report was built on the feedback we received from the 25,000 people who visited the website and downloaded the 2019 report.

This year we dive deep into urban biodiversity—a topic of great importance as pressures on our natural environment from urbanization and climate change threaten the ecosystems that sustain us. We have not only reported stories and compiled key data, but created an online biodiversity resource library where you can learn more about biodiversity's connection to climate change, well-being, Indigenous land management, habitat restoration, and more.

You'll also find stories on how scarce and expensive land (and now physical distancing measures) is driving innovative new public spaces, how we can more meaningfully engage people, and what cities can do to lead the conversation about homelessness and parks with care—a topic that has taken on heightened importance due to COVID-19.

Our goal with the Canadian City Parks Report is to provide opportunities for shared learning, increased action, and inspiration. We hope you find stories that resonate with you, but also challenge your thinking. And that you come away feeling invigorated about Canadian city parks and what you can do to make them even a little bit better in your community.

A report this size is a team effort.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We would also like to thank RBC for its support of the Nature section's biodiversity stories, stats, and online Biodiversity Resource Hub. Finally, we would like to thank the Landscape Architecture Canada Foundation for its support of the research into small-scale urban biodiversity projects.

Lastly, thank you to the entire Park People team for their support and input.

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Nature

INTRODUCTION

Biodiversity is the splendour of life on this planet—the intricately linked mix of flora and fauna that sustains us. And yet biodiversity is under threat due to degraded and fragmented habitats from urbanization and increased ecosystem stress from climate change.

In 2017, the World Wildlife Fund-Canada [reported](#) that 50% of monitored species in Canada are in decline, including federally protected at-risk species. And Canadian researchers have warned that bee populations are in [severe decline](#), putting at risk the pollination required by nearly 75% of food crops.

In Canada, some of the areas most rich in biodiversity are [also the areas most densely settled](#), making biodiversity both an urban challenge and opportunity. As places where nature and people come together in cities, our local parks have a large role to play in protecting and enhancing biodiversity—and increasing our understanding of its importance to our planet and to our lives.

That's why we've focused this section on a special look at urban biodiversity, diving deep into its impacts on our well-being, how small spaces add up to big impacts, why we need to increase habitat connectivity, and what we can do to deepen the conversation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only bolstered arguments for the importance of access to nature and healthy ecosystems. Stories from across the country showed how people found new relief in exploring natural spaces, [running outdoors](#), and using parks to decompress.

As the stories in this section show, biodiversity is a key ingredient in the resiliency of both our ecosystems and our mental health.

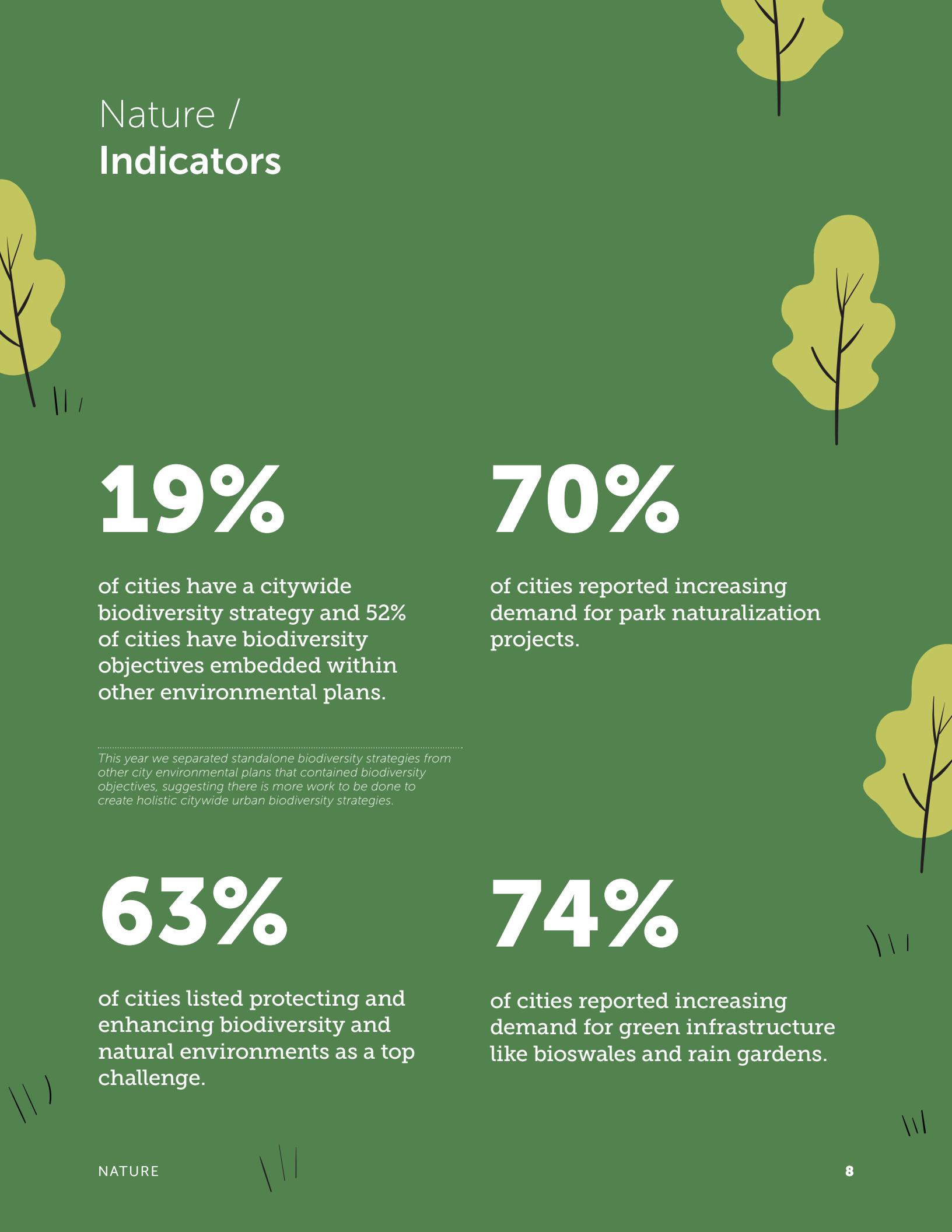
Nature

INSIGHTS

- * Nearly two thirds of cities reported protecting biodiversity and enhancing natural areas as a top challenge, while only 1 in 5 reported having a citywide biodiversity strategy in place.
- * Nature experiences are in demand as 70% of cities reported increasing demand for park naturalization projects and 56% of cities reported increasing demand for volunteer stewardship opportunities.
- * As extreme weather continues to impact parks, nearly three quarters of cities reported increasing demand for green infrastructure like rain gardens and bioswales that can help mitigate impacts, but few cities have citywide green infrastructure strategies in place that include parks.

TAKE-AWAYS

- * Recognize and promote the psychological well-being benefits of biodiversity and use public health as a “doorway” to bring new people into the conversation, especially as the COVID-19 response turns to addressing an increasing mental health crisis.
- * Leverage the attachment people have to their local neighbourhoods to promote small-scale projects like pollinator gardens that make urban biodiversity tangible for people, and use them as springboards into wider environmental conversations.
- * Work towards the protection and restoration of natural spaces—large and small—but ensure they are also connected through biodiversity corridors at the multiple scales of neighbourhood, city, and region.



Nature / Indicators

19%

of cities have a citywide biodiversity strategy and 52% of cities have biodiversity objectives embedded within other environmental plans.

This year we separated standalone biodiversity strategies from other city environmental plans that contained biodiversity objectives, suggesting there is more work to be done to create holistic citywide urban biodiversity strategies.

70%

of cities reported increasing demand for park naturalization projects.

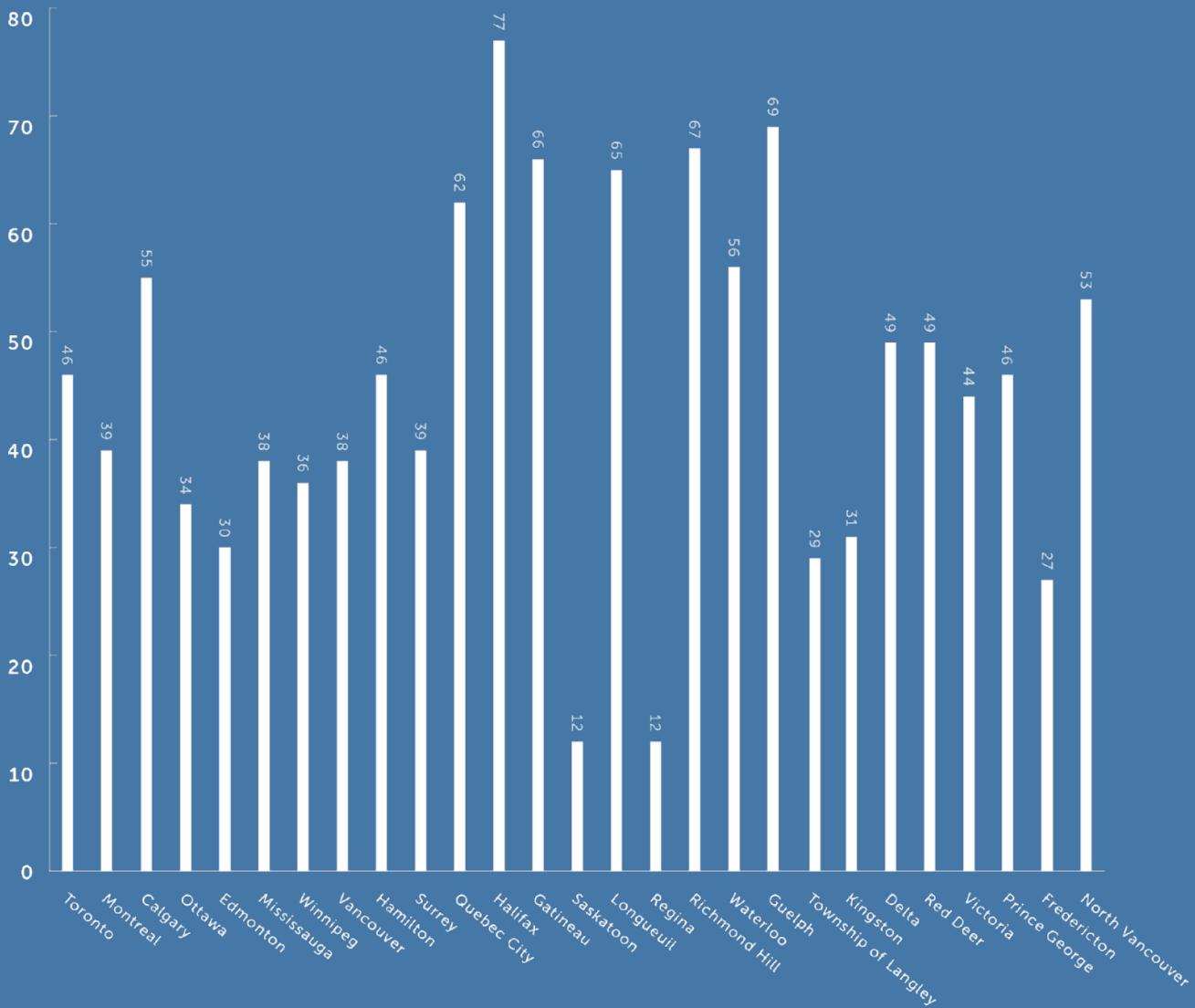
63%

of cities listed protecting and enhancing biodiversity and natural environments as a top challenge.

74%

of cities reported increasing demand for green infrastructure like bioswales and rain gardens.

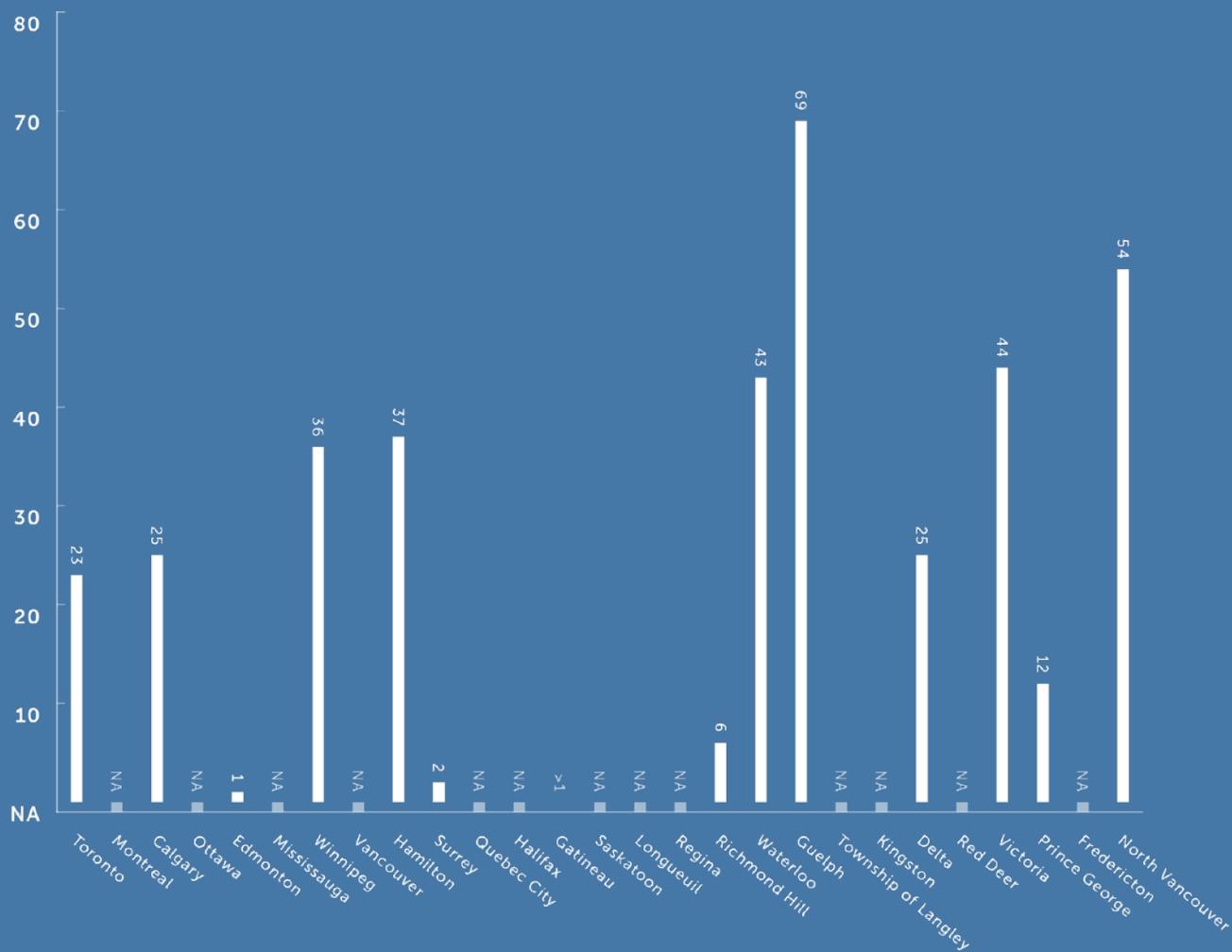
Nature / % of parkland that is natural parkland



Park systems are made up of both manicured parks (sports fields, playgrounds) and natural areas (woodlots, meadows). As we seek to adapt to climate change and increase biodiversity, it's important to ensure we are protecting natural spaces as cities grow. On average, 45% of park systems are natural areas, representing 33,600ha across all cities.

*Arranged by population size

Nature / % of parkland that is environmentally significant/protected



This chart shows the percentage of total city parkland that is under special protection as ecologically sensitive. While the policies are different in each city, it gives a sense of the quantity of protected urban habitat—8,300ha in total or equivalent to nearly 21 Stanley Parks—a number that could help contribute to **Canada's target** of 17% protected land in the country.

*Arranged by population size

1.

The Feel Good Factor

How urban biodiversity improves our well-being and why that matters even more during COVID-19.

Take a walk in a park. It's something many of us intuitively do when we're feeling anxious, which, as COVID-19 courses through our lives, is a growing collective emotional state. Nature is even something doctors have begun **prescribing**. But are all parks created equal in their benefits to our psychological well-being?

Pioneering research from the 1990s showed how exposure to nature—even getting a glimpse of it out of a window—could reduce stress, **improve concentration**, and help us **heal faster**. However, this research often painted nature with a broad brush: green space was green space whether it was a wild space or a treed lawn.

Recent research has been going deeper by exploring people's response to different natural



Mentally Significant Area. Credit: TRCA

environments. Studies have looked at the **length of time** spent in biodiverse areas (the longer time the greater the positive effect), the **types of vegetation** present (bright flowers were stimulating, green plantings were soothing), and whether the **presence of park furniture** like benches reduced the well-being impacts of natural areas (it didn't). Overall, the research has found

that people report a greater sense of well-being in areas that they perceive to be more biodiverse—a finding that has deep implications for how we plan and engage people in urban biodiversity.

The importance of access to nature and biodiversity for our mental health becomes even more urgent in light of COVID-19. As the pandemic increased stress and severed personal support networks

for many, **half of Canadians reported** worsening mental health and the Canadian Mental Health Association warned of a potential **"echo pandemic"** of mental illness.

People were left trying to balance government direction to "stay

home" with a desire to get some fresh air and clear their heads. A **global survey** of 2,000 people found mental and physical health were key drivers of public space use during the pandemic. The same survey found that

people took refuge in places close to home, highlighting the pressing need to ensure natural areas are equitably distributed throughout our cities.

A NEW FRONTIER



A walk in the woods. Credit: Park People

The benefits of biodiversity are often couched in environmental impacts and ecosystem services—the work that natural areas do to help clean the air, provide food, mitigate flooding, control extreme temperatures, and more. Viewing nature as green infrastructure is critical, but it misses how these same spaces are also psychological infrastructure.

"The intersection of the richness of life on earth with human well-being is now well established in science and is fast becoming an imperative in design and planning practice," said Nina-Marie Lister,

Associate Professor and Director of the Ecological Design Lab at Ryerson University, who added that the area is a "new frontier."

"Never before have our parks and public green spaces been more important to city dwellers, especially in terms of the mental health and wellness benefits of urban nature," she said.

"From birdsong to sunshine, wildflowers and shady walks, we now know that the ability to safely access the outdoors is a critical necessity—and a vital prescription for wellness."

"The sooner we recognize that we take psychological solace being in nature, the better we are able to protect nature for our own well-being," she added.

Don Carruthers Den Hoed, a researcher at Mount Royal University who also manages the **Canadian Parks Collective**

for Innovation and Leadership, has conducted his own studies on the connection between biodiversity and well-being. He argued that the well-being narrative can be a "doorway" through which to get more people involved in conversations about parks and biodiversity, noting the

Canadian Index of Well-being as a model for how to talk about the multiple benefits of parks.

Understanding how parks contribute to Index areas like leisure and environment are a "no-brainer," Carruthers Den Hoed said. But what about

democratic engagement and community vitality? Through the Index, cities can make the case that volunteer stewardship programs aren't just about natural restoration work, he said, but also about strengthening community vitality and well-being.

EDUCATION, RESTORATION, AND WELL-BEING: A WIN-WIN-WIN

The impacts of well-being and biodiversity often depend as much on people's perceptions as on actual levels of biodiversity present in a natural area.

For example, one **2012 study** found people reported high levels of well-being in areas they perceived to be more natural, even if their perception did not align with actual levels of biodiversity.

This leads to an opportunity, the researchers pointed out. Closing the gap between perception and reality through natural education and stewardship initiatives could "unlock win-win scenarios" that "can maximize both biodiversity conservation and human well-being."

In other words, the more we improve the biodiversity of our city and provide people ways to learn and steward these areas, the more people are able to appreciate natural spaces and the better they will feel as a result.

Robin Wall Kimmerer wrote of this reciprocal relationship between land stewardship and human well-being in her book, **Braiding Sweetgrass**, which weaves together Indigenous knowledge and natural science.



This place is for the birds. Credit: Park People

"Restoring land without restoring relationship is an empty exercise," she wrote. "It is relationship that will endure and relationship that will sustain the restored land. Therefore, reconnecting people and the landscape is as essential as reestablishing proper hydrology or cleaning up contaminants. It is medicine for the earth."

A MISSED OPPORTUNITY?

Lister views the public health and well-being impacts of biodiversity as a "missed opportunity" in Canada. "For a country rich in biodiversity, we are behind on protection strategies that can improve human well-being. I think it's an urgent necessity to put biodiversity and health together in our public policies."

Carruthers Den Hoed pointed out that park managers often speak about the spiritual benefits of nature and yet "that's not mentioned in any management plans. It's one of the really important values people come to nature for and yet it's just kind of shuffled to the side of the table."

Our review of Canadian biodiversity strategies found that while they mention the human well-being benefits of biodiversity, they do so often only in general terms rather than in policy or recommended actions.

However, that doesn't mean cities aren't thinking about the connection between biodiversity and public health. Recognizing the scientific link between



Canoeing the Humber River in Toronto. Credit: Park People

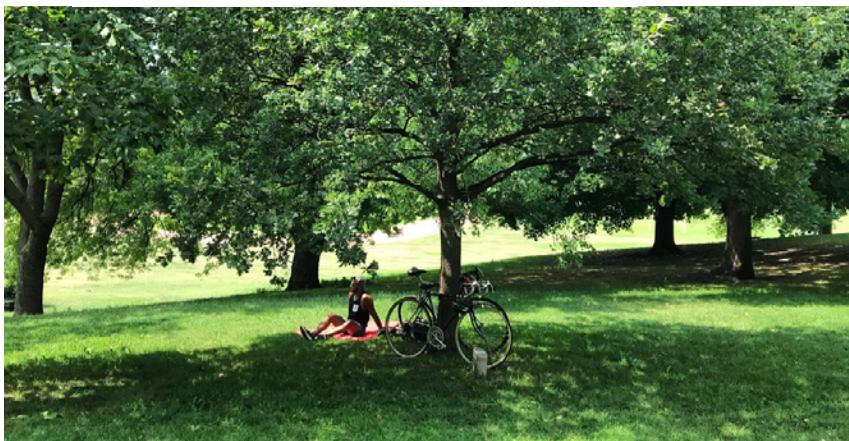
mental health and biodiversity, Vanessa Carney, Calgary's Landscape Analysis Supervisor, said that one of the goals of the city's work mapping ecological networks "is to help find ways to expand Calgarians' access to park spaces to include more easily accessible nature experiences."

The well-being benefits of experiencing biodiversity and nature raise important questions about equitable access to these spaces—especially given rising mental health pressures due to COVID-19.

As **health researcher Nadha Hassen** found, racial and socioeconomic inequities in access to quality green spaces can be a determinant of mental health outcomes. "In urban settings, neighbourhoods with low-income, newcomer, and racialized populations tend to have lower access to available, good quality green spaces compared to other groups that are higher income or white," she wrote.

Equity is a "massive piece of work," Carruthers Den Hoed noted. Indeed, equity is a missing lens from many biodiversity strategies. He argued that equity should not just be about access (do people have nearby nature to enjoy?), but about inclusion (how involved are people in shaping those natural spaces?).

"Where's the equity focusing on the decision-making, the employment, the economic benefits of the things that are happening in that park?" Carruthers Den Hoed said. "That's where I think the most interesting work will go."



Reclining under a tree. Credit: Park People

2.

Small is Mighty

How seemingly small actions and community-led urban biodiversity projects across the country are having a big impact.

The destruction and fragmentation of habitat from urbanization is one of the most pressing challenges facing urban biodiversity. In this context, it becomes increasingly important to find every nook and cranny we can to support habitat creation.

While large natural areas are critical, research shows that small-scale urban biodiversity projects—like pollinator gardens—are important pieces of the puzzle.

According to Carly Ziter, Assistant Professor in Concordia University's Biology Department, small-scale initiatives are key: at the ecological level they diversify habitat and improve connectivity, and at the social level they facilitate access to nature and opportunities for stewardship.



*Small pollinator garden in raised bed.
Credit: Park People*

Even small spaces can support a large number of local species with the right kind of native plants, as one [2019 study](#) showed. For example, a [citizen science survey](#) in Vancouver observed the second highest number of pollinator species within a small community-planted pollinator garden compared to nearby green spaces.

As the [Cougar Creek Streamkeepers](#) have shown, local projects can have big impacts over time. This group of industrious volunteers works in Surrey and Delta with city staff and local schools to create rain gardens that support the health of local streams to [bring back salmon](#) to the area. Their [annual counts](#) of salmon populations have tracked an increase of 50% since 2017.

FIND TOEHOLDS TO CREATE CONNECTIONS



Butterflyway Map Vancouver. Credit: David Suzuki Foundation

Connecting larger green spaces through native plant gardens along streets and parks can help restore lost habitat networks—a key focus of many city biodiversity strategies.

However, with park space at a premium, naturalization projects could create tension between different users. As Jode

Roberts from the David Suzuki Foundation pointed out, you can't play soccer on a meadow.

Roberts said he looks for smaller toeholds in underused spots in parks. "Urban landscapes are so fragmented that even adding little patches here and there is great for continuity for species, especially wild bees," he said. That's part of

the drive behind David Suzuki Foundation's **Butterflyway Project**, which encourages resident-led native plant gardens in Toronto, Richmond Hill, Victoria, Vancouver, and Montreal.

To increase naturalized areas, Sarah Winterton, formerly Director of Nature Connected Communities at World Wildlife Fund-Canada, argued that cities could consider designating a percentage of every park as a naturalized habitat.

Some cities are taking the lead on this. For example, Ottawa's **park development manual** establishes targets for naturalization in new parks. Halifax is planning to naturalize underused park areas with the help of local stewards, and Victoria has already naturalized 62 locations within their park system. Meanwhile, Fredericton is turning infrastructure into living habitat by building **living retaining walls** in three parks.

CULTIVATE THE PLANTS OF THE FUTURE

As the climate changes, so too will the plants that can thrive. As part of its climate resiliency planning, Victoria developed a plant selection list for parks that includes climate adaptive native plants that are drought-tolerant, pest/disease resistant, and pollinator-friendly, but also **low allergen** and low maintenance. One third of its annual plant inventory is now transitioned to naturalized plantings.

Guelph also devotes space in

its greenhouses to growing native plants through a pilot that it expanded in 2020, with plants made available for city parks and other naturalized planting programs. Over 75% of the seed for the 2020 program was collected from within the city itself. Similarly, Winnipeg is protecting genetic diversity by harvesting seeds from native plants in restoration projects and propagating them in the city's nursery.



Pollinator visitors. Credit Dallington Pollinators

UPDATE MAINTENANCE PRACTICES

Good maintenance and design are critical to the success of smaller projects as they are often in areas that are heavily used and may be under stress.

This includes ensuring enough sunlight, keeping dogs and people out of sensitive areas through low fencing, and leaving fallen leaves and sticks to assist

in natural nutrient cycles and habitat for nesting insects. For example, Montreal has begun leaving **dead/dying trees in parks** (when safe to do so) to promote biodiversity, as several species rely on woody debris.

Conservationists were even encouraging people to **let their lawns grow wild** as the

COVID-19 pandemic kept people inside, allowing native flowering plants to take over and provide more habitat for pollinators. Since lawns—whether in parks or on private property—often represent the largest vegetative areas of cities, these practices can result in large impacts.

THINK BEYOND THE PARK

Finding space for habitat in an urban landscape necessitates creative thinking. Concordia University's Carly Ziter noted that opportunities for local biodiversity projects can be found in urban agriculture, laneways, abandoned spaces and vacant lots, sidewalks, and private yards.

Montreal's network of **green alleys**, managed by community

members, provides small-scale habitat and social space in the city's boroughs. Other community-led projects championed by the boroughs include the initiative "**Faites comme chez vous**", which helps residents create small habitat patches on their own property.

Toronto's community-led **WexPOPS** took a different

approach. A six-week long summer 2019 pop-up plaza, WexPOPS provided a green oasis in a strip mall parking lot in Scarborough's Wexford Heights. Its numerous native plantings attracted pollinators, creating a hotspot where residents could interact with local wildlife in what was previously just a parking lot.



WexPOPS. Credit: Park People

"It's been quite dramatic to watch the monarch's progress from larva to adult butterflies, and to see how much milkweed they eat in the process," Brendan Stewart, one of the project team members

said. "The garden is constantly buzzing and visitors tend to be surprised and delighted to experience this much life in the middle of a huge parking lot."

It's a striking example of how small pin-pricks of nature in an otherwise sea of pavement—even in temporary spaces—can help support biodiversity and threatened species.

MAKE IT LOCAL TO MAKE AN IMPACT

Sarah Winterton argued that working on local initiatives may trigger people to be more aware of biodiversity's importance, creating support for other environmental issues.

That's why WWF-Canada launched the **In The Zone** program, which, like the Butterflyway Project, encourages resident-led native plant gardens. The program includes a "zone tracker" where gardeners can track the impact of their garden and see how it contributes to wider change.

The program aims to build awareness amongst people who "are not people who are already doing it," WWF-Canada's Lead Specialist in Species Conservation Pete Ewins said, adding that one of the biggest ways cities can boost urban biodiversity is to transition people to use native plants in their own gardens.

"Part of the problem [is] that environmental groups have for 50 years thought that a bunch of numbers and statistics under a powerful brand will change people's priorities," Ewins

said. "But it's got to have the emotional factor plugged in."

Ryerson University Associate Professor Nina-Marie Lister agreed. "If you've got a pollinator garden on your property, you are more likely to be the person who will support your government for investing in very large scale initiatives," she said. People can be "messengers of goodness" in their community, spreading ideas at the same time as they contribute to local habitat.

CREATE A PLACE FOR PLANTS—BUT ALSO PEOPLE

Local projects provide "an opportunity for people to come together to reduce social isolation and disconnection," argued David Suzuki Foundation's Jode Roberts. Residents meet other gardeners, chat with community members walking by, or swap plant advice.

Mahnaz Ghalib, founder of Toronto's **Dallington Pollinator Community Garden**, said that while the garden is a place for the community to address issues like climate change and declining biodiversity, one of the key drivers was bringing people in the neighbourhood together. To do that, the group



Dallington Pollinators Mural. Credit: Dallington Pollinators

hosts programming like youth garden clubs and speaks to people living in the neighbourhood's high-rise buildings about how they can bring a little piece of garden to their own balconies.

Local projects can also be a way to reach across

generations—something Marie-Pierre Beauvais found from her involvement in **Les Amis du Champ des Possibles**, a vacant lot turned naturalized landscape in Montreal.

Getting involved in setting up a project like a garden or naturalized

area can help strengthen social ties in the neighbourhood, both young and old, she said. The group hosts programming like seasonal clean-ups, botanical drawing lessons, and discovery walks to reach different people.

OFFER A HELPING HAND

When Ghalib started the pollinator garden she said she "had no idea about environmental stewardship. I jumped into it. And as I worked there was a lot of joy."

Ghalib said that assistance from the city is crucial for gardens like hers, which are tended by volunteers who have their own busy lives. In addition to grants offered to help initially set up a garden, Ghalib said that helping to engage local residents and communicating the benefits of urban biodiversity and garden projects would be helpful. Additionally, assistance with site and plant selection and guidance through the permitting process would help ease the burden on volunteers.

Beauvais agreed that cities need to step up for people to get involved, perhaps by creating management funds to support projects. Cities can also help by supporting the creation of resident-led committees and groups that have delegated responsibility for these spaces. For example, Beauvais's group consists of a board of volunteers that liaised with the city, residents, and experts they hired, such as biologists, to help out with the project.



Community pollinator garden. Credit: Dallington Pollinators

We found a range of supportive programs and grants for community-led urban biodiversity projects, including:

- * Ottawa's **Community Environmental Projects Grants** give out 50k per year to groups.
- * Richmond Hill's **Community Stewardship Program** works with volunteers to plant trees, remove invasive species, restore streams, and host workshops such as bird boxes and frog watching.
- * Waterloo's **Partners in Parks stewardship program** helps

create wildlife habitat around waterways, pollinator gardens, and remove invasive plants.

- * Guelph's **Healthy Landscapes Program** includes a free site visit from city staff to discuss native plant tips like creating rain gardens and attracting pollinators. The city also runs a **pollinator community garden program**.
- * Toronto's **PollinateTO grants** provide funding and tips to residents to support local pollinator gardens.

3.

Deepening the Conservation Conversation

How we can both deepen the conversation about biodiversity and broaden it to include more people

With climate change and biodiversity loss increasing stress on ecosystems, engaging residents in urban conservation is more important now than ever.

The question becomes how to reach people in their busy lives, respect traditional knowledge, and bring more people into the conversation about conservation.



Trillium Park in Toronto. Credit: Park People

CONSIDER THE METHOD AND THE MESSAGE

In order to reach people, we need to articulate biodiversity in a way that is meaningful for them, said Jennifer Pierce, a biodiversity researcher at the University of British Columbia.

She recommended starting from questions such as "how does biodiversity relate to their lives. To what they value?" This may mean dropping the solely environmentally focused arguments and connecting biodiversity to other top-of-mind issues for people.

As we noted in our story on

neighbourhood-scale urban biodiversity projects, one of the benefits of local initiatives is how they can make biodiversity tangible and relevant. Recent **research** has also shown how people's exposure to local nature can positively impact their involvement in wider environmental issues.

By leveraging people's attachment to their own home or neighbourhood—and by showing them how native plant gardens and rain gardens could, for example, save them money

like **Guelph's rebate program** does—more people can be brought into the conversation.

Another way to reach people is by working with youth. Schools are a great cross-section of society, Ryerson University Associate Professor Nina-Marie Lister said. Students can bring back messages of the importance of biodiversity to their parents, the same way that they did with recycling in the 1980s. "It was kids that pressured their parents to recycle," Lister said. "They led by example."

RESPECT AND HONOUR INDIGENOUS LAND STEWARDSHIP

Joce Two Crows Tremblay is an Earth Worker with the Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle in Toronto who works directly with street-involved youth and urban Indigenous populations planting and tending Indigenous species in local parks and public spaces.

These gardens are an important way of connecting with the land, traditions and ceremony—ties which have been severed through the colonization process.

"For the 50% of Indigenous populations that are now living in urban settings, parks are often our only place to connect with the land," explained Tremblay. "A lot of healing happens by just getting your hand in the ground."

Tremblay's work extends to compiling research and educating about less-invasive management practices with a keen awareness of how colonial thinking is often



Friends of Watkinson Park. Credit: Elder Marlene Bluebird

re-enacted in how we manage species and landscapes.

Introducing new ways of thinking needs constant effort, and reinforcement of intentions through all layers of staff, as Tremblay learned when one

of their Three Sisters gardens was accidentally mowed down. It is as important for the staff cutting the grass as it is for management to understand efforts to increase biodiversity and reconciliation work in parks.

How little we embed Indigenous knowledge and land management practices into our biodiversity work "is an enormous gap, and it's also an irresponsible gap," Lister argued.

She pointed out that while city staff have good intentions with biodiversity strategies and are aware of the need for more Indigenous involvement, they also

recognize that many Indigenous organizations and communities are often stretched to capacity.

"It's long been recognized that patterns of colonization and colonial history are repeated and entrenched through the way we build our landscape," Lister said. "And we know that there needs to be, in **Lorraine Johnson's** words, an unsettling of the garden."

While not looking specifically at city parks, the importance of Indigenous land stewardship practices was highlighted by a 2019 University of British Columbia study which found biodiversity was highest on Indigenous-managed lands—finding a **40% greater number of unique species**.

ENGENDER RESPECT AND CARE

Getting to a place of collective care can be challenging. Some people may "love a place to death" while others may be ignorant of sensitive ecosystems, dumping trash or allowing their dog to run around.

However, as research by Mount Royal University's Don Carruthers Den Hoed has found, how a place is framed—the name we give it and the narrative we embed in it—can impact people's understanding of its importance. Humans are constantly looking for cues that suggest how we should act or what a place is for.

Carruthers Den Hoed pointed to one study where by telling people they were going to a park, people perceived it as a restorative place before they even got there. Even by naming something a "park" or a "sensitive landscape" we frame it in such a way that it affects how people relate to it.

Another research study set up by Carruthers Den Hoed included a "blind taste test" of nature. He brought participants to the same place through different ways: one group saw a park sign, one saw no sign, and another



Bose Forest Interpretive Signage in Surrey. Credit: Pamela Zevit

connected with Indigenous elders who talked about the place's spiritual significance.

Carruthers Den Hoed found that people's perception of the space—the importance and the level of care needed—was affected by the

narrative of the place they were presented with, whether through signage or story. As a result, he noted it's important to think about what the amenities, signage, and management of a park says about its significance and purpose.

CREATIVE WAYS TO REACH OUT AND BRING PEOPLE IN

Here are some of the creative practices that cities and communities are using to involve people in the preservation and enhancement of urban biodiversity.

LEVERAGE THE POWER OF ART.

- * Montreal's **Les Amis du Champ des Possibles** hosted botanical drawing sessions to reach artists and local residents in a vacant lot turned naturalized area.
- * Montreal collaborated with students in Concordia University's Communication Studies program to create a collection of 25 artistic short films called **Portraits d'Arbres** aimed at increasing urban tree awareness.
- * Mississauga engaged in its first ever partnership between the Culture Division and Parks to create a **public art bee hotel** in Jack Darling Memorial Park.



Les Champ des Possibles in Montreal. Credit: Park People

cameras and partners on an **amphibian monitoring program**.

- * Regina hosts **Ladybug Day**, where residents are invited to release thousands of ladybugs to control aphids.
- * Montreal partnered with WWF-Canada to host **Biopolis**, which profiles projects and includes a resource library.
- * Winnipeg operates the **Living Prairie Museum**, which conducts research into pollinator diversity across the city and control of invasive species.

sightings and provide information to help people feel more comfortable coexisting with the city's coyote population (the city also has a **coyote management plan** that emphasizes resident collaboration).

MAKE IT ACCESSIBLE.

- * Montreal's **Nana buses** connect urban residents to the larger natural areas surrounding the city that are not readily accessible through public transit.
- * The **Into the Greenbelt** program in southern Ontario offers bursaries for day-trip greenbelt bus tours to underserved communities.
- * Ottawa's online **natural areas map** provides directions and hiking information, including wheelchair accessible trails.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO BE QUIRKY.

- * The David Suzuki Foundation launched the tongue-in-cheek **Bee-BnB campaign** to transform the idea of a home-sharing network for pollinators, encouraging people to plant neighbourhood native gardens.

TURN NATURE INTO A LEARNING LABORATORY.

- * Edmonton's **Urban Bio Kit** helps people conduct citizen science and monitoring in their own local park.
- * Cities including Calgary host the multi-day **City Nature Challenge** where residents collect information on local wildlife. Calgary also works with residents to monitor **wildlife**

DEMYSTIFY WILDLIFE.

- * Ottawa organizes free **wildlife talks** bringing in experts to talk about the animals found in the city.
- * Toronto produces a series of **biodiversity booklets** exploring bees, spiders, fish, and other local critters.
- * Montreal launched a **coyote info line** for residents to report

Connecting the Dots

Why habitat corridors are important for urban biodiversity and what cities are doing to make sure parks large and small are connected.

While small-scale biodiversity projects are important, there's no question that when it comes to nature, size matters: larger spaces allow for a greater diversity of plants that in turn support a greater diversity and number of species. They also provide critical ecological services, such as cleaning the air, managing stormwater, and mitigating urban heat—all of which only become more important as climate change increases environmental stress.

Cities use different policy and planning levers to protect sensitive urban ecosystems or important habitat links, often designating them as Environmentally Sensitive/Significant Areas. For example, Toronto expanded its ESA's by **68 areas**, Montreal instituted an **Ecosystem Management**



A Rendering of the Meadoway at Highland Creek in Scarborough. Credit: TRCA

Program for its large parks, and Fredericton released two new large park **management plans**.

However, with 19% of cities reporting citywide biodiversity strategies in place, and a further 52% who have biodiversity objectives embedded in other environmental plans, there's a need for more holistic citywide

planning that examines key species, develops education and stewardship plans, and identifies habitat corridors.

CONNECT AT ALL SCALES

It's not enough to have habitat patches—even large ones—if they are isolated.

Whether it's an urban landscape or a pristine natural area, you need connected networks for ecosystems to function properly, said Pamela Zevit, Surrey's Biodiversity Conservation Planner.

Connectivity ensures wildlife are not confined to what Zevit called "habitat islands," which can easily become degraded by pollution, disease, or disturbance, leaving wildlife with nowhere else to go.

This is why Surrey has spent so much energy planning what it calls its **green infrastructure network**: a series of cross-city habitat corridors connecting larger habitat hubs. While important at the city scale, planning must also connect within regional networks—after all, animals don't stop at city borders—so Surrey has made sure their network matches up with the natural systems of neighbouring cities.

"Surrey has a very strong desire to be a leader," Zevit said. "So we made this effort early on to connect a lot of the dots and we'll be able to fit into whatever happens over time at the regional level."

Within its own borders, the city is also working towards approving its first biodiversity design guidelines. The guidelines will cover not just natural areas but places in what Zevit referred to



Bose Forest Boardwalk in Surrey. Credit: Pamela Zevit

as the "urban matrix"—all those other land uses outside of parks and natural areas that have an impact on biodiversity.

"The [guidelines] are this long overdue, comprehensive approach to linking all the existing design guidelines and construction documents and everything that we have around us and saying how do we integrate biodiversity objectives into everything that the city does," said Zevit.

Calgary is another city that has been working hard at restoring natural spaces and ensuring connectivity through a biodiversity strategy the city approved in 2015.

Over the past two years, the city has identified and evaluated the components of its ecological network so it could prioritize restoration and enhancement projects. It has even produced a guide on **how**

to naturalize existing parks.

Until this evaluative work was underway, Calgary didn't have "a mechanism to set citywide priorities for biodiversity conservation or habitat restoration," with actions largely done as needed over time, said the city's Landscape Analysis Supervisor, Vanessa Carney. Like many Canadian cities, she said, urban development happened neighbourhood by neighbourhood, meaning environmental planning has occurred largely at the local scale, rather than comprehensively across the city or region.

"While this approach helps to conserve highly biodiverse and landscape diverse parcels of land as public, we've been missing that ecological backbone that allows us to look at how neighbourhood development contributes or constrains citywide and regional connectivity," Carney said.

To perform its evaluation, the city examined the permeability of landscapes for wildlife movement, the size of habitat areas and their adjacent land uses, and how integral the space was to the functioning of the overall ecological network.

Despite the citywide view, Carney said that both small and large parks play a role in connectivity. The larger parks serve as "biodiversity reservoirs," while smaller parks—whether natural or manicured—provide habitat for smaller species, serve as stepping stone habitats, and allow people to connect with nature in their everyday lives.

At this smaller scale, cities can turn to development policies



Nose Hill Park in Calgary. Credit: Chris Manderson

to preserve and enhance connectivity. For example, through its **Greenway Amenity Zoning**, Langley Township ensures every community includes

green corridors and buffers to support biodiversity and Red Deer creates **Ecological Profiles** for new subdivisions to ensure natural features are protected.

RESTORE WATERWAYS



Naturalized Mouth of the Don River. Credit: Waterfront Toronto

Riparian areas (habitat along waterways) are particularly rich areas for biodiversity and can help create important habitat connections. They are also important for climate change mitigation as flood protection

from increased extreme weather damage.

Surrey's **Nicomekl River Park** project will restore and enhance unique riverfront ecological zones into a 3km linear park,

aiming to combine nature with art, heritage, recreation, and social space. The city has released a **heritage plan** and **public art strategy**, along with a **management plan** that highlights opportunities for recognition of Indigenous history, practices, and plants through programming, signage, and naming.

Led by Waterfront Toronto, Toronto is also undertaking a massive restoration project in **naturalizing the mouth of the Don River**, which flows into Lake Ontario. The project, which also includes creating biodiverse **"park streets"** as part of new neighbourhood development in the area, will create flood protection and restore lost landscapes.

At a smaller-scale, Vancouver is moving ahead with **daylighting**

a creek through Tatlow and Volunteer Parks, restoring a waterway into English Bay. The creek is one of many that have been buried throughout Vancouver's development—something many cities did

as part of urbanization.

The project acts on priorities in Vancouver's new parks master plan, VanPlay, for restoring wild spaces and increasing connectivity. Restoring the

creek to aboveground will create new aquatic habitat, manage stormwater, improve water quality, and create habitat for birds and pollinators.

TURN HYDRO CORRIDORS INTO BIODIVERSITY CORRIDORS

The often large swathes of mowed grass in hydro corridors that cut for kilometres through cities are also increasingly being seen as areas ripe for habitat connections.

Take The **Meadoway**, a project of the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority in partnership with the City of Toronto, Hydro One, and philanthropic funder The W. Garfield Weston Foundation.

Already partly constructed, the plan will naturalize a 16km hydro corridor across Scarborough connecting two large natural areas on either side: Rouge National Urban Park and the Lower Don Ravine. When finished, The Meadoway will feature hundreds of acres of meadow habitat with restored wetland areas, a connected trail, and social gathering spaces. An online **visualization toolkit** showcases the potential of the project, which is expected to be completed by 2024.

Montreal has also announced plans for a biodiversity corridor in a Saint-Laurent borough hydro corridor. "Climate change issues are requiring us to act quickly with innovative solutions," **said the borough's mayor**, Alan DeSousa, calling the project a "laboratory" from which others can learn. Ultimately constructed



Meadoway Western Gateway. Credit: TRCA



Meadoway Childs Eye View in Toronto. Credit: TRCA



Saint Laurent Biodiversity Corridor. Credit: Table Architecture, LAND Italia, civiliti, Biodiversité Conseil

on 450 hectares of land, the project will include native habitat, trails, and green roofs installed on neighbouring buildings.

MAKE BIG PLANS FOR BIG PARKS

Here's what other Canadian cities are doing to create and enhance large nature parks and increase habitat connectivity:

- * In 2019, Montreal's mayor announced a vision to create a large green space system in the city dubbed **Grand parc de l'Ouest**. Situated on Montreal's West Island, the park will stitch together existing parks and 1,600ha of new green spaces for a total 3,000ha.
- * Halifax is working with the Nova Scotia Nature Trust to preserve a 230ha wilderness area 20 minutes from downtown Halifax called the **Blue Mountain Wilderness Connector**. Nova Scotia Nature Trust Executive Director Bonnie Sutherland **told CBC** that the land is "one of the last large intact wilderness areas that we have in the greater Halifax area." The area is home to several at-risk species and was previously slated to be a housing development.
- * In 2019, Kingston approved a **new master plan for Belle Park**, setting the stage for a 15-year restoration of the 45ha park—the largest

urban park operated by the city. The land was formerly a landfill turned golf course and includes **Belle Island**, which has **significant importance as an Indigenous burial ground** and is co-owned between the Mohawk Nation Council of Chiefs and the city. The new plan calls for promoting biodiversity through naturalization projects and creating recreational access such as trails.

- * Richmond Hill is moving ahead with a large woodlot restoration project in the 40ha **David Dunlap Observatory Park** as set out in the park's **2016-approved master plan**, which also identifies wetlands and wildlife corridors. Local advocacy resulted in the land being saved as a park rather than developed.
- * Toronto approved an implementation plan for its **Ravine Strategy** in 2020 for this network of ecologically rich areas that thread throughout the city. The plan creates a special ravine unit to oversee work and added extra funding towards conservation, clean-up measures, and community stewardship.



Blue Mountain Wilderness Connector.
Credit: Nova Scotia Nature Trust

Growth

INTRODUCTION

In many Canadian cities, scarce and expensive land presents both a challenge and an opportunity for park building. These constraints lead to parks that are more expensive to design and maintain, but they are also driving innovation, producing some of the most unique parks in the country.

These new parks often necessitate new partnerships and are up-ending the business-as-usual approach of acquiring a piece of land to build a park. New plans feature elevated pathways, sports fields on malls, and parks along rail lines.

COVID-19 creates further urgency and challenges. Cities are grappling with physical distancing rules that put pressure on already crowded parks as people seek more space to spread outdoors, accelerating the need for outside-the-box thinking.

And with the pandemic shining a light on the already present inequities in who has access to, and feels safe in, public spaces, many are raising questions about how we prioritize equitable park development as we move forward.



Growth

INSIGHTS

- * Consistent with 2019, the top challenges cities reported were aging infrastructure, acquiring parkland to meet growth needs, and insufficient operating budgets. However, just 63% of cities reported having updated park system plans to address growth.
- * COVID-19 has accelerated actions to convert streets to public space—both temporary and permanent—as cities seek to expand the amount of room for people to gather outdoors.
- * While there is a combined \$441 million in capital dollars budgeted towards new and upgraded parks in 2020 (Toronto and Vancouver make up more than half of that total), cities are grappling with the financial impacts of COVID-19, which will likely impact park development budgets and timelines.

TAKE-AWAYS

- * Both for immediate COVID-19 relief and longer-term transformations, broaden the view beyond parks to include streets, laneways, hydro/rail corridors, schools and other open spaces as part of a connected network of temporary/permanent public spaces.
- * Prepare to study new management models, funding arrangements, and equity-based development tools as new park development relies more on partnerships between different landowners, community organizations, and government agencies/departments.
- * Ensure long-term park system planning balances improving the performance and quality of existing parks with identifying growth areas to acquire land ahead of development.

Growth / Indicators

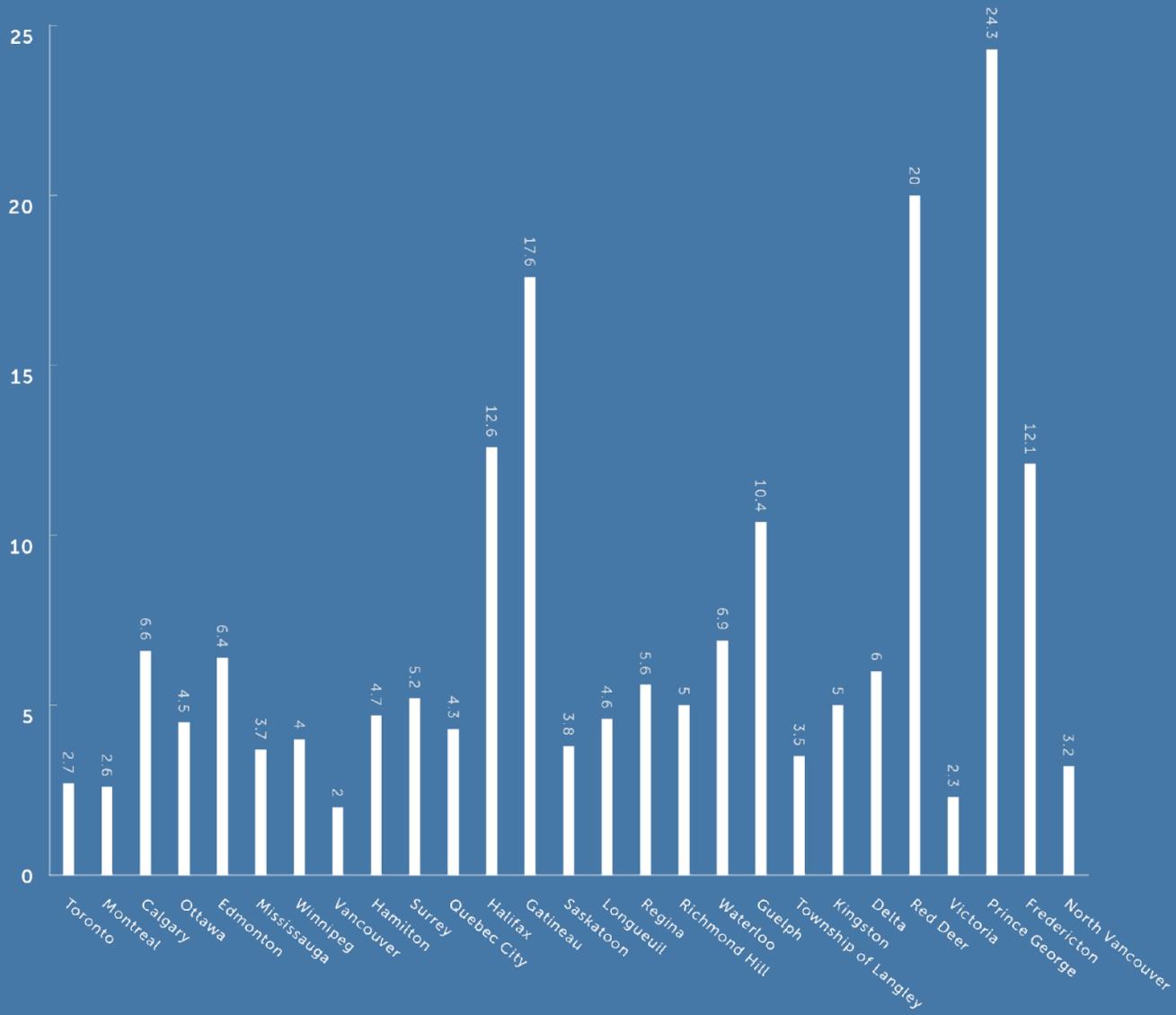
63%

of cities have park system
master plans approved within
the last ten years.

\$441 M

total budgeted for capital parks
spending in 2020.

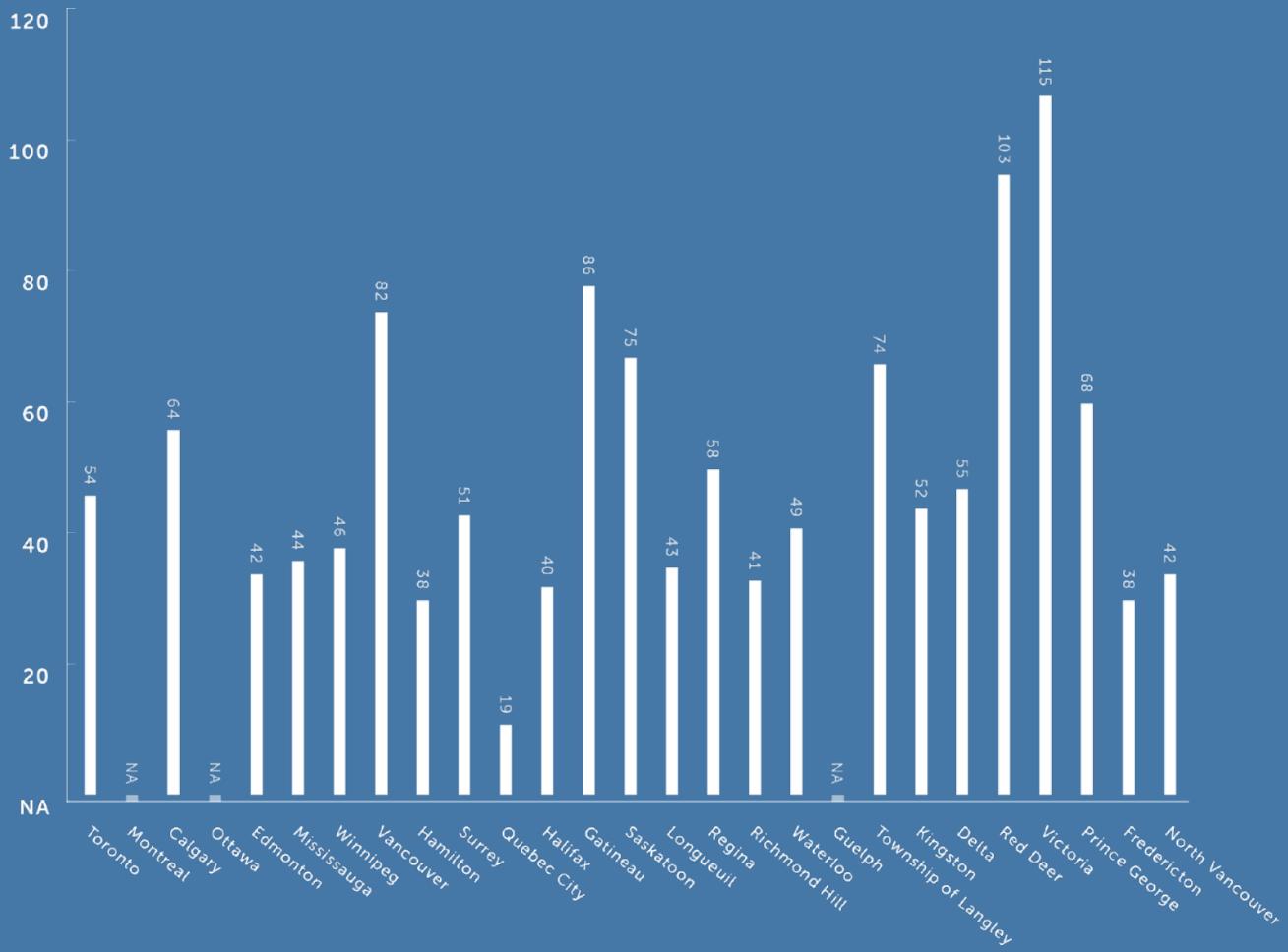
Growth / Ha of parkland / 1000 people



This chart shows the amount of parkland for every 1,000 residents. While there is no "correct" amount of parkland per population as it depends on local context, Canada's major urban centres have similarly lower levels of parkland per population as they deal with higher densities and development pressures. Ensuring these numbers do not decrease as populations grow will be key to meeting future parkland needs.

*Arranged by population size

Growth / \$ in operating budget/person



As with parkland per population, there is no “correct” operating budget amount. Tracking dollars spent per person over time helps shed light on whether budgets are keeping pace with population growth, which puts additional pressures on park systems. Already cities reported insufficient budgets as a top challenge two years running. Average operating budgets remained consistent with what was reported in 2019; however, COVID-19 impacts on 2020 budgets have not been reported yet and will inform the basis of analysis in the 2021 report.

*Arranged by population size

1.

The Space Squeeze

As populations and development boom in many cities, finding space for new parks is creating challenges—and spurring innovation

Much of the low hanging fruit is gone, but cities are finding the fruit higher up tastes a bit more interesting. Or, as Ann-Marie Nasr, Toronto's Parks Development and Capital Projects Director put it: "Part of not having a lot of land around to turn into parks means you become more inventive, right?"

Nasr is overseeing a burst in innovative park building, including rooftop recreation facilities, parks over rail corridors, and linear parks in hydro corridors. Vancouver's experience is similar, with designs for a **new downtown park** including an elevated walkway. "We need to think in three dimensions," Dave Hutch, the Vancouver Park Board's Planning Director said, and "use every square inch, especially on small sites."



Smith and Richards Park Rendering. Credit: Vancouver Park Board

While the majority of the projects in this article were in development before COVID-19, physical distancing requirements have put additional pressure on cities to creatively and quickly expand public space, potentially bolstering arguments for and accelerating planning for new public spaces.

However, as these constraints push public space creation into so-called "leftover" spaces in a city, such as under a highway or along rail lines, it can have unintended effects. This includes displacing people occupying those spaces for shelter and potentially spurring gentrification.

Despite its popularity, **many have criticized** New York's elevated High Line park as contributing to unaffordable housing and catering to **overwhelmingly white visitors** despite the racial diversity of the neighbourhood. In response, the

Friends of the High Line spun out a new entity called the **High Line Network** to advise infrastructure reuse parks on more inclusive practices. Toronto's **Bentway** and **The Meadoway** are the group's only Canadian members.

The Network has published **toolkits** with strategies for community-based planning and equitable development principles, which can be a helpful guide as Canadian cities embark on a new era of park building.

PUT A PARK ON IT

One trend likely to grow is building parks on top of other infrastructure, like a parking garage. These are called strata parks because of their stratified ownership: the city doesn't own the land underneath, just the layer on top.

On its face, it seems like a win-win situation. A property owner gets to build something and the city gets a park on top. But in reality, strata parks present a number of logistical, design, and legal challenges with which cities are grappling.

The structural integrity of what is below dictates the amount of soil you can place on top, which impacts landscaping. Additionally, when the waterproof membrane separating the park from the structure below needs replacing or maintenance, the park must often be scraped off and rebuilt. These parks can end up less green because of these factors, Nasr said—an issue when cities facing climate change want to add more greenery for stormwater management and urban heat mitigation.

One city that has seen rising pressure to accept strata parks is Richmond Hill. "Land value has appreciated quite substantially in the last 10 years," said Michelle Dobbie, the city's Park Planning



Rendering of Oakridge Mall park green space. Credit: Vancouver Park Board

Manager, leading developers to maximize land by pushing parking underground.

Aside from the design challenges of strata parks, there's a host of legal and logistical implications, like long-term financial liability for future upgrades. Recognizing that this pressure is not abating, Richmond Hill has commissioned a study to look at strata parks and help guide its decisions on accepting this type of parkland.

Vancouver's plans for a new park partially on top of the **redeveloped Oakridge Mall** shows both the promise and complexity of strata parks. The 3.6 hectare park will rise from ground level onto the mall's roof

with areas for social gathering, gardening, and sports. Using the roof allowed the city to create a much larger park, Hutch said.

The Park Board worked hard to negotiate an ownership structure with the mall, Hutch said, including a provision that park maintenance and future capital renewal are paid for and done by the landowner, not the Park Board. A first for the Park Board, this was negotiated due to the complexity of having multiple maintenance crews on site and liability if a Park Board staff person damaged the protective membrane. An operating committee including Park Board and mall staff will be created to troubleshoot issues.

CONNECTING THE NETWORK

As we reported in last year's **Canadian City Parks Report**, parks planning is increasingly concerned with connectivity. Linear parks, trails, and other green spaces that thread their way through tight spots—repurposing rail corridors and hydro corridors to do so—are becoming more common.

One such project is the Edmonton **High Level Line**, a vision by a group of community members that has caught city officials' attention. The plan proposes connecting neighbourhoods along a 4km route using an existing rail corridor across the North Saskatchewan River. It's an idea that follows the principles of connectivity put forward in the city's 2019 **Downtown Public Places Plan**.

The project envisions tying existing parks together, but also plays off opportunities on private lands. For example, property owners could develop



High Level Line Grandin Junction in Edmonton. Credit: High Level Line

their sites to open up onto the Line or provide amenities.

"Edmonton has this great asset in the North Saskatchewan River and the River Valley...but it also

acts as a real barrier," said Kevin Dieterman, spokesperson for the group. But the project isn't just about moving from A to B, he said, it's "the experience that you have along the way."

FROM STREET TO PARK

Land in the public right-of-way, such as streets, is increasingly being viewed as a resource for temporary and permanent public space creation.

New designs that employ low curbs and special paving allow streets to be used more flexibly. Toronto calls this design approach "parks plus." As Nasr explained: "If you think of it as an equation, parks plus streets equals an amazing public realm."

However, it's Montreal that has been a pioneer with **15 shared/pedestrian streets** developed in the last five years adding to the 50 already in existence. The city's **Shared and Pedestrian Streets Program** ("Le Programme de rues piétonnes et partagées"), which has developed an **inspirational catalogue**, supports the implementation of projects that reflect the culture of a neighbourhood, including a participatory design process.

While street reallocations have been happening for years, the practice accelerated during COVID-19. Starting in April, cities across Canada including Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, began turning over car lanes to pedestrians to create temporary public space to help with physical distancing.

Advocates and urbanists have since deepened that conversation. For example, placemaker Jay Pitter highlighted the **"spatial**

inequities" that underscore the limits of such reallocations and which populations they serve. She has called for the need to centre discussions around racial and

socioeconomic inequities, and specifically anti-Black racism, as cities expand public space—a call that other writers **have echoed**. Rising incidents of **anti-Asian**

racism in public spaces, for example, have also been reported in Canada during the pandemic.

Montreal pedestrian Street. Credit: Park People



PRIVATE SPACE, PUBLIC AMENITY

Over a third of cities we surveyed reporting increasing demand for privately-owned public space development (POPS). POPS are built and maintained by private property owners, with city agreements to ensure public access. Cities like Toronto and Vancouver already have many POPS, while Mississauga, Richmond Hill, and Waterloo said they were contemplating their use.

"I think being clear about [POPS'] role and function is really important," said Nasr. In Toronto, POPS have been used to create a more connected public realm, like a landscaped walkway or small gathering space in the front of a building, but not to replace

requirements for parks. They can also help take some pressure off parks in dense areas, Nasr said.

However, the "publicness" of POPS have been called into question with **disputes over access** and **encroachment from businesses**. And since they're privately owned, these spaces could be redeveloped over time, as has happened **in Vancouver**.

In a bid to raise awareness and promote better design and visibility, Toronto **mapped POPS** and produced **design guidelines** and a signage strategy to clarify that POPS were public spaces.

TO EXPAND OR IMPROVE?

Weighing the cost and benefits of expanding parkland versus improving the parkland you have should be part of the discussion, said Chris Hardwick, Principal at 02 Planning + Design, who has worked on park plans in Edmonton, Halifax, Toronto, and Winnipeg.

In cases where land is expensive and scarce, the best strategy may be to deploy resources to improve parkland to ensure it's performing its best, Hardwick argued. However, it's critical for cities to get ahead of development by targeting land acquisition in areas that are slated for growth, as opposed to playing catch up later.

Different challenges exist in different urban contexts, depending on growth and demographic change, he said. Some cities are dealing with a lack of park space, while others are dealing with too much or the wrong kind of spaces. For example, Prince George reported turning underused baseball diamonds into dog parks.

Other cities are in between. They're shifting from a more suburban style of development to higher density development, necessitating shifts in policies, financial tools, and planning to ensure new neighbourhoods have



*Square One redevelopment public space rendering in Mississauga.
Credit: Oxford Properties Group and Alberta Investment Management Corporation*

the parks they need as they grow. For example, Surrey reported land banking in growth areas to prepare for future development.

Toronto's Nasr said that suburban malls are becoming another focus of new park development, with some malls slated to be transformed into the centres of new, dense neighbourhoods. "They're big blocks of land

in which parks become an organizing element to inform those transformations," said Nasr.

Toronto has three major mall redevelopments underway that contain new anchor parks, including **Cloverdale**, **Yorkdale**, and **Agincourt**. In neighbouring Mississauga, the redevelopment of **Square One Mall** will include 37 towers and new parks.

2.

The New Wave of Parks

Leading examples of projects that use creative measures to expand parkland

In Park People's 2015 **Making Connections** report, we profiled creative strategies cities were using to ensure parks kept pace with growth. Pressures have only intensified since then, and will continue to intensify due to COVID-19, resulting in further innovations in planning and design.



High Level Line Aerial in Edmonton. Credit: High Level Line

LAYERING: PARKS UP TOP—AND UNDERNEATH

Cities are planning for spaces that do double—or even triple—duty by layering parks on top of or underneath rail corridors, highways, malls, water filtration plants, and more.

- * Vancouver's park on top of **Oakridge Mall**, will swoop up from ground level to ensure accessibility and provide space for sports, naturalized areas, and social gatherings.
- * Calgary's **Flyover Park**, a new park built underneath an overpass, was created through a partnership between University of Calgary landscape architecture students and local sixth graders and the **Bridgeland Riverside Community Association**.
- * Langley Township's **Jericho Reservoir Park** is a new water reservoir being built that will include a park sloping onto its top, providing amenities like pickleball.



Rendering of Oakridge Mall park woodland area. Credit: Vancouver Park Board

- * Montreal's 62-hectare **Parc Frédéric-Back** is built on top of a former landfill, which will include large naturalized areas and social spaces.
- * Toronto's **Rail Deck Park**, a planned 8-hectare park over a

downtown rail corridor, is north of a new running track and basketball court built on top of the **Canoe Landing Community Centre** and near **The Bentway**, a public space underneath an elevated expressway.

STITCHING: GREENWAYS TO TIE A CITY TOGETHER



High Level Line Railtown Green in Edmonton. Credit: High Level Line

As cities turn to bolstering connectivity within their park system, linear parks and greenways are helping to stitch parks and neighbourhoods together.

- * Edmonton's **High Level Line** is a community project seeking to tie green spaces and neighbourhoods together using an existing rail line.
- * North Vancouver's 35km **North Shore Spirit Trail**, a collaboration with the Squamish Nation and other levels of government, ties together the waterfront with community facilities, including a **mini-suspension bridge**.

- * Vancouver's **Arbutus Greenway** is a 9km trail along a former rail corridor connecting multiple neighbourhoods through a newly approved master plan.
- * Waterloo's **Laurel Greenway** is a priority initiative from the recently adopted 2019 Uptown Public Realm Strategy, which will connect Laurel Creek, a new LRT station, and Waterloo Public Square.
- * Toronto's **Green Line Implementation Plan** will create a 5km linear park through an urban hydro corridor and **The Meadoway** will connect Scarborough neighbourhoods through a 16km trail in a hydro corridor.



Spirit Trail Ravine Connection. Credit: City of North Vancouver

RE-ALLOCATING: OPENING UP STREETS FOR PEOPLE

By temporarily or permanently re-allocating space within the public right-of-way, cities are using their own streets as a resource for enhancing public space.

- * Spurred by COVID-19, **Toronto** is creating "quiet streets" that target those adjacent to parks, **Montreal** is planning a network of "active family streets," and **Vancouver** is studying longer term pedestrianization.
- * Toronto's **Berczy Park** included the redesign of an adjacent street as a curbless, flexible space.
- * Vancouver's new parks master plan, **VanPlay**, includes policies to explore street closures for parkland acquisition and temporary activations, cementing in policy the city's practice of piloting new plazas on streets, such as **Jim Deva Plaza**, and temporary street activations through **VIVA Vancouver**.

* Kingston's City Hall pop-up pedestrian plaza on **Ontario Street** ran for two summer weekends in 2019, creating space for salsa dancing, yoga, and a DJ.

* Guelph's **Guelph Market Square** was redesigned with a flexible adjacent street that can be closed off to cars to accommodate events and programming.

* Longueuil's redeveloped Empire Park, **removed a street** that crossed the park to improve safety and user-friendliness.

Collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Demographic shifts and urban growth are changing park use in many cities, with Canadians desiring more—more variety in programming, different cultural amenities, and opportunities to be involved.

It can be hard for cities to stay on the pulse and manage often competing desires for the same space. In this environment, it becomes even more important to ensure people have opportunities to be involved—from before a design is conceived to long after the ribbon is cut.

These pressures necessitate shaking up the standard community meeting format with methods that reach new people and provide them with meaningful ways to participate that help build bridges across real and perceived differences. And, as COVID-19 has shown, new digital techniques for engagement must be used that go beyond static surveys and allow for collaboration.

Collaboration

INSIGHTS

- * Many cities are experimenting with creative methods such as park pop-ups, culturally specific activities, participatory budgeting, and take-home toolkits to reach new people.
- * The top two challenges community park groups said they anticipate due to COVID-19 were funding and re-engaging residents in park programming, making city support critical.
- * While 77% of cities said they had developed non-profit partnerships, 58% said private investment in parks (e.g., philanthropy and donations) was staying the same and 23% said it was decreasing.

TAKE-AWAYS

- * To help build community strength through engagement, provide space for conversations about a park's social dimensions, like cultural practices, not just physical design/amenities.
- * Engage before the "start" and beyond the "end" by involving people as local experts before designs are produced and developing long-term programming partnerships so amenities are used.
- * As COVID-19 precautions persist, create one-stop shops for residents to find city support, funding, and information on how to re-engage their communities safely in parks.

Collaboration / Indicators

56%

of cities offer a community park group program (e.g., adopt-a-park) for residents to get involved long-term in their park.

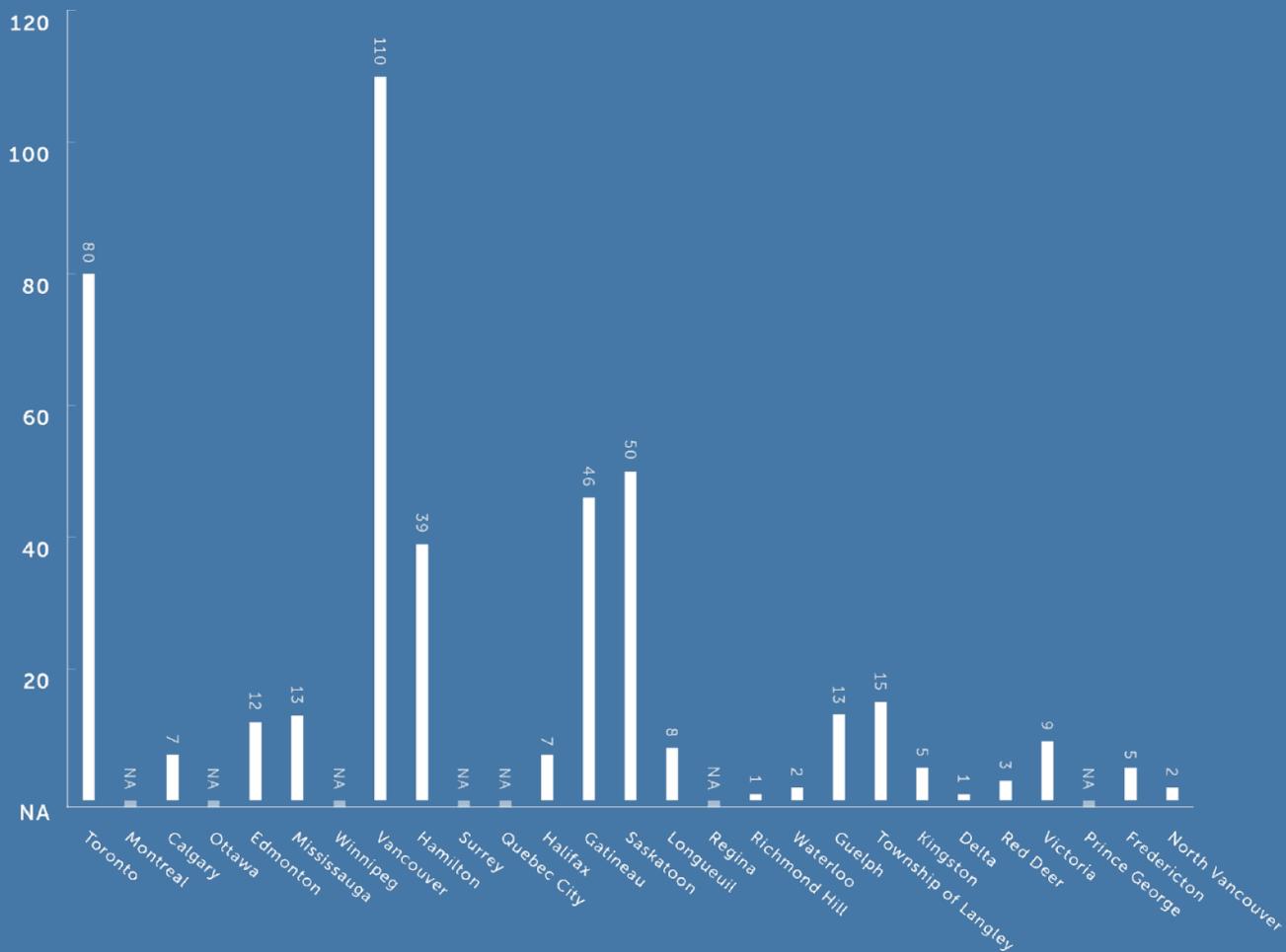
70%

of cities offer a community grant program that can be used for park projects.

77%

of cities have at least one non-profit park partnership for programming or operations.

Collaboration / # of community park groups



The number of community park groups varies widely across cities. Two thirds of cities reported demand for this type of involvement is stable, while one third of cities say demand is increasing. In our survey of park groups, the top three impacts groups saw their work having were: strengthening their communities, improving local quality of life, and enhancing the natural environment.

*Arranged by population size

1.

Don't just tick the box —think outside of it

Why community engagement requires going deeper—and broader—to provide meaningful opportunities for people to see themselves reflected.

Most parks engagement conversations start with design. Do we want a splash pad here? A playground? What kind of benches? But for author and placemaker **Jay Pitter**, who has led projects across Canada and the U.S., this misses an important dimension: the social.

Skipping over a discussion of the social dimension of a park—and the lived experiences and power dynamics of its users—means missing out on the opportunity to create responsive well-designed amenities, Pitter argued, but it also misses larger conversations that might need to happen.



Parc Jarry consultation. Credit: Charles-Olivier Bourque

"One might come in with the intent to revitalize or design a public space when the community actually needs to talk about safety concerns or interpersonal tensions pertaining to that public space," Pitter said, adding that "it's advisable to begin the

conversation in a slower more open-ended manner that invites a holistic conversation exploring the spatial and social aspects of a site."

To address this, Pitter builds her engagement methods around reciprocity—not just asking questions that "gather data

for a particular placemaking project," but asking questions "in a way that strengthens and unifies communities."

Take community gardens. "Communing with the earth and growing food have special meanings across most cultures," Pitter said. "So why not leverage the design and programming of community gardens to build cross-cultural understanding and appreciation?"

This reciprocity is an important metric of success for Pitter. Did the process bring people together who wouldn't normally interact or

see their concerns as overlapping? "If the community engagement process hasn't served the larger purpose of building bridges across difference and fostering new relationships, then it hasn't served the community," she said.

The dialogue about public space is becoming more complex with "people sharing intimate and oftentimes difficult place-based stories that have historically been silenced," she said. This includes "Indigenous peoples sharing stories to decolonize public spaces, women and gender-diverse individuals sharing

safety concerns and disabled peoples sharing a righteous unwillingness to be erased from public spaces due to physical barriers and an erasure of the social parts of their identities."

"Traditional community engagement processes lack the agility and compassion to respond to these and other complex issues," she said. "Urbanists must catch up quickly because communities are insisting on shaping public space conversations and the design of their public spaces."

START SMALL

Pitter recommends small-group engagement in non-traditional settings like walks or small workshops, which help break down the "power imbalance" embedded in the large town hall format where one person gets the microphone. Pitter often starts engagement in semi-public or even private settings, like small dinners, faith-based community centres, union halls, or the homes of elders.

This is a practice also used by Matt Hickey, an architect with Two-Row Architects who leads Indigenous engagement. "We use talking circles a lot," Hickey said, which are "gatherings of smaller groups that allow for people to express information in an oral format." This approach allows for personal interaction that can create a more supportive and comfortable atmosphere for expression.

While small-group engagement can help break down power imbalances, Pitter argued it's important to recognize that no engagement is "neutral," and to believe so obscures the power dynamic inherent in an urbanism professional coming into a community.

"When you're leading a community engagement, it's important to be mindful of the considerable power and privilege you possess...so for me, the act of going into a community is an act of personal reflexivity and humility," she said. Urbanists need to recognize "their individual power based on aspects of their identities such as race, ability, and gender" and also their professional relationship with a client like an urban design firm or city government.

Before beginning any engagement process, being vulnerable and inviting the community to "vet" you by asking you tough questions is important, Pitter said. It helps to "level power imbalances" and conveys that "you're clear that you are not entitled to be in their community."

"I'm honoured every single time a community vets me and entrusts me to co-lead processes that will not only shape a public space but the quality of their experiences within it," she said.

START BEFORE THE BEGINNING

Too often engagement starts after a project's beginning, inviting people to provide feedback on already formed concepts. However, it's important to involve people before any design has been set, said Daniel Fusca, Manager of Public Consultation within Toronto's Parks, Forestry, and Recreation Division.

Fusca is cultivating a new approach to engagement, involving people in what he calls "primary research" rather than just asking for feedback.

The difference is subtle, he said, but important.

For a project that involved squeezing an off-leash dog area into a small park, rather than getting feedback on proposed configurations, his team



City of Toronto Consultation. Credit: Daniel Fusca

divided people into groups and provided them with a grid of the park to design the dog park themselves using sticky notes.

The tactile nature of the exercise helped people think through spatial constraints, making trade-offs on the size of the dog park and space for other

amenities. These designs were then posted online where over 500 community members voted.

"Now we have all of this really rich data on what people are comfortable with in terms of the layout of the park," Fusca said, which will inform the brief for the landscape architect.

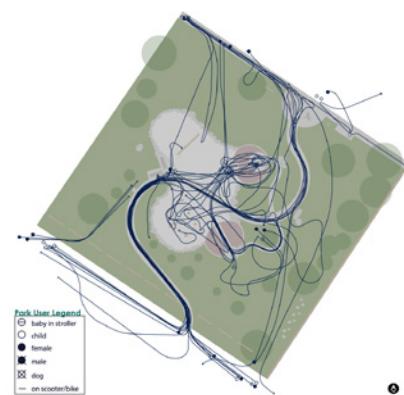
DON'T END WHEN THE RIBBON IS CUT

For architect Matt Hickey, how you engage people after the project is "finished" is almost as important as what happens before it starts.

Hickey, who has led Indigenous engagement in parks, noted that parks may be designed with Indigenous programming and cultural spaces, but there is little thought to how those spaces will be continually used afterwards. The "if you build it, they will come" mindset may work sometimes, but other times these amenities may sit underused or, worse, not used at all.

"When a park is designed to facilitate cultural communities or cultural happenings or ceremonies and gatherings," Hickey said, the question should be "how does that get programmed into those spaces in the future so they don't just get designed for it, but they're actually used for it?"

For Hickey, it's about relationship building with vendors and service providers that provide cultural activities within their own spaces or buildings and inviting them to bring that programming to the park.



Chief Mathias Joe Park post-occupancy study. Credit: City of North Vancouver

Another key element is assessing how already built designs are performing and being open to alterations in response to feedback—a practice the City of North Vancouver does.

"Typically most organizations do not do evaluations or review once a facility is open to the public," said Adam Vasilevich, the city's Parks and Greenways

Planner. "In the past we did public engagement before or during design, but it should be carried through to the space being used."

The city has begun doing post-occupancy evaluations, which involve behavioural observations of use patterns and conducting on-site park user surveys. Vasilevich said the evaluations offer critical information that

can be used to modify designs and make better decisions about future parks. By focusing on studying off-leash dog areas and children's playgrounds specifically, he said the city has been able to better inform designs for play equipment, shade, and social spaces.

GO BEYOND THE ONLINE SURVEY

Digital engagement is often relegated to online surveys or project websites. While these can provide important information, they miss out on the potential of collaborative online tools.

Toronto's parks consultation manager Daniel Fusca said that COVID-19 has necessitated reaching new strategies for digital engagement, likely changing the way cities will engage permanently. "Even when this ends, we don't know

how comfortable people are going to be with meeting other people in groups," he said.

The city is looking at tools that allow for online meetings that include break-out discussion groups and others that facilitate digital mapping. While the best engagement still happens in person, it's important to try to bridge that quality gap between online and off, since so many people participate in civic life online, he said. "I think

we're going to see that there's a lot of benefits to engaging the public in this way."

However, there are equity implications—something the city is still working through, Fusca said. Given that libraries and other public places where people access the internet have been closed, "it's really hard to think about how you're going to engage people online, when there are some people who don't have access to the internet."

ENGAGE PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

We've all seen the flyers. Come to a school gymnasium or community centre on a Wednesday night at 6pm in the middle of February for a public meeting.

For some, this works well, but good engagement meets people where they are: whether that is physically (in an apartment building lobby, for example) or whether that means meeting a language, accessibility, or childcare need.

* **Pop-up in the park.** Cities including Hamilton, Halifax,

Kingston, Vancouver, Calgary, and Toronto are directly reaching park users in parks. Kingston has hosted meetings in community gardens and Calgary has even outfitted a mobile engagement van.

* **Decide on funding together.** *Participatory budgeting processes involve residents directly in proposing projects and making funding decisions, as Longueuil does with \$100,000 per project.*

* **Talk to kids.** *Toronto is considering providing schools with classroom assignments*

about local playground designs and has held engagements in playgrounds to directly get ideas from kids, not their parents. Similarly, Prince George engaged a local seven-year old to help design a new playground.

* **Give homework.** *For Vancouver's VanPlay master plan, the city created downloadable workbooks so people could host their own community engagement. Over 450 participants completed workbooks that included discussion guides and activities. The Park Board is also developing decolonizing*

toolkits to support community groups and partners to decolonize their practices and programs.

- * **Be culturally and linguistically relevant.** *Calgary has a cultural marketing plan that is used to reach audiences in linguistically diverse neighbourhoods. In 2020, the city will be using infographic signs and educators who speak specific dialects.*
- * **Engage internally, too.** *It's not just the public that should be engaged, but a city's own staff across multiple departments. Gatineau hosted an internal parks forum with speakers and brainstorm sessions to kick-off their parks master plan process, inviting city councillors, city staff, and non-profit partners to help shape the vision.*
- * **Provide info online—and keep it up to date.** *Most cities offer project updates online, but many leave a lot to be desired in ease of use and up-to-date information. Ottawa's [online engagement website](#) provides key project information—meeting dates, maps, design materials—as well as direct staff contacts.*



Toronto playground pop-up. Credit: Daniel Fusca

Power to the People

Park groups of all types are delivering outsize impacts for their communities through collaborative programming—but they need support in order to thrive.

More and more, residents and organizations are getting involved in local parks—bringing new ideas, programming, and partners.

A 2020 Park People survey conducted of over 200 Canadian park groups found a broad range of organizations, including arts organizations, social service agencies, and neighbourhood associations.

These inspiring groups put on fun activities, enhance nature, advocate for improvements, and create more inclusive places:

* Vancouver's **Vine Arts Festival** produces park performances that work towards decolonization and address social issues around race, class, and gender.

* Winnipeg's **Spence Neighbourhood Association** manages 15 green spaces in a low income community to promote local food and social gathering.



Seniors tend to a roadside garden in Toronto. Credit: Park People

* Gatineau's community-based **Fondation Forêt Boucher** recently signed a 3-year agreement to work with the city on a Boucher Forest Master Plan.

* Calgary's **Crescent Heights Community Association** brought together residents of the diverse and socio-economically divided Crescent Heights community

for an **epic water fight**. "Play is a great way to bring people together and we were trying to tackle some of the social issues that we have in our neighbourhood in a cheeky and playful way," said CHCA engagement coordinator Kevin Jesuino.

The impacts of these efforts by park groups are clear: they support neighbourhoods and cities that are more socially connected, civically engaged, and environmentally friendly.

- * 96% said their work in parks helped build a stronger sense of belonging in their community.

- * 83% said they developed an increased awareness of how to protect and enhance green spaces through their park work.

- * 82% said they developed an increased awareness of civic engagement and how to work with city staff.



Crescent Heights waterfight. Credit: Crescent Heights Community Association

HOW THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECTED PARK GROUPS

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Canada in March, many park groups had to quickly change their programming and get creative. In April, we conducted a special COVID-19 survey and got nearly 120 responses. Here's what we learned:

- * The top two challenges facing park groups are financial uncertainty

and pivoting programming online. Relatedly, the top two areas park groups will need long-term help with are funding and re-engaging community members in park gatherings.

- * 63% of groups said their work was on hold, but nearly a third of groups said they were developing new ways of offering services.

- * 42% of groups said they had responded directly to community needs (e.g., purchasing groceries for vulnerable people). Of those groups, nearly half said that their involvement in a park group helped them better respond to the COVID-19 crisis. For example, Toronto's Flemingdon Community Support Services pivoted to organizing people to sew masks.

RESIDENT GROUPS NEED SUPPORT

Even before COVID-19, we consistently found that accessing funds was the number one challenge facing park groups.

Some cities offer support: 70% of cities reported some kind of financial program that can be used for park activities or improvements.

For example, Ottawa offers **cost-sharing grants** for projects both minor (tree planting, park furniture) and major (new facilities

or renovations), as well as a **separate grant** for community-based environmental projects.

A few cities have created neighbourhood units that act as one-stop support shops. Waterloo's newly created **Neighbourhood Services group** supports the creation of neighbourhood groups, providing access to toolkits, information on neighbourhood programming, and grant opportunities. Surrey's **Neighbourhood Team** also connects residents to grants and services.

Another way to support is through a formalized volunteer program that offers pathways for people

to get involved beyond one-time or event-based opportunities. We found 56% of cities have created some kind of adopt-a-park program where people can self-organize to care for and animate local parks.

To learn more about available community grant and park group programs, check out the City Profiles.

Activation

INTRODUCTION

People come to parks for all sorts of reasons—to exercise, to play, to relax, to rejuvenate. It can be hard to accommodate everyone's desires, especially when some park uses—like community gardens and off-leash dog areas—often require setting aside precious dedicated space. The dog park especially has become a lightning rod for conflict.

And yet both food and dogs provide important places for people to come together, forging social ties and providing outlets for physical activity. Governments recognized this during the COVID-19 pandemic when some provinces declared community gardens

an essential service and Edmonton included off-leash dog areas in the first wave of its [reopening plan](#).

If parks are lessons in how we learn to share common space with others, then the dog park and the community garden are good classrooms to start in.

ACTIVATION



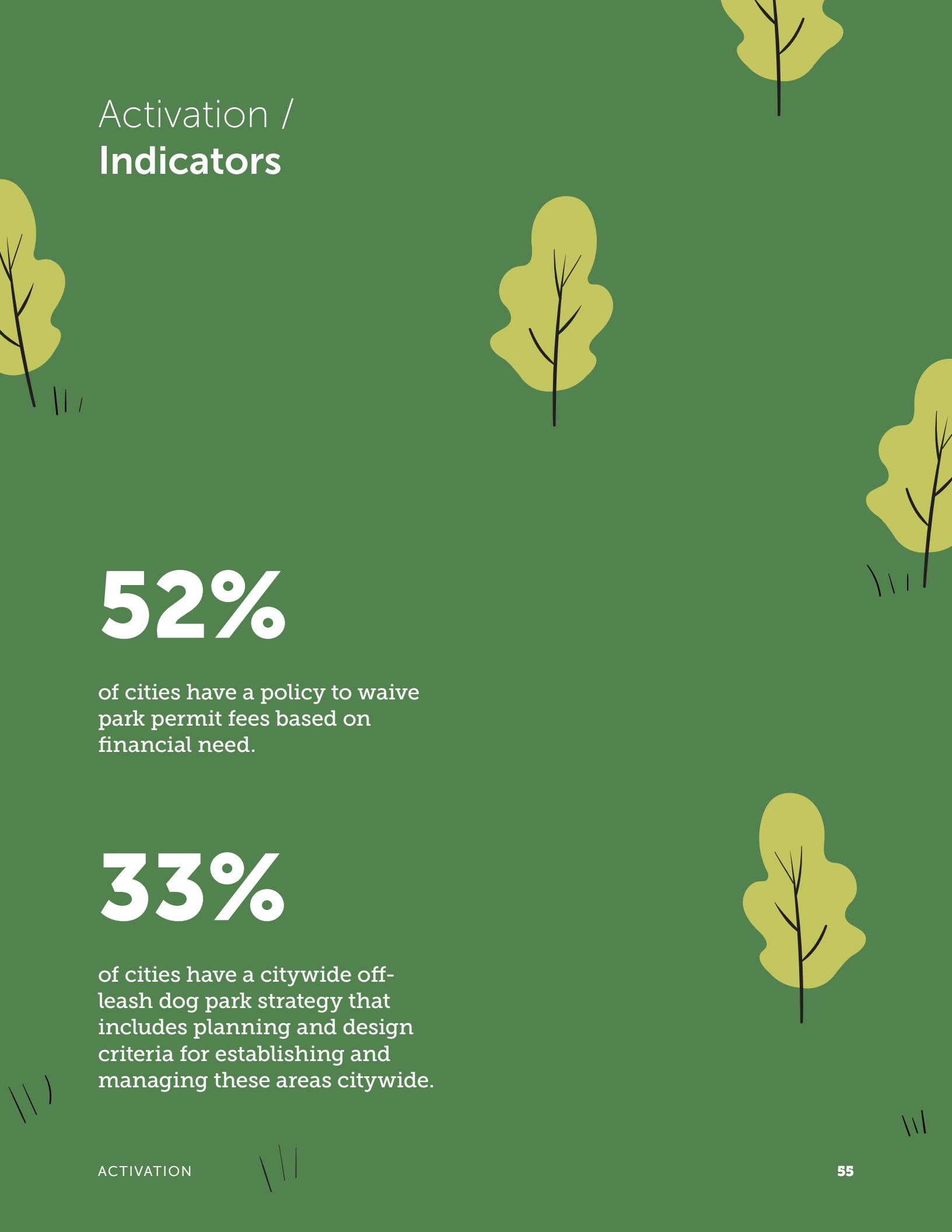
Activation

INSIGHTS

- * There is a need for more off-leash dog area planning. 85% of cities reported increasing off-leash area demand, but just a third of cities have strategies in place with policies guiding new development.
- * Park-based food amenities like community gardens and orchards is a growing area, with three quarters of cities reporting increasing demand.
- * Increasing demand was reported by 93% of cities for multi-use trails, 74% for adventure play areas, and 48% for outdoor fitness equipment.

TAKE-AWAYS

- * Consider community management models to foster a sense of shared responsibility in off-leash areas and surrounding natural areas, but don't expect these models to be a long-term solution to funding.
- * To meet demand, experiment with ideas like promoting off-leash amenities within condo developments and creating temporary/seasonal off-leash areas.
- * Consider food amenities and programming in the planning of all parks—like gardens and communal dinners—as part of a community resilience strategy.



Activation / Indicators

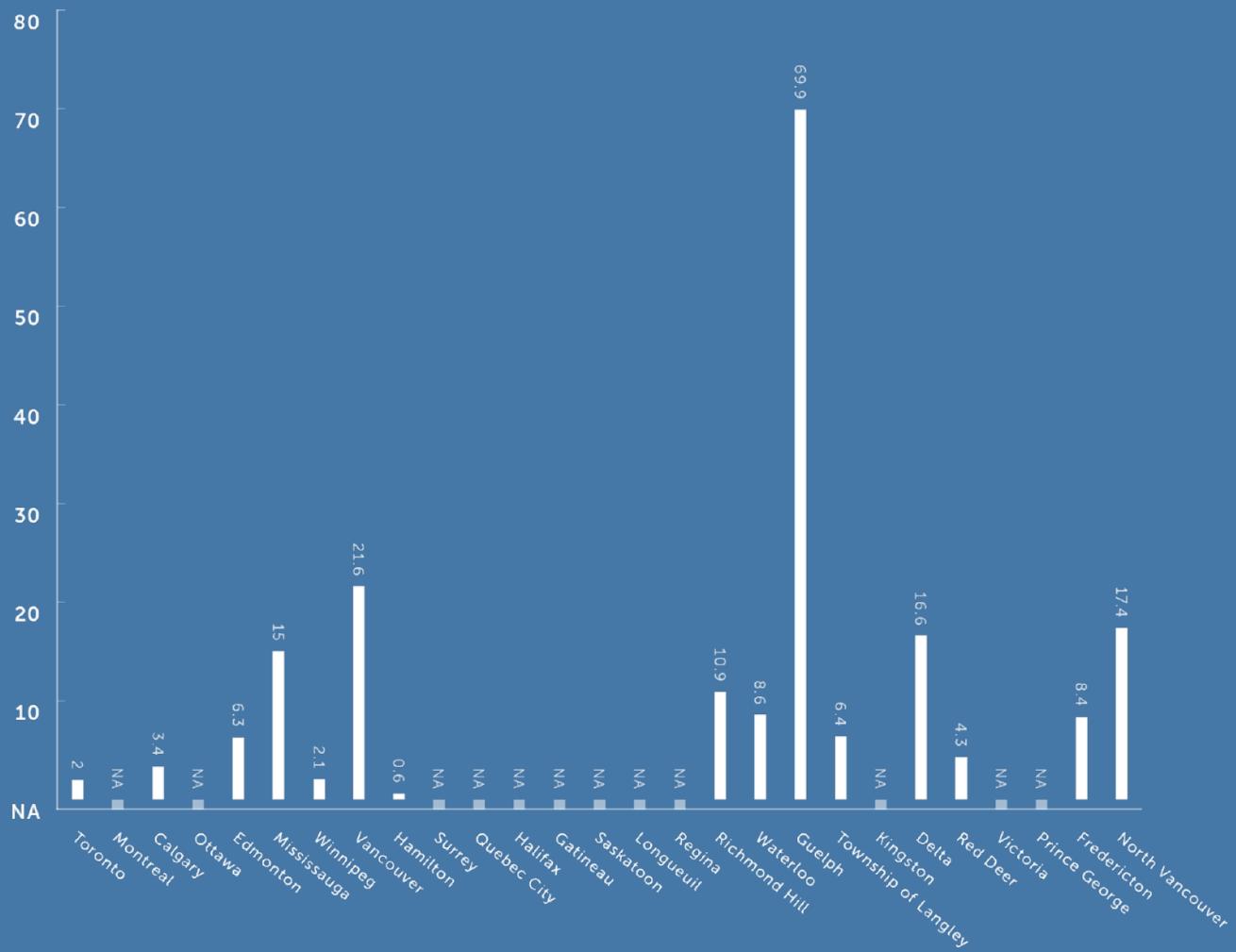
52%

of cities have a policy to waive park permit fees based on financial need.

33%

of cities have a citywide off-leash dog park strategy that includes planning and design criteria for establishing and managing these areas citywide.

Activation / # volunteers / 1,000 people



Shows the number of volunteers through city parks programs, controlling for population by representing it as a ratio of volunteers per 1,000 residents.

*Arranged by population size

1.

Take me out to the dog park

How cities are dealing with the high demand for—and high controversy around—dog parks.

If you want to see a park staffer cringe, just mention dog parks. There's hardly a park amenity more controversial than setting aside space for dogs to run off-leash in green space.

But off-leash dog areas are also increasingly in demand, as 85% of cities noted in our survey, and they can provide important social benefits. However, cities are challenged to find suitable land and deal with community concerns.

The COVID-19 crisis further complicates the issue as many Canadian cities including **Edmonton, Ottawa, Calgary, and Toronto** restricted, or closed, off-leash parks to encourage physical distancing. In May, Edmonton **opened up off-leash parks** as part of its first phase of re-opening. However, longer-term physical distancing requirements may challenge cities already struggling to provide enough off-leash space.



Etobicoke Valley Dog House Mississauga. Credit: Eric Code

THE STRUGGLE OVER LIMITED SPACE

As cities grow, so does our population of four-legged friends. Many cities are under pressure to create more space for dogs, while juggling demand for other park uses, which leads to conflicts.

In 2011, Waterloo dropped a pilot to create six off-leash areas due to **lack of public support** and is now looking to expand their one off-leash area to three. Guelph city council **nearly closed** the city's only fenced-in leash-free park due to community complaints, before reversing course. The animosity can quickly reach ridiculous heights. In Toronto, **someone locked up** an off-leash dog area and a resident played recordings of barking out a window to rile up the dogs.

Conflict with natural areas is another area of concern, with the potential for off-leash dogs to trample sensitive plantings and disturb wildlife.

Ron Buchan, Parks Community Strategist for the City of Calgary, said that the city has turned down community requests for new off-leash areas adjacent to natural areas. However, of the city's 152 off-leash areas, only 11 are fenced, meaning that in parks where existing off-leash areas abut natural spaces, there is nothing physically stopping dogs from heading into sensitive habitats.

To address this, Calgary is working on initiatives that include a park ranger program targeted to high user conflict areas, education on habitat restoration and dog etiquette, and an adopt-a-park program to encourage stewardship.



Dogs off-leash area. Credit: City of Calgary

The number of off-leash areas varies widely between cities and many appear to have been planned in an ad hoc manner. Finding appropriate sites to locate off-leash areas is difficult, especially in cities already dealing with park deficiencies.

"There are many areas in Hamilton that are parkland deficient," Hamilton city staff said. "There is a bit of a tug of war between folks who want land for people and those that want it for dogs." In an indication of how challenging space constraints have become, the last two off-leash areas the city created were approved by council direction even though they didn't conform to the city's policies on size.

A citywide strategy for managing and expanding off-leash areas can go a long way to alleviating concerns—both from dog owners

and others, said Eric Code, founder of the 2,000 member Toronto Dog Park Community Group. "If you're going to walk across a tight-wire, you need a pole," he said. "That's what policy is."

We found one third of cities have off-leash strategies that include planning and design criteria for establishing and managing areas citywide. In Calgary, Buchan said the city's decade old management plan helped "tremendously" by providing a clear decision-making framework for where and how to expand off-leash areas and clarity in responding to residents.

In Ottawa, the city **uses a point system** to designate off-leash areas. The city allows dogs off-leash in 175 parks and in 62 others only in certain areas or at certain times, with nine of these areas fenced-in.

THE SOCIAL BENEFITS OF DOG PARKS

For Eric Code, the benefits of the dog park go far beyond being a place for his dog to play—they create a sense of community, providing a “third space” between work and home where he connects with others.

Taking your dog to the park makes it easier to start up a conversation with a stranger, Code said. You wouldn’t necessarily go up to people throwing a ball around and start chatting, Code said. But you can easily meet new people at the dog park.

“In today’s world, especially in Toronto, where life can be a bit cold, there’s a small town feeling in dog parks that you just can’t get elsewhere,” he said.

The importance of dog parks for social connection is backed up by research.



Etobicoke Valley Mississauga. Credit: Eric Code

One study found having dogs increased the likelihood of people meeting others in their community, acting as an ice-breaker, while **another study** found that dogs help reduce feelings of social isolation and

increase the chance of building social support networks. Dog parks have also been shown to increase perceptions of safety as dog owners use parks in the “off hours” of early morning or evening.

INSTILL A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Some Canadian cities rely on, or are developing, programs that involve community members to fundraise for and manage dog parks—a response to both budgetary pressures and desires for greater community engagement.

After noting the city’s “limited resources”, Edmonton is studying the creation of **community-operated off-leash areas** to help expand offerings. Montreal’s **Club d’Agilité de Montréal** is run by a community non-profit that provides space for dog agility training. And in Gatineau the

1,200 member **Aylmer Canine Club** has an agreement with the city to run an off-leash area in Paul Pelletier Park.

But it’s Mississauga that has the most developed community-run off-leash arrangement out of the cities we surveyed. In 1997, a city by-law created off-leash zones in parks, but also placed the costs and management on a non-profit called **Leash-Free Mississauga**; however, in 2016 due to funding challenges as demand grew, the city stepped in with financial support.



P.U.P.P.Y patrol. Credit: City of Calgary

In Calgary, where the city runs a volunteer program called **PUPPY** (pick up pooches poo yourself), Buchan said that dog park community groups help reduce complaints as people take on a stewardship role.

Eric Code noted that programs to get residents more involved in dog parks can be a way to harness people's frustrations for good. It can help build a sense of responsibility, reducing incidences of dog owners

not respecting the rules.

"If you make people volunteers, and give them the ability to make the dog park better, they're going to take that much more care and pride in it." Code said.

GET CREATIVE



High Park dog hill in Toronto. Credit: Eric Code

* **Find space outside parks.**

Calgary hopes to create more off-leash areas within hydro corridors, while also encouraging developers to create dog amenities within new developments. In the hopes of encouraging the same, Toronto released its **Pet-Friendly Design Guidelines for High Density Communities**.

* **Improve existing spaces.**

Kingston is increasing lighting at its dog parks to make them safer and more inviting to use at night and in winter.

* **Create temporary spaces.**

Edmonton and Regina have created temporary off-leash areas in facilities like tennis courts when they're not being used. Guelph has approved the use of 41 sports fields for off-leash use when not occupied.

* **Create separate spaces.**

Hamilton piloted an enclosure for small dogs only at one park and plans to expand the offering after positive feedback.

* **Listen to feedback—and react.**

North Vancouver is piloting a new off-leash area along its waterfront, collecting public feedback and **updating a website** to show what's been altered.

* **Turn poop to power.**

Both **Waterloo** and **Mississauga** have dealt with the issue of growing dog waste in parks by testing designated bins that divert dog poop to facilities that turn it into energy.

2.

Feed them and they will come

How creative community groups and city support are growing connections through food in parks.

With their impressive array of social, health, and food security **benefits**, amenities like community gardens have become a staple in many cities.

Community food infrastructure holds even greater value in times of crisis, as we saw when provinces like **Ontario, British Columbia, and New Brunswick** declared community gardens an essential service during COVID-19.

As community resilience takes on heightened importance, roughly three quarters of cities reported demand for food opportunities in parks is also on the rise, creating an opening for cities to use food in parks to strengthen communities.



*Victoria leads gardening workshops as part of Growing in the City.
Credit: City of Victoria*

DESIGN FOOD AMENITIES INTO PARKS—AND GET CREATIVE

When Halifax was hit by Hurricane Dorian leaving residents without electricity, the **Park Avenue Community Oven** group in Dartmouth stepped up to provide pizza to the community at a local park's bake oven. And in response to the COVID-19 crisis, Victoria temporarily reassigned park staff to grow **up to 75,000 food plants** for residents in need.

These examples showcase how park-based food amenities and the support networks they create offer “an important buffer from stressful life events,” as one **2019 study** found.

Yet it often falls upon community groups to advocate for features like community gardens after the park is built, said Alex Harned, Food Systems Coordinator at the City of Victoria, noting that this can be cumbersome and involve competing for space with other user groups.

Instead, Harned sees great potential for cities to start integrating these amenities into the (re)design phase as “a necessity within every park, and not just an afterthought.”

While Harned noted this is largely “a shift that’s yet to happen,” we found some cities are taking



Volunteers make pizza at Park Avenue Community Oven in Dartmouth, Halifax. Credit: Lorrie Rand

steps in the right direction:

- * When planning the green space outside Regina’s **mâmawêyatitân centre**, a community hub that includes a high school, library, and recreational spaces, the city worked with Indigenous Elders and the school chef to include fruit trees, herbs, and berries for community access.
- * Released in 2020, Longueuil’s **urban agriculture policy** emphasizes the importance of building food amenities into neighbourhood public

spaces, involving residents and non-profits.

- * In Waterloo Park, neighbours can dine together thanks to a **functional art piece** in the form of a harvest table that seats 200 people.
- * In Ottawa, Halifax, Calgary, and Toronto, bake ovens can be found in parks—including tandoor ovens in the latter two cities—where community groups have formed around them, such as in Ottawa’s **Bayshore Park**.

SUPPORT THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE PROJECTS

Whether a garden, bake oven, or edible forest, food amenities often depend on the maintenance and programming efforts of dedicated volunteers.

Cities can lend a helping hand by providing coordination and resources, as Victoria has since 2016 through **Growing in the City**. Created in response to community demand, GITC supports

community-led food projects in green spaces—from small-scale commercial agriculture, to boulevard gardening, to fruit tree stewardship, **and more**.

GITC provides support to groups at the start-up phase and beyond. For example, the city helps connect community garden groups to available land and offer start-up funding (new in 2020), but also offers \$10,000 grants for garden volunteer coordinators to ensure the work remains sustainable over time and to support garden-based programming.

All of this work is overseen by Victoria's full-time Food Systems Coordinator—a unique role based out of the parks department, created as part of GITC.

Other cities are also helping to coordinate garden groups, either directly or through partnerships:

- * In Guelph, city staff convene the **Community Gardens Network Working Group**, which includes an online forum for



Victoria leads gardening workshops as part of *Growing in the City*. Credit City of Victoria

sharing information and regular meetings where volunteer garden coordinators discuss best practices, grant opportunities, and upcoming events.

- * For almost two decades, Ottawa has been collaborating closely

with **Just Food**—a community-based organization that, among other things, manages a **Community Gardening Network** that assists with garden start-up, provides grants, and offers skill-building opportunities.

GROW YOUR OPTIONS FOR GETTING INVOLVED

While some enjoy the labours of gardening or running a bake oven, there is a need to ensure accessible food opportunities for those with less time to commit.

One way to do so is through providing free publicly accessible produce. A **2019 study** of an edible orchard in Montreal found that food bearing plants can enhance residents' social capital, place attachment, and food knowledge—all without requiring a high level of time, skill, or commitment.

- * Edmonton created an **online map** of all the publicly accessible edible trees in the city, as did Red Deer of its **community food forests**, which are often managed in partnership with community groups.

- * In Prince George and Fredericton, city staff help maintain edible landscaping in parks that the public is encouraged to forage.

- * Kingston has a **community orchard and edible forest policy** that encourages community-led planting and harvesting of fruit and nut trees on public lands.



Nelson Park Community Garden in Vancouver. Credit: Park People

USE FOOD AS AN ANCHOR FOR CREATIVE PROGRAMMING



Volunteer at Gordon Neighbourhood House community dinner in Vancouver. Credit: Matthew Schroeter

Community groups across the country are showcasing how food can create a starting point for learning and connecting with one another.

* Toronto is home to the first ever shipping container grocery store in Canada: **the Moss Park Market**, run by **Building Roots**. With pay-what-you-can and pay-it-forward options, the market is a response to the community-identified need for accessible and affordable local grocery options. Much of the produce is grown down the road at Ashbridges Urban Farm, where some patrons of the market have since become volunteers, said Building Roots' Lisa Kates.

* In Saskatoon, **the askiy project**—a container garden located on a brownfield site—is run by Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth through a summer internship program that focuses on building skills, sustainability, and cultural connection.

* Local food groups can take up residencies in Vancouver's parks through the **Fieldhouse Activation Program**, such as the **Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty**, providing space to garden and host free, public events.

* In Halifax, two youth-based social enterprises, **Hope Blooms** and **BEEA Honey with Heart**, use parks as their homebase for

providing creative training and leadership opportunities for youth.

* Langley's **Learning Farm**, Fredericton's **Hayes Urban Farm**, North Vancouver's **Loutet Farm**, and Hamilton's **McQuesten Farm** show how urban farms can double as learning spaces by offering educational programming.

Inclusion

INTRODUCTION

On the surface, parks are open to all—but the reality is much more complex. Whether due to design features like inaccessible park washrooms, or social discrimination based on race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, and housing status, parks can be spaces of exclusion, discomfort, and even harm.

For this year's report, we take a closer look at how these physical and social barriers shape the experiences of two groups of park users—people experiencing homelessness, and people with disabilities—and how cities are working to address this.

The urgency of addressing equity issues in parks, and homelessness in particular, has been brought to the forefront by the COVID-19 pandemic. With reduced access to shelters, washrooms, and indoor community spaces, cities have seen rising numbers of people residing in public spaces, facing multiple vulnerabilities with little ability to meet public health directives around physical distancing and sanitation.

While COVID-19 has underscored the risks of sheltering in public space and urgent need for permanent housing, it's also made clear that even during times of crisis, unsheltered homelessness remains an enduring reality in many of our city parks. This reality highlights the need to ensure parks are safe, functional, and accessible for this community.

Meaningfully addressing exclusions related to homelessness and accessibility is complex work, but, as some Canadian cities show, it also creates opportunities to strengthen communities. Through thoughtful and intentional policies and programs, parks can allow people of different life experiences to exist together safely, confront stereotypes and stigma, and learn how to better live together.



Inclusion

INSIGHTS

- * Despite listing homelessness in parks as a key social challenge, few cities reported examples of responses that are not centred on encampment monitoring and enforcement, showing a need to prioritize equity-informed work in this area.
- * There is a need, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, for essential amenities, like washrooms, and services, like social workers, to be integrated into parks.
- * 81% of cities reported universally accessible designs are increasing in demand, yet less than half of cities have accessibility guidelines or strategies in place that address parks.

TAKE-AWAYS

- * Value and engage people experiencing homelessness as a community of local experts in park design, stewardship, and employment opportunities, rather than defaulting to approaches that aim to deter and displace.
- * Challenge community concerns related to homelessness and parks that are often rooted in stigma through investing in public education and community-based efforts to change perceptions, such as artistic and cultural park programming.
- * Consider social methods to improve accessibility, alongside necessary park design upgrades, including thoughtful programming led by people with disabilities and/or aimed at bringing people of different abilities together.

Inclusion / Indicators

44%

of cities have an accessibility strategy that addresses parks.

This year we tightened our definition to include only approved accessibility strategies and guidelines that include policies or actions for parks.

56%

of cities have a seniors strategy that addresses parks.

This year we tightened our definition to include only approved seniors strategies that include policies or actions for parks.

1.

The Trouble with Displacement

As many Canadian cities grapple with housing crises, parks are filling an important gap on the housing continuum. Now is a critical time to better understand this reality and re-evaluate our current approaches.

When cities were surveyed in early 2020, unsheltered homelessness in parks was the most cited social challenge. Yet, few cities responded to our prompt to highlight inclusive work they do to address this.

This tells us that the use of parks as places of shelter is an area we were collectively struggling with even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic—and understandably so. We know that this is an extremely complex challenge, rooted in issues well beyond the realm of parks, and now further deepened by COVID-19.



Bench with centre bars to prevent lying down.
Credit: Cara Chellew

With homelessness **predicted to rise** due to recent job losses, it is a critical time for cities and park professionals to ensure they have clear, well-informed approaches that are compatible with the current realities of unsheltered homelessness in Canadian cities.

Our conversations with experts, which took place prior to the pandemic but have become only more relevant since, invite reflection about how we might approach this issue from a new place.

UNDERSTANDING THE REALITIES

Homelessness, by definition, involves a lack of access to private spaces.

This places people experiencing homelessness “necessarily” in the public realm, explained Dr. Jeff Rose, a professor at the University of Utah whose research explores homelessness and parks. “And then if you’re in the public realm—where do you be? Where do you exist?”

The best option, for many, is a park.

This has become even more apparent as COVID-19 has placed **added pressures** on the shelter system. But even prior, many shelters were **not accessible to all**, due to factors such as restrictions on pets, partners, and/or substance use, a lack of adequate storage for belongings, and/or inadequate supports for trans communities



Defensive benches with third rail and without shelter from elements.
Credit: Cara Chellew

and people with disabilities.

Anna Cooper, a lawyer and homeless rights advocate at **Pivot Legal Society** in Vancouver, noted that, in this context, parks can be places of relative safety.

Being surrounded by community lends a sense of security, and can

play a life-saving role amidst a national overdose crisis where encampments can serve as de facto overdose prevention sites, Cooper said. It also makes it easier for outreach workers to stay in contact with people they’ve connected with when they know where to find them.

RETHINKING COMMON APPROACHES

Despite these realities, many of our standard approaches focus on displacement.

Defensive urban design—defined by researcher and founder of **DefensiveTO** Cara Chellew as “an intentional design strategy used to guide or restrict people’s behaviour in urban space as a form of crime prevention or order maintenance”—is one such tactic.

A classic example is the park bench with a third rail to prevent lying down. Defensive design in parks can also look like “ghost amenities”—the absence of amenities thought to attract “undesirable” users, like sheltered gathering areas or public washrooms, said Chellew.

But Chellew noted that not only does this approach fail to address root problems, it also makes parks inhospitable for

all—especially other vulnerable groups like seniors, people with disabilities, and people with chronic health conditions.

As COVID-19 has **made clear**, amenities like washrooms “are basic things that all humans need, that should be in public spaces,” Chellew said. “When we’re trying to exclude a certain group of people, we’re really making the park hostile for everyone.”



Rocks in unused space to discourage camping. Credit: Cara Chellew

Encampment clearances are another common response. But these measures are expensive, ineffective, and inhumane when people have nowhere else to go, said Anna Cooper. "We shouldn't be using resources to constantly displace people from public spaces to nowhere. It's a bad policy, which is doomed to fail, because people have to occupy space," she said.

Dr. Rose agreed, adding that these measures "often have the perverse outcome of supporting what they're trying to work against." His **research** has found that being forced to relocate or stripped of belongings can create setbacks in people's efforts to improve their situation.

Displacement from parks can also push people to take shelter

in more isolated spaces where they face increased health and safety risks, **new research** shows.

On top of the ethical and economic issues, park clearances often rest upon the shaky foundation of bylaws that are "constitutionally suspect," Cooper said.

Some cities have had their bylaws prohibiting sheltering in parks **struck down**, on the grounds that they violate individual rights to safety and security of the person, set out in Section 7 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

While some cities have worked to bring their bylaws into alignment with these rulings, many have not. A key reason these bylaws continue to exist,

said Cooper, is due to a lack of resources to challenge them.

"As a homeless person, you can't go to your local Legal Aid office and ask for funding for a lawyer to help you challenge a bylaw," she said. "There is a huge access-to-justice issue where there's just no funding."

In light of these realities, it's easy to wonder what the alternatives are to our current approaches. Fortunately, we can look to Canadian cities that are showcasing other possibilities.

2.

Forging a Different Path

A look at the complexity and lessons learned from striving toward a non-displacement approach to homelessness in Vancouver and Montreal.

Responding to homelessness can be outside the comfort zone of park professionals, but initiatives in Vancouver and Montreal offer insights on how to approach complex issues—from safety concerns to park revitalization—with care.



Co-creating art in a Montreal park. Credit: Chloé Barrette-Bennington for Exeko

THE CASE OF VANCOUVER'S OPPENHEIMER PARK

Until May 2020, Vancouver's Oppenheimer Park was the site of one of Canada's **largest and longest-standing** encampments, lasting one and a half years and home to roughly **300 residents** at times.

Rather than clearing the park, the **Vancouver Park Board** adopted an approach centred on better understanding and meeting the needs of park residents, with the goal of coming to a collaborative resolution.

However, the Provincial Government intervened to clear the park in early May 2020 when COVID-19 left residents exceptionally vulnerable, offering **temporary housing in hotels**.

Interviews for this piece took place in February 2020, prior to these interventions, and the situation remains fluid at the

time of writing in May 2020.

Still, looking back on Vancouver's experience offers insights

on other possibilities for addressing homelessness in parks, and strategies for moving the conversation forward.

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Oppenheimer Park is located in the heart of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, a neighbourhood that faces significant challenges around extreme poverty and has been at the forefront of the opioid crisis, but also has a strong sense of community.

"This is a park that sort of acts as a lightning rod for a lot of social issues, and health issues, and economic issues in our city and in our province and in our country," said Park Board Chair, Camil Dumont.

When advised by staff to seek an injunction to clear the park in fall 2019, the Park Board "wasn't

comfortable with taking that as an isolated action," Dumont said.

"We sort of interpreted that as an act of displacement in a neighbourhood, and within a community of people, who have pretty significant challenges just from a survival perspective," he said. "The act of physically removing them or criminalizing them ... I think only would have led to those folks being further isolated."

Instead, the Park Board hired **PHS Community Services Society**, a non-profit housing organization with strong roots in the Downtown Eastside, to connect with park residents

and provide recommendations about enhancing safety, improving support, and seeking appropriate shelter.

The Park Board also directed staff to strengthen relationships with the city and BC Housing, and revise bylaws on camping in parks to bring them in line with legal precedents.

The plan required actions to be taken in consultation with park residents, and within a commitment to reconciliation. Only with these conditions met would the Park Board consider seeking an injunction.

WHEN IT COMES TO SAFETY, CONSIDER HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

One of the most contentious issues when it comes to encampments in parks is safety—and conflicting perceptions and concerns around it.

According to Chrissy Brett, former part-time resident and liaison in Oppenheimer Park, the most pressing safety concerns of Oppenheimer residents related to the ability to meet basic needs—including access to washrooms, heating during the colder months, and harm reduction supports.

But safety concerns were also the reason cited by the city

when, in summer 2019, they pulled staff from a fieldhouse in the park that ran vital community programming.

The closure of the fieldhouse along with **perceptions of unsafety** deterred some residents of the surrounding neighbourhood, many low income or precariously housed themselves, from accessing the park. Dumont acknowledged that there'd been "an incredible negative impact" to people who relied on the space and no longer felt comfortable using

it, as there are few other green spaces in the neighbourhood.

To assess these competing concerns, the approach that the Park Board has taken is to apply a "hierarchy of needs" lens.

"From a parks perspective, I think the needs of those who are taking refuge in the park are quite obvious," Dumont explained. "The needs of those in the community who need the park are less front and center, but it's not a voice that is lost on us either by any means."

"We know that this park needs to be returned to a programmable space at some point, it's kind

of the 'how we get there' that's complicated," he added—a process that will become even

more complicated due to the recent interventions and new considerations COVID-19 brings.

CULTIVATE SUPPORT THROUGH EDUCATION

Another strategy for managing concerns about encampments is through public education.

Housed residents often have broad misunderstandings of homelessness in parks, scholar Jeff Rose said, which can be problematic when misinformed complaints place pressure on parks departments to take short-term responses.

Dr. Rose's 2019 **research** with co-author Milo Neild suggests that education campaigns can help to mobilize "the vital public support needed" to move from reactive responses toward "proactive, holistic engagements with homelessness

in parks." The piece provides a list of suggested messaging for municipalities to use.

At Oppenheimer, Chrissy Brett saw the effects of public education in practice. Through casual conversations, she took on the role of engaging with housed residents in the neighbourhood. She spoke with them about the challenges faced by park residents—often rooted in colonial structures and practices, with a **majority** of the park population identifying as Indigenous—and the peer-led programs in place.

For example, Brett often taught parents about the "neighbourhood watch" program run by park

residents, where they would alert each other to the presence of children to ensure any non-kid-friendly activities were concealed. "Because they've never been protected, [park residents] are very protective of the children, so they're very respectful and able to share that space," Brett said.

When she'd educate people about this, Brett would "see housed people and mothers, like, start tearing up." She added that "it's amazing to see how people morph and change," noting that some people who previously avoided the park became comfortable using it once they were better informed.

START THE CONVERSATION AND EMBRACE DISCOMFORT

While acknowledging the work can be intimidating, Vancouver Park Board's Camil Dumont advises parks staff in other cities to embrace the responsibility to strive for more inclusive solutions.

"It's pretty uncomfortable for everyone, ourselves included, to try to forge a different path here," said Dumont, but "as branches of government, from the lowest to the highest, our responsibility is to try to figure out how we can best help people and how we can move away from harm."

That work begins with starting a conversation, Brett noted, one that includes park residents, and respects the need for both consultation and consent. "I think more municipalities need to have that dialogue around, 'how are we going to deal with tent cities?'" she said. "Because they aren't disappearing."

THE CASE OF MONTREAL'S CABOT SQUARE

In downtown Montreal, Cabot Square is an important social space for the homeless community. Over the past 30 to 40 years, it has become an

informal public reception area for Indigenous people, and Inuit people in particular. Often coming to the city from northern Quebec and Nunavut to access

healthcare at a nearby hospital, some have found themselves without a place of residence in Montreal upon discharge.

PLAN FOR INCLUSIVE REVITALIZATION, AND BRING SERVICES TO PARKS

Over the years, advocates have worked with the City of Montreal to ensure that the park remains an accessible gathering space for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness and **Indigenous homelessness**. When the city began planning the revitalization of the square in 2010, one of the proposed steps was to move park regulars into a neighboring vacant lot.

When invited to give input in the planning process, Nakuset, the director of the **Native Women's Shelter of Montreal** and co-director of the **Montreal Indigenous Community Network**, opposed this approach, stressing the importance of the park as a gathering place for Indigenous people and the need for the community to remain in place.

In collaboration with **the First Peoples Justice Center**, they carried out **research**, partly paid for by the city, outlining strategies and recommendations to support social inclusion and properly consider the realities of people experiencing homelessness in the revitalization process.

The main recommendations were to integrate two social workers and a mediator in the square. "Instead of moving people who are homeless from the park,



Montreal's Cabot Square is an important gathering space for the Indigenous community. Credit: Lori Calman

let's give them the services they need," said Nakuset.

After several years of discussions and negotiations, the city accepted the recommendations and allowed Nakuset's team to hire a social worker, who, since 2014, has provided a presence in the park five days a week, allowing people to access culturally appropriate services and psychological support without leaving the park.

When COVID-19 heightened the need for additional services in parks, **Resilience Montreal**, a new day centre adjacent to

Cabot Square that Nakuset co-manages, **brought its services to the park** to provide washrooms, food, counselling, and other resources for people experiencing homelessness. It was one of the first of **five outdoor day centres** in parks to open in Montreal, through a partnership between the city and local organizations.

From Displacement to Inclusion

Moving away from displacement-oriented approaches means facing cohabitation challenges—but it also creates opportunities to increase our capacity for inclusion and learn how to better live together.

The **stigma** of homelessness, which intersects with racism and stigmas attached to substance use and mental illness, can create misunderstanding and social barriers between differently housed park users. As COVID-19 raises the **potential for increased prejudice** toward people experiencing homelessness, addressing these issues through education and shared experiences becomes even more important.

Instead of avoiding friction through displacement, organizations are using creative strategies to work through these tensions, helping communities to better understand each other and strengthen relationships in the process.



Using art to engage users of Montreal's Viger Square in consultations prior to redevelopment. Credit: Mikael Theimer for Exeko

BUILD BRIDGES THROUGH ART



Aboriginal Fridays at Cabot Square in Montreal. Credit: Lori Calman

In Montreal, non-profit organization **Exeko** engages people experiencing homelessness in artistic and intellectual activities through the **idAction project**. The project brings a 'philosophical caravan'—a van stocked up with art supplies and a library—to public spaces around the city.



Exeko's **idAction** mobile van stocked with library and art supplies in Montreal. Credit: Mikael Theimer

Dorothée de Collasson, co-director of programs at Exeko, said art helps to create shared experiences and change perceptions.

"By putting a jukebox in a park, for example, the person [experiencing homelessness] becomes the dancer, or the musician, or the guy who chose the right song," she said. The perception changes completely.

The Native Women's Shelter's **Cabot Square Project** has also used artistic programming to foster cultural learning and connection between the

community of homeless park regulars and residents of the surrounding neighbourhood.

Nakuset, the Native Women's Shelter's executive director, said that despite the added support of a full-time park-based social worker, "there was still the issue that ... the people around the park remained fearful."

To address this, the weekly **Aboriginal Fridays** program invites people into the park to participate in free artistic and cultural activities, including soapstone sculpture workshops, dreamcatcher making, hoop dancing and concerts.

"When everyone gathers, people learn the beauty of our culture," said Nakuset, "they are having a conversation, and it is starting to change their perception of Indigenous people."

CREATE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Exeko's Dorothée de Collasson recommends recognizing and valuing the skills of people experiencing homelessness, and exploring the potential for park-based income opportunities.

Having a conversation with an unhoused park user about their skills can also be an opportunity to begin building a relationship and learning to collaborate, de Collasson said. "A talent map can be produced to help managers visualize but also make visible the talents of these people in the public space they occupy," she suggested.

The Roundhouse Cafe, located in a pavilion within Cabot Square, offers one model for park-based employment.

A project of **l'Itinéraire**, a



A creative workshop at Place Émilie Gamelin in Montreal.
Credit: Audrey-Lise Mallet for Exeko

community-based organization that supports people experiencing homelessness and marginalization, the Roundhouse is Montreal's **first Indigenous cafe**. Employing roughly

16-20 Indigenous staff, the cafe offers **flexible employment arrangements**—whether that means working only a few hours at a time, or receiving wages in cash at the end of a shift.

ENGAGE PEOPLE IN PARK DESIGN, STEWARDSHIP

For cities looking to create more inclusive public spaces, researcher Cara Chellew advises that there are no set design guidelines to follow. Rather, inclusive design is a process, Chellew said. Meaningfully involving people experiencing homelessness in the planning stage will result in spaces that better support their use of parks.

Dorothée de Collasson added that this engagement should continue after parks are built, recommending not to hesitate to involve marginalized people in beautification initiatives, such as murals and horticultural maintenance projects.

Montreal non-profit **Sentier Urbain** has been doing this for 25 years through their **Jardins Gamelin** project—a participatory garden in a park that offers a paid pre-employment training program focused on horticultural skills. This approach recognizes homeless people as local experts and fosters a sense of belonging and accomplishment.

Community groups that steward a particular park, such as park friends groups, should also look for opportunities to connect with marginalized park users, de Collasson said.

For example, when groups are getting started, they can host

simple social activities like a movie night or a picnic to break the ice. "These initial contacts allow the various users to share positive experiences," de Collasson said, "and prepare the ground to make people more tolerant and empathetic with each other."



Aboriginal Fridays at Cabot Square in Montreal. Credit: Lori Calman

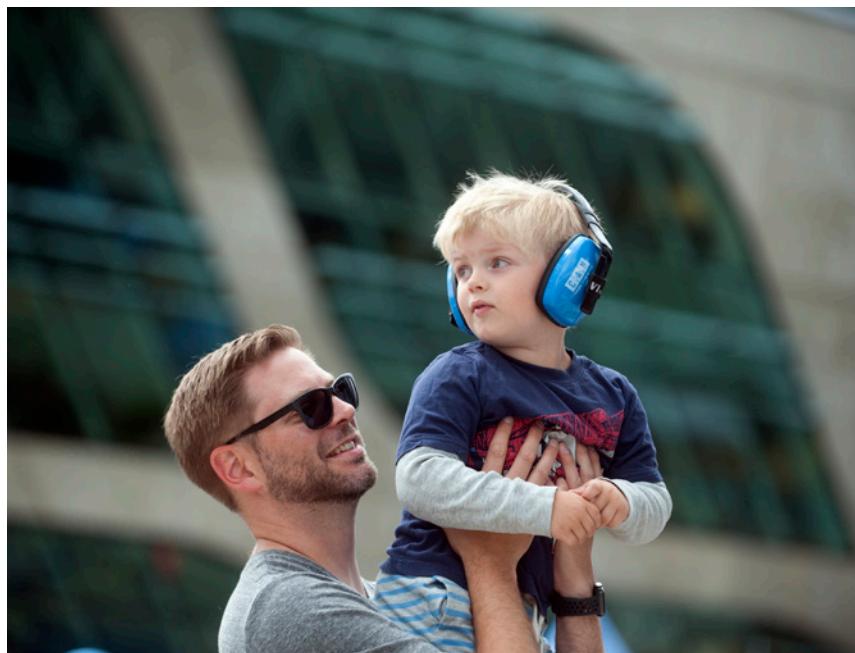
Accessibility Beyond Design

Cities and communities are using creative programming, training, and tech-based interventions to make parks inclusive for people of all abilities.

When it comes to public space, we can reframe our understanding of disability, said Dr. Ron Buliung, Professor of Geography at the University of Toronto and parent of a child with a physical disability.

Rather than thinking of disability in anatomical terms, we can think about how "it's actually the environment that is disabling," he said. "It's about how spaces "[don't] work in the presence of an impairment."

Parks are no exception, with city parks across the country **in varied states of accessibility**.



Child wears noise-cancelling headphones at festival in Surrey Civic Plaza. Credit: Canucks Autism Network

Cities we surveyed are aware of the need to improve, with four in five reporting increasing demand for universally accessible designs, although only 44% have an accessibility strategy that includes objectives for parks.

As cities work toward the necessary task of upgrading design, there are a broader range of supportive programs and projects that can complement design interventions, or help reduce barriers in the meantime.

INCLUSIVE PLAYGROUNDS ABOUT MORE THAN EQUIPMENT

Dr. Buliung is working on research, led by colleague Dr. Kelly Arbour-Nicitopoulos, to evaluate inclusive playgrounds across the country funded through the **Jumpstart Inclusive Play Project**. Seven have been built so far, including in Surrey, Calgary, Winnipeg and Toronto. The goal is to identify successes and recommendations for improvement.

While the research is still in progress, interviews with families who use the playgrounds, as well as rehabilitation and education professionals, suggest that the sites are having important benefits.

The playgrounds enable sibling play between differently abled children, and allow families to stay together rather than splitting up between different parks. Play across ability is also helping to educate children about disability from a young age, which the research team hopes will instill an inclusive outlook toward disability as they grow up.

But the research also suggests areas for improvement—and not all relate to the physical environment.

An emerging finding is the need for programming at these playgrounds.

"It's not just a matter of having physically accessible playground

equipment, because a child may still require emotional and social support in initiating play with others," Dr. Arbour-Nicitopoulos said. "We need to think about how to fully engage children together," she said, suggesting that a staff playground leader is one option—otherwise it falls on parents to take this role on.

On-site educational opportunities could also be beneficial. For parents, it would help to alleviate the need to explain their child's disability to curious park users. For children, learning about the different types of play equipment could help them to better share the space with others whose abilities differ from their own.

CONSIDERING INVISIBLE DISABILITIES

A partnership between the City of Surrey, the Vancouver Park Board, and the non-profit **Canucks Autism Network** (CAN) is making parks more inclusive for people with autism and other invisible disabilities.

Hallie Mitchell, Manager of Training and Community Engagement at CAN, said, "one of the most common things that people tell us is that they've gone to an event or program at a park or plaza and they have actually been asked to leave, or told that it wasn't a good fit for them."

CAN has provided in-person and **online** training to parks and rec staff in Vancouver and Surrey to equip them with the knowledge and skills to better

understand, support, and welcome autistic park users.

A key point emphasized in the training is the importance of predictability, said Mitchell. "Outdoor spaces are sometimes unpredictable. We don't know who will be accessing them, what might be happening in that space at that time, what the weather will be ... there might not be a lot of information about how to navigate through that space."

Thorough information on parks websites, detailed maps or signage on-site, and visual supports that illustrate the social rules of a public space can all help to make spaces more legible and inviting.

In addition to training, CAN also works with municipalities

to provide sensory-friendly amenities at festivals and gatherings in parks and public spaces. For people who experience their sensory environment intensely, crowding, loud noises, and scents at events can easily become overstimulating.

Sensory Friendly Spaces—tents equipped with features like comfortable seating, fidget/sensory toys, books, games, and noise-cancelling headphones—provide a place to escape and relax should attendees become overwhelmed. Since first piloting a **Sensory Friendly Space** at an event with the City of Surrey in 2018, CAN has brought them to various outdoor events in Vancouver and Surrey.

TURNING TO TECH

Through the use of an app called Blindsight, Canadian National Institute of the Blind (CNIB) has **made two parks** in Regina accessible to people with vision loss.

After learning that some community members were avoiding Victoria Park and City Square Plaza due to disorienting features including a spoke-like path design, CNIB wanted to find a solution to make these parks accessible and safe to navigate, said CNIB Saskatchewan's Executive Director, Christall Beaudry.

People can use the app for free and navigate the park using audio cues based on GPS coordinates transmitted from their phone to nearby beacons installed in the park.



Navigating Regina's Victoria Park using BlindSquare. Credit: CNIB

NAVIGATING PARKS TOGETHER

While the support of non-profit organizations and cities is important, what can get lost in the conversation, Dr. Buliung noted, is recognition of the creativity and agency of people with disabilities in navigating spaces that may not be perfectly accessible.

Safari Walking Group, a volunteer-led walking group run by and for people with vision loss or blindness, is doing just that, through weekly walks that explore different parks and trails in Toronto.

"When you get to places that are sometimes hard to navigate, like parks, it's good to have other people," said one of the

group's founders, Craig Nicol. The group relies on "sharing abilities," as members have varying levels of visual acuity, and all routes are pre-tested by Nicol and his guide dog.

By switching up walk locations each week so that walkers are encouraged to explore new neighbourhoods on public transit, "it's helped teach people more about the city and give them more confidence," Nicol said.

Whether through design interventions or community-led programming, making parks accessible is important not only to ensure the **rights** of people with disabilities to participate in their

communities, but also because parks are less vibrant when some are excluded, said Dr. Buliung.

"My daughter has something to offer while she's in the park," he said. "It's not just about what the park has to offer her. Her mind, her experience, her way of being, and her generosity are there as gifts for the other kids as well."

Next Steps



This report was partly written during the COVID-19 pandemic and we began to weave the emerging impacts into the stories we were reporting. However, there is much more work to do to make sense of the impacts of COVID-19 on park systems across the country and how we can move forward together—both in the near term as part of recovery and in the longer-term.

Park People is committed to doing that work with you. We will be using the learnings from this report to help frame that work, which will also shape the next Canadian City Parks Report for 2021.

If your city is not represented in the report, **please let us know** you'd like to see it next year. And of course, please let us know how you used this report, what you found most interesting, and how to improve it next year.

Thank you for reading.

Methodology

PROCESS

This year's report contains 27 Canadian cities—an increase of four over 2019—including 20 returning cities, and seven new cities. We aimed for diversity in size, geography, and official language, and prioritized cities that were returning from 2019, contacted us to participate, or filled a gap.

We distributed questionnaires to park staff, available in both French and English, that included questions on statistics, policies/plans, and projects/practices. The questionnaire included a confidential section about challenges, allowing us to report on cross-country trends.

To ensure data quality, we verified some responses independently or followed up with questions. All cities had a chance to verify their City Profile data pre-publication.

We also undertook secondary research of media and scholarly sources. To ensure rich analysis and capture diverse perspectives, we conducted expert interviews with city staff, academic researchers, park professionals, non-profit staff, and community members.



CHALLENGES AND LEARNINGS

Part of what makes Canada's landscape of city parks so exciting is its variety. Climate, topography, and governance are just a few factors that make cities unique—but that comes with challenges for comparability.

Differences in which cities participated in 2019 and 2020 also made cross-year comparability of data challenging, so we focused on overall trends.

Cities are also in very different places regarding what metrics they track, how they track them, and how they coordinate data internally. For some cities, certain numbers were not available, or were only available as best estimates (e.g. number of volunteers).

Data were collected largely in February 2020, prior to disruption from COVID-19. Operating and capital budgets may shift from the ones published here as cities assess new pressures. Since the situation was still very fluid at the time of publication, COVID-19 impacts will be reported on in greater detail in the 2021 Canadian City Parks Report.

We've tried our best to ensure consistency and context. For example, we've used methods that standardize for city size (e.g., hectares of parkland per 1,000 people). In cases where there are important influencing factors that affect the data, we've noted these directly on the City Profile for transparency.

Ensuring common definitions has been another challenge. We refined some of our definitions this year based on city feedback, and will continue improving them.

If you have a suggestion or a comment, please get in touch.

Methodology / Definitions

Total parkland

Includes both natural and maintained parkland that is owned, leased, or under a management agreement by the municipality.

Natural parkland

A natural area is a green space which receives a relatively low level of maintenance and supports natural or naturalizing vegetation. Natural areas may include trails or walkways as well as parking areas and washrooms.

Environmentally significant/sensitive areas (ESAs)

Areas designated under special policy protection to preserve important environmental attributes, such as rare flora and fauna. Only includes hectares of ESAs/protected areas within the public park system.

Total population

Total population of the municipality based on 2019 sources, unless otherwise noted.

Operating budget

Direct operating expenditures (not including revenues) for the Current Budget Year for maintaining parks and natural areas. This includes:

- * planting and maintenance of trees in park/natural areas
- * graffiti & vandalism repair
- * management, administration & operational staff salaries
- * consultant/contractor costs
- * parks horticultural plantings
- * maintenance of closed cemeteries if carried out from the Parks Operating Budget
- * parks litter pickup & waste disposal
- * inspection and maintenance of splash pads, playgrounds & outdoor fitness equipment
- * maintenance & replacement of park furniture
- * public toilets where maintained from parks budget
- * sports field maintenance
- * snow clearing and ice control for parks & natural areas
- * any other parks/green space maintenance costs except cemetery costs where the cemetery is "active"

Capital budget

Capital expenditure for all capital items related to land improvement works, planned for completion during the current financial year. It includes both new and renewal work, capital items carried forward from previous years, and salaries and wages for all staff involved in the design, planning and delivery of Capital projects.

Community gardens/urban farms

Food-growing gardens available for the public to use that may require membership. This includes community orchards.

Off-leash dog areas

Includes both standalone dog parks and off-leash dog areas within parks.

Volunteers

Includes only volunteers who have worked directly with the municipality (not external organizations). Programming refers to publicly accessible activities and events (e.g. yoga classes, nature walks, park cleanups, farmer's markets, festivals, celebrations, etc.). Programming does not include any large commercial activities, such as a private party.

Community park group program

A formal municipal program through which residents can get involved in parks. An example of would be an adopt-a-park program. The roles of these groups may include environmental stewardship (e.g. clean-ups), social/recreational programming (e.g. festivals, yoga in the park), etc. Does not include one-off volunteer opportunities (e.g. volunteering at a specific event).

Community grant program

A monetary grant offered by the municipality that residents and community groups can apply for, and can be used for the purposes of improving or programming parks.

Non-profit partnership

An ongoing partnership between the city and a non-profit organization that includes a programming or maintenance agreement in a park.

Parks system master plan

An overall plan or strategy dealing with the municipality's current and future park/greenspace provision needs. It usually includes an analysis of current provision against population and a review of future park/greenspace acquisition/disposal needs.

Universal design

The design of parks or park amenities to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized modification. This would include people of all ages, and those with and without disabilities.

Green infrastructure

Also known as low-impact development. The engineering of natural systems that capture, hold, and treat rainwater where it falls. It may include features such as bioretention ponds, rain gardens, and bioswales.

City Profiles

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Vancouver

Surrey

Delta

Township of Langley

Prince George

City of North Vancouver

Victoria

ALBERTA

Calgary

Edmonton

Red Deer

SASKATCHEWAN

Saskatoon

Regina

MANITOBA

Winnipeg

ONTARIO

Toronto

Hamilton

Richmond Hill

Kingston

Ottawa

Mississauga

Waterloo

Guelph

QUEBEC

Montreal

Quebec City

Longueuil

Gatineau

NEW BRUNSWICK

Fredericton

NOVA SCOTIA

Halifax

Vancouver

BRITISH COLUMBIA
POPULATION: 646,700

ANALYSIS

- * At 110 groups, Vancouver reported the most park groups and has the second highest rate of volunteers at about 22 per 1,000 people.
- * Vancouver is one of 19% of cities with a standalone biodiversity strategy, one of two cities with a bird strategy, and one of 63% with a citywide park system master plan updated within the last 10 years.
- * At 2 hectares of parkland per 1,000 people, Vancouver sits in line with other dense cities such as Montreal and Toronto.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * In 2019, Vancouver released the final report comprising VanPlay—the city's park master plan that lays out a 25-year vision for parks that prioritizes equity, asset needs, and connectivity.
- * The city is investing \$4.5 million in upgrading 7 playgrounds, with a focus on risky play and social spaces for all ages.
- * Vancouver has started construction on a new \$13.8 million downtown park with an elevated walkway and cafe.



INVENTORY / AMENITIES

2

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 1,262)

38%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 482)

N/A

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: N/A)

11%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 11,497)

1.1 ha / 1,000

This is a citywide target. How this applies to neighbourhoods and communities is determined using the Parks Asset Target in VanPlay.

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

38

of dog parks

36

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

21.6

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 14,000)

No

Policy to waive permit fees

110

of community park groups

Park Stewardship Program

Community park group program

Neighbourhood Matching Fund

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$82

Increase from 2019 due to improvements in data reporting.

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$52,800,000)

\$143,700,000

Capital budget

\$1,045,710

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

N/A

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

*VanPlay: Parks and Recreation Master Plan
2019*

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Biodiversity Strategy 2016

Climate Change Adaptation Strategy 2012

Rain City Strategy 2017

Urban Forest Strategy 2018

Bird Strategy 2015

OTHER

Track and Field Strategy 2019

*VanSplash - Aquatics Strategy (includes
Beaches) - 2019*

*OnWater - Mon-motorized Watercraft
Recreation Strategy 2019*

People, Parks, and Dogs Strategy 2017

Surrey

BRITISH COLUMBIA
POPULATION: 578,236

ANALYSIS

- * Surrey is one of 19% of cities with a standalone biodiversity strategy.
- * With nearly 3 off-leash dog areas per 100,000 people, Surrey is just above the median.
- * Surrey is one of 70% of cities that offers a community grant program for park projects.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * Through a purchase from the province, Surrey acquired 58 hectares of ecologically sensitive land as part of the city's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy.
- * The city's new 10-year parks and recreation plan proposes 29 new parks to accommodate growth, changing populations, and preservation of natural lands.
- * City staff worked with urban agriculture groups to develop best practices for safely keeping community gardens open during the COVID-19 pandemic.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES

5.2

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 3,012)

39%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 1,175)

2%

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: 59)

10%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 31,640)

City: 1.2 ha / 1,000

Community: 1.0 ha / 1,000

Neighbourhood: 1.2 ha / 1,000 in secondary plan areas, 10 minute walk in town centres and urban areas.

Nature Preserves and Habitat Corridors: 4.2 ha / 1,000

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

17

of dog parks

9

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

N/A

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: N/A)

N/A

Policy to waive permit fees

N/A

of community park groups

N/A

Community park group program

Neighbourhood Enhancement Grants

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$51

Budgets are from 2019. 2020 numbers were unavailable at time of survey as they had not yet been broken down by department.

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$29,755,000)

\$11,496,000

Capital budget

N/A

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

5% of development site or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Parks Rec and Culture Strategic Plan 2018

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2014

*Environmental Guidelines for Planning,
Design, Development and Operations of
Parks*

Climate Adaptation Strategy 2013

Greenways Plan 2012

Shade Tree Management Plan 2016

Coastal Flood Adaptation Strategy 2019

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Age-friendly Strategy for Seniors 2014

OTHER

Dog Off Leash Area Strategy 2012 - 2021

Delta

BRITISH COLUMBIA
POPULATION: 103,000

ANALYSIS

- * Delta is one of 19% of cities with a standalone biodiversity strategy and one of two cities with a bird strategy.
- * Delta has the fourth highest number of volunteers per 1000 residents, at about 17.
- * Delta is one of 56% of cities that offers a community park group program.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * To accommodate rising interest in pickleball, Delta is planning to create **18 new pickleball courts** in the city.
- * In May 2020, Delta launched a **'virtual recreation centre'**, bringing its programming online to support physical activity during COVID-19.
- * Delta installed **mason bee boxes** in four parks to support local pollinators.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES

6

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 618)

49%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 304)

25%

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: 153)

3%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 18,370)

6 ha / 1,000

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

12

of dog parks

4

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

16.6

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 1,711)

Yes

Policy to waive permit fees

1

of community park groups

Adopt-a-Rain Garden & Adopt-a-Park

Community park group program

Community cost-sharing program of \$200,000

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$55

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$5,654,378)

\$9,275,000

Increase from 2019 related to new track and field facility.

Capital budget

N/A

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

5% of development site or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Invasive Species Management Plan 2016

Birds & Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2018

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Social Action Plan 2018

Township of Langley

BRITISH COLUMBIA
POPULATION: 131,000

ANALYSIS

- * With nearly 5 off-leash dog areas per 100,000 people, Langley is above the median.
- * Langley is one of 56% of cities that offers a community park group program.
- * Langley is one of 77% of cities that reported having at least one park partnership in place with a non-profit.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * **Four hectares were added to the township's largest park, Campbell Valley Regional Park, which will help with "ecological and trail continuity."**
- * The new **Langley Learning Farm** is coming to the Derek Doubleday Arboretum through a partnership with the Langley Sustainable Agriculture Foundation.
- * A new **disc golf course** opened on the site of a former landfill in Jackman Wetlands Park through a collaborative effort that involved local disc golf enthusiasts.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES

3.5

Increase from 2019 due to GIS improvements.

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 458)

29%

Increase from 2019 due to GIS improvements.

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 132)

N/A

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: N/A)

1%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 31,600)

3.4 ha / 1,000

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

6

of dog parks

9

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

6.4

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 839)

No

Policy to waive permit fees

15

of community park groups

Adopt-a-Program

Community park group program

Neighbourhood Initiative Program

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$74

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$9,750,000)

\$9,100,000

Capital budget

\$75,000

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

5% of development site or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Parks and Recreation Master Plan 2002

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Wildlife Habitat Conservation Strategy 2008

Greenway Amenity Policies

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Age-friendly Strategy 2014

Prince George

BRITISH COLUMBIA
POPULATION: 78,675

ANALYSIS

- * At nearly 25 hectares, Prince George has the highest ratio of parkland per 1,000 people.
- * Prince George is one of 70% of cities that offers a community grant program for park projects.
- * At 46%, Prince George sits at the average ratio of parkland that is natural area.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * In 2019, the first downtown park since 1994 opened as **Wood Innovation Square**.
- * A local seven-year old girl **helped the city design a new playground** by surveying other playgrounds in the city.
- * About three quarters of Prince George's ball diamonds and sport fields are jointly maintained with non-profit sports associations.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES

24.3

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 1,913)

46%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 876)

12%

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: 238)

6%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 32,900)

Community Park:
1.0 ha / 1,000

Neighbourhood Park: 1.2 ha / 1,000

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

4

of dog parks

3

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

N/A

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: N/A)

Yes

Policy to waive permit fees

N/A

of community park groups

No

Community park group program

Various Community Grants

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$68

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$5,333,386)

\$3,853,000

Capital budget

\$10,000

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

5% of development site or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Park Strategy Report 2017

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

*Community Forest of Prince George:
Management Plan 2006*

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Age Friendly Action Plan 2017

Off Leash Strategies 2011

*Lheidli T'enneh First Nations Government and
Reconciliation*

OTHER

Ball Diamond and Sport Field Strategy 2018

City of North Vancouver

BRITISH COLUMBIA
POPULATION: 53,000

ANALYSIS

- * At 54%, North Vancouver's ratio of parkland under special policy protection for sensitive ecosystems is twice the average.
- * With nearly 23 community gardens per 100,000 people, North Vancouver is tied with Red Deer with the highest ratio.
- * North Vancouver is one of about a quarter of cities that offer a formal park volunteer program, a grant program, and a policy to waive permit fees for groups in financial need.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * North Vancouver is piloting a new off-leash dog area at Waterfront Park at a site selected in response to community feedback.
- * The city banned smoking—cigarettes and cannabis—in all city parks and greenways.
- * In 2019, North Vancouver residents planted 100 trees at the new Moodyville Park.



INVENTORY / AMENITIES

3.2

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 169)

54%

Includes ESAs rated high only
% of parkland that is
ESA/protected
(Ha total: 91)

53%

% of natural area of
total parkland
(Ha total area: 90)

14%

% of total city land area
as parks
(Ha total: 1,183)

3 ha / 1,000 people

Parkland provision
goal (distance to park
/ ha per 1000 people)

4

of dog parks

12

of community
gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

17.4

Includes Park Steward program only.

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 924)

Yes

Policy to waive permit fees

2

of community park groups

City Park Stewards

Community park group program

Living City Grant

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$42

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$2,250,000)

\$4,000,000

Capital budget

\$100,000

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

5% of development site or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available
for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Parks Master Plan 2010

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Invasive Plant Management Strategy 2013

Corporate Climate Action Plan Update 2017

OTHER

Child, Youth and Family Strategy 2014

Victoria

BRITISH COLUMBIA
POPULATION: 92,041

NOTES:

Victoria is making a new investment of \$858,000 annually to expedite implementation of the Urban Forest Master Plan.

ANALYSIS

- * With about 10 community gardens per 100,000 people, Victoria has nearly double the median.
- * At 44%, Victoria is above average in percentage of parkland that is under special policy protection for sensitive ecosystems.
- * Victoria is one of 63% of cities with a citywide park system master plan updated within the last 10 years.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * A new **1.2-hectare waterfront park** is being developed at Laurel Point, thanks in part to a transfer of land from the federal government.
- * Victoria is promoting citizen stewardship of its urban forest by aiming to **plant 5,000 trees in 2020** as part of the UN Trees in Cities Challenge.
- * To enhance food security during the COVID-19 pandemic, Victoria assigned parks staff to grow up to **75,000 food plants** to be distributed to residents in need.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES**2.3**

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 209)

44%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 91)

44%

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: 91)

11%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 1,947)

400 m

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

13

of dog parks

9

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION**N/A**

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: N/A)

No

Policy to waive permit fees

9

of community park groups

No

Community park group program

Various grants available

Community grant program

FUNDING**\$115**

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$10,543,532)

\$4,480,000

Capital budget

\$92,000

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

5% of development site or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Parks and Open Space Master Plan 2017

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Urban Forest Master Plan 2013

Calgary

ALBERTA

POPULATION: 1,267,344

ANALYSIS

- * With 152 off-leash areas, Calgary has the second highest total number and the third highest when population is factored in, at 12 per 100,000 people.
- * Calgary is one of 19% of cities with a standalone biodiversity strategy.
- * At nearly \$1.7 million, Calgary pulled in the second highest amount in outside funding for parks.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * Through a collaborative effort that involved different city departments as well as artists and biologists, Calgary opened the unique **Dale Hedges Park** in 2019, also serving as a stormwater treatment facility.
- * Calgary led **public engagement in summer 2019** to gauge support for a potential pilot project to allow alcohol consumption at certain park picnic sites.
- * Through the **Creating Coventry** project, the city teamed up with a community association in the Coventry Hills area to engage residents about local park and playground improvements, publishing a **report** following the process.



INVENTORY / AMENITIES

6.6

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 8,412)

55%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 4,630)

25%

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: 2,100)

10%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 84,820)

450 m

5 minute walk

2 ha / 1,000 people

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

152

of dog parks

56

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

3.4

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 4,300)

Yes

Policy to waive permit fees

7

of community park groups

Green Leaders

Community park group program

N/A

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$64

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$81,657,970)

\$33,417,788

Capital budget

\$1,695,000

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

10% of development site or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Open Space Master Plan 2002

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Our BiodiverCity 2015-2025

Climate Resilience Strategy 2018

Parks Water Management Strategic Plan 2007

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Universal Design Handbook 2010

Seniors Age Friendly Strategy 2015-2018

Inclusive Play Spaces Implementation Plan 2018

OTHER

Off-leash Area Management Plan 2010

Edmonton

ALBERTA
POPULATION: 972,223

NOTES:

Edmonton underwent a municipal annexation in 2019. The city also experienced a heavy rain year, which led to \$1.8 million overspent on turf operations.

ANALYSIS

- * Edmonton is one of a third of cities with an off-leash dog park plan.
- * With nearly 8 community gardens per 100,000 people, Edmonton is above the median of 5.
- * Edmonton is one of 56% of cities that offers a community park group program.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * Edmonton is piloting driverless electric lawn mowers that are programmable, self docking and will potentially run on solar power, as well as autonomous snow blowers.
- * In winter 2020, the annual Flying Canoë Volant Festival celebrating Métis and francophone culture saw participants fly down Gallagher Park's hill in canoes as part of a "Canadian triathlon" that also involved log-sawing and axe-throwing.
- * In May 2020, reopening dog parks was one of the first steps Edmonton took in easing its COVID-19 restrictions.



INVENTORY / AMENITIES

6.4

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 6,177)

30%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 1,856)

2%

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: 130)

8%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 78,310)

500 m

10 minute walk

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

43

of dog parks

75

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

6.3

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 6,106)

No

Policy to waive permit fees

12

of community park groups

Partners in Parks

Community park group program

N/A

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$42

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$40,830,079)

\$3,150,000

Excludes staff salaries/wages.

Capital budget

\$800,000

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

10% of development site or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Breathe Green Network Strategy 2018

Urban Parks Management Plan: 2006 - 2016
- City of Edmonton

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Biodiversity Action Plan 2009

The Way We Green 2011

*Climate Resilient Edmonton: Adaptation
Strategy & Action Plan 2018*

Urban Forest Management Plan 2012

OTHER

Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy 2016

Red Deer

ALBERTA
POPULATION: 101,002

NOTES:

A major windstorm in Red Deer in 2017 has required continued clean-up, including this year.

ANALYSIS

- * With nearly 23 community gardens per 100,000 people, Red Deer is tied with North Vancouver with the highest ratio.
- * At 20 hectares per 1,000 people, Red Deer has the second highest ratio of parkland per population.
- * At nearly 20%, Red Deer has the highest percentage of city land area reserved for parks.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * Red Deer held weekly **pop-up spray parks** to engage the community in neighbourhood parks in summer 2019.
- * Red Deer **won the parks excellence award** at the 2019 Alberta Recreation & Parks Association conference in light of the city's leading work renovating Discovery Canyon.
- * As COVID-19 rules were often framed in terms of what residents can't do, in May 2020 Red Deer **wrote up positive guidelines** of what residents can do, encouraging them to (safely) get out into parks.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES

20

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 2,019)

49%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 990)

N/A

Red Deer offers special policy protection to environmentally significant areas through the A2 Environmental Preservation District (not parks-specific).

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: N/A)

19%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 10,701)

400 m

18 ha / 1,000 people

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

2

of dog parks

23

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

4.3

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 430)

No

Policy to waive permit fees

3

of community park groups

Adopt-a-Park

Community park group program

N/A

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$103

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$10,353,702)

\$3,085,558

Capital budget

N/A

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

10% of development site or cash-in-lieu

Environmental Reserves taken in accordance with the Municipal Government Act also contribute to the City's parkland development.

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

River Valley and Tributaries Plan 2010

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Climate Change Adapation Action Plan 2014

Environmental Master Plan 2019

Saskatoon

SASKATCHEWAN
POPULATION: 272,211

ANALYSIS

- * With 12 community gardens per 100,000 people, Saskatoon has more than double the median.
- * At 50 groups, Saskatoon reported the third highest number of community park groups.
- * Saskatoon is one of 63% of cities with a citywide park system master plan updated within the last 10 years.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * Saskatoon parks staff lent a helping hand to neighbours in Winnipeg with clean-up assistance after a major snowstorm in October 2019.
- * Saskatoon's **Avalon Dog Park** got a 1-hectare expansion in June 2019.
- * Saskatoon sent 'ambassadors' into parks during COVID-19 to provide friendly education to residents about safe park use.



INVENTORY / AMENITIES

3.8

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 1,039)

12%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 120)

N/A

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: N/A)

4%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 23,633)

4 ha / 1,000 people

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

8

of dog parks

33

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

N/A

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: N/A)

No

Policy to waive permit fees

50

of community park groups

N/A

Community park group program

Various grant opportunities

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$75

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$20,500,000)

\$1,900,000

Capital budget

N/A

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

10% of development area or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Recreation and Parks Master Plan 2015

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Green Infrastructure Strategy (in development)

Urban Forestry Management Plan (in development)

Regina

SASKATCHEWAN
POPULATION: 234,177

ANALYSIS

- * Regina is one of 56% of cities that offers a community park group program.
- * Regina is one of 63% of cities with a citywide park system master plan updated within the last 10 years.
- * Regina is one of 77% of cities that reported having at least one park partnership in place with a non-profit.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * A new 1.3-hectare park that will feature off-leash dog areas, disc golf, and a toboggan hill is coming to Regina on the site of a golf course.
- * Regina is working with local organizations to develop and install communication boards for children who are non-verbal at accessible playgrounds in the city.
- * Regina has an interactive floral map to help residents identify flowers planted in the city's public spaces.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES

5.6

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 1,321)

12%

Regina is situated on dry prairie. Every tree has been hand planted. There is not a lot of natural space within City limits.

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 155)

N/A

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: N/A)

7%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 18,243)

Neighbourhood Level 1.2-1.6 ha / 1,000 people

Zone Level open space 0.7-1.1 ha / 1,000 people.

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

2

of dog parks

9

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

N/A

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: N/A)

No

Policy to waive permit fees

0

of community park groups

Adopt-a-Greenspace

Community park group program

Community Investment Grants

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$58

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$13,578,932)

\$1,060,000

Capital budget

N/A

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

10% of development area or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Recreation Master Plan (2019)

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

*Regina Urban Forest Management Strategy
(2000)*

Winnipeg

MANITOBA
POPULATION: 753,700

ANALYSIS

- * At 36%, Winnipeg is above average in percentage of parkland that is under special policy protection for sensitive ecosystems.
- * Winnipeg is one of a third of cities with an off-leash dog park plan.
- * Winnipeg is one of 56% of cities that offers a community park group program.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * A 2019 audit of Winnipeg's park spaces found nearly 60% were in "very good" condition.
- * The Healing Trails project is adding story-based Indigenous art and signage to Winnipeg's network of public trails to increase visibility of Indigenous languages and culture.
- * The Downtown Winnipeg BIZ brought pop-up parks and pop-up public washrooms to the city's public spaces in summer 2019.



INVENTORY / AMENITIES

4

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 2,994)

36%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 1,084)

36%

Winnipeg protects natural areas in parks through the Ecologically Significant Natural Lands Strategy. The policy uses a broader definition of sensitive lands that encompasses any natural area within the park system.

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: 1,084)

6%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 46,400)

N/A

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

12

of dog parks

41

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

2.1

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 1,574)

No

Policy to waive permit fees

N/A

of community park groups

Adopt-a-Park

Community park group program

N/A

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$46

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$34,569,000)

\$8,600,000

Capital budget

N/A

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

N/A

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Parks Strategy (in development)

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

*Ecologically Significant Natural Lands
Strategy & Policy 2007*

Climate Action Plan 2018

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Accessibility Plan 2019 - 2021

Age-friendly Winnipeg Action Plan 2014

OTHER

Athletic Field Review 2018

Off-Leash Dog Areas Master Plan 2018

Toronto

ONTARIO

POPULATION: 2,956,024

ANALYSIS

- * Toronto is one of 19% of cities with a standalone biodiversity strategy and one of 63% with a citywide park system master plan updated within the last 10 years.
- * Toronto is one of 52% of cities with a policy to waive park permit fees for financial need.
- * At 2.7 hectares of parkland per 1,000 people, Toronto sits in line with other dense cities such as Montreal and Vancouver.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * In 2019, Toronto released its new **Parkland Strategy**—a 20-year master plan to guide park development and improve access to parks in the city.
- * Toronto is conducting a **citywide study** on how to improve off-leash dog areas to accommodate population growth.
- * Toronto approved an implementation plan for its **Ravine Strategy** that includes extra funding towards conservation, clean-up measures, and community stewardship.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES

2.7

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 8,096)

46%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 3,693)

23%

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: 1,892)

13%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 63,020)

N/A

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

75

of dog parks

81

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

2

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 6,000)

Yes

Policy to waive permit fees

80

of community park groups

Community Natural Ice Rink Program

Community Stewardship Program

Community park group program

Community Investment Funding

PollinateTO Community Grants

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$54

This year's budgets include only the portion for Parks, whereas the numbers reported for 2019 included the entire Parks, Forestry and Recreation budget.

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$160,115,185)

\$100,729,608

Capital budget

\$8,100,000

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

Community Benefits Charge

This tool was introduced in 2019 and is still under review. Previous Provincial legislation allowed 5% of development site or cash-in-lieu.

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Parkland Strategy 2019

Recreation and Parks Facilities Master Plan 2017

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Wild, Connected and Diverse: A Biodiversity Strategy for Toronto 2019

Toronto Ravine Strategy 2017

Resilience Strategy 2019

Sustaining and Expanding the Urban Forest 2012 - 2022

Pollinator Protection Strategy 2017

Natural Environments Trail Strategy 2013

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Accessibility Design Guidelines 2004

Seniors Strategy 2.0 2018

Our Common Grounds: Incorporating Indigenous place-making in Toronto's parks and public realm

Hamilton

ONTARIO
POPULATION: 579,000

ANALYSIS

- * With 17 community gardens per 100,000 people, Hamilton has the third highest number of community gardens per population.
- * Hamilton is one of about a quarter of cities that offer a formal park volunteer program, a grant program, and a policy to waive permit fees for groups showing financial need.
- * Hamilton is one of 56% of cities with a seniors strategy that includes parks.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * **John Rebecca Park**, opened in 2019, is built on a converted downtown parking lot, and was partly funded through a **\$1 million donation**.
- * In 2020, Hamilton received **Bee City designation** for its commitment to supporting pollinators.
- * Hamilton's Summer Supie program which provides free drop-in activities for kids in parks **celebrated its 110 year anniversary** in 2019.



INVENTORY / AMENITIES

4.7

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 2,717)

46%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 1,240)

37%

Includes ESAs in parks that are maintained, but not owned, by the city.

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: 1,010)

2%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 112,775)

2.1 ha / 1,000 people

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

14

of dog parks

100

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

1

Includes volunteers engaged in maintenance/stewardship only. Decrease from 2019 due to program review/administration clean-up.

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 350)

Yes

Policy to waive permit fees

39

of community park groups

Adopt-a-Park

Community park group program

Clean and Green Neighbourhood Grant

City Enrichment Fund

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$38

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$22,083,870)

\$8,376,000

Capital budget

\$154,000

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

Community Benefits Charge

This tool was introduced in 2019 and is still under review. Previous Provincial legislation allowed 5% of development site or cash-in-lieu.

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Urban Forest Strategy (in development)

Recreational Trails Master Plan 2016

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Age Friendly Strategy

Richmond Hill

ONTARIO
POPULATION: 209,286

ANALYSIS

- * At 67%, Richmond Hill has a higher than average ratio of parkland that is natural area.
- * Richmond Hill is one of 56% of cities with a community park group program.
- * With nearly 11 volunteers per 1,000 people, Richmond Hill is above the median of 8.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * A new **youth area in Lake Wilcox Park** opened in summer 2019, providing a safe and lively gathering place for youth aged 13-19 including a skatepark, beach volleyball courts, fitness equipment and wifi.
- * Council approved the preparation of an **Urban Open Space Master Plan** to be initiated in late 2020 that will **identify opportunities to improve green space connectivity**.
- * The redeveloped **Bradstock Park** incorporates a unique kaleidoscope-themed design, with interactive and artful play features.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES

5

This total does not include an additional 935 hectares of natural parkland owned by the Conservation Authority and the Province.

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 1,044)

67%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 703)

6%

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: 64)

10%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 10,100)

1.52 ha / 1,000 people

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

2

of dog parks

7

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

10.9

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 2,280)

Yes

Policy to waive permit fees

1

of community park groups

Community Stewardship Program

Community Garden Program

Community park group program

Community Stewardship Program

Community Garden Program

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$41

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$8,651,300)

\$2,113,900

Excludes salaries/wages

Capital budget

\$136,300

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

Community Benefits Charge

This tool was introduced in 2019 and is still under review. Previous Provincial legislation allowed 5% of development site or cash-in-lieu.

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Parks Plan 2013

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Urban Forest Planting Guidelines 2016

Urban Forest Management Plan (in development)

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Multi-year Accessibility Plan 2018 - 2022

Kingston

ONTARIO
POPULATION: 129,300

NOTES:

Due to significant storm damage this year particularly along the waterfront, many projects have been focused on repairing infrastructure.

ANALYSIS

- * With nearly 4 off-leash dog areas per 100,000 residents, Kingston is above the median.
- * Kingston is one of 52% of cities with a policy to waive park permit fees for financial need.
- * Kingston is one of 63% of cities with a citywide park system master plan updated within the last 10 years.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * Two new community orchards are being developed at Lakeside Community Garden and Oak Street Community Garden, thanks to the city's **community orchard and edible forest policy**.
- * Kingston community groups **launched the Gardening for Good campaign** to promote food growing in the city and help advocate for the province to declare community gardens essential services during COVID-19.
- * The city provides free, family-friendly summer programming at local parks through its **Neighbourhood Parks Program**.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES

5

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 644)

31%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 201)

N/A

The City of Kingston has a policy in place to designate ESAs, however the data for ESAs within the municipal parks system is unavailable.

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: N/A)

1%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 45,119)

5 ha / 1,000 people

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

5

of dog parks

7

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

N/A

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: N/A)

Yes

Policy to waive permit fees

5

of community park groups

N/A

Community park group program

Community Garden Grant

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$52

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$6,700,000)

\$5,700,000

Capital budget

\$569,000

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

Community Benefits Charge

This tool was introduced in 2019 and is still under review. Previous Provincial legislation allowed 5% of development site or cash-in-lieu.

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

*Parks and Recreation Master Plan Update
2020*

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Kingston Climate Action Plan 2014

Urban Forest Management Plan 2011

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Facility Accessibiliy Design Guidelines 2019

Age Friendly Kingston 2014

OTHER

Off Leash Dog Park Policy 2009

Ottawa

ONTARIO

POPULATION: 1,001,077

ANALYSIS

- * Ottawa has the highest total number of community gardens at 129, and with population factored in, has more than double the median with nearly 13 community gardens per 100,000 residents.
- * With 237 parks that allow dogs off-leash, Ottawa has the highest total number of off-leash dog areas, as well as the highest per population with nearly 24 per 100,000 residents.
- * Ottawa is one of about a quarter of cities that offer a formal park volunteer program, a grant program, and a policy to waive permit fees for groups showing financial need.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * Ottawa's [first outdoor bike park](#) opened in 2019 atop a former ski hill at Carlington Park, through a partnership with the Ottawa Mountain Biking Association.
- * The city has created an interactive [map of Ottawa's natural areas](#) including descriptions of what nature-lovers will see and experience at each site.
- * Park staff worked with the city's Environmental Remediation Unit to remediate and cap former landfill and other contaminated sites as part of park redevelopments, including Bayview Friendship Park, Springhurst Park and Reid Park.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES**4.5**

This number does not include provincially or federally owned/managed parkland, which is significant in Ottawa and estimated at 1600 ha.

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 4,466)

34%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 1,510)

N/A

The City of Ottawa has a policy in place to designate Environmental Protection Zones, however the data for these areas within the municipal parks system is unavailable.

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: N/A)

2%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 279,600)

400 m**5 minute walk**

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

237

In addition, there are 2 large off-leash dog parks on NCC property.

of dog parks**129**

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION**N/A**

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: N/A)

Yes

Policy to waive permit fees

N/A

of community park groups

Adopt-a-Park

Outdoor Rink Program

GLAD Cleaning the Capital

Community park group program

Community Environmental Projects Grant Program (CEPGP)

Community Partnership Minor & Major Capital Programs

Community Garden Development Fund (offered in partnership with Just Food)

Community grant program

FUNDING**N/A**

Operating budget / person
(Total: N/A)

N/A

Capital budget

N/A

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

Community Benefits Charge

This tool was introduced in 2019 and is still under review. Previous Provincial legislation allowed 5% of development site or cash-in-lieu.

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Greenspace Master Plan 2006

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Ottawa Wildlife Strategy 2013

Urban Forest Management Plan 2018 - 2037

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Accessibility Design Standards 2015

Older Adult Plan 2020-2022

OTHER

Dogs in Parks Designation Policy

Mississauga

ONTARIO
POPULATION: 777,200

ANALYSIS

- * With 15 volunteers per 100,000 residents, Mississauga has almost double the median of 8.
- * Mississauga is one of 63% of cities with a citywide park system master plan updated within the last 10 years.
- * Mississauga is one of about a quarter of cities that offer a formal park volunteer program, a grant program, and a policy to waive permit fees for groups showing financial need.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * New nearly 3.6-hectare Saigon Park opening in 2020 honours Vietnamese culture and history, and also contains stormwater management facilities.
- * The city launched a beach mat pilot project in June 2019 to improve accessibility at two of the City's popular beaches in Jack Darling Memorial Park and Lakefront Promenade Park.
- * Guided by the city's Smart Cities Master Plan, the iParks pilot project will build nine Mississauga parks with Wi-Fi, allowing for digital screens, smart furniture, and more.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES

3.7

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 2,912)

38%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 1,113)

N/A

The City of Mississauga has a policy in place to designate ESAs, however the data for ESAs within the municipal parks system is unavailable.

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: N/A)

10%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 29,243)

Tableland: 1.2 ha/1,000 people

800 m

Downtown: 400-800 m

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

8

of dog parks

11

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

15

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 11,640)

Yes

Policy to waive permit fees

13

of community park groups

*Adopt-a-Park Program**Community Group Registry Program**Leash Free Mississauga*

Community park group program

*Community Grant Program**Small Project Matching Grants*

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$44

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$34,500,000)

\$24,000,000

Capital budget

\$112,000

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

Community Benefits Charge

This tool was introduced in 2019 and is still under review. Previous Provincial legislation allowed 5% of development site or cash-in-lieu.

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Parks and Forestry Master Plan 2019

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Natural Heritage and Urban Forest Strategy 2014

Climate Change Action Plan 2019

Living Green 2012

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Multi-Year Accessibility Plan 2018-2022

Older Adult Plan 2008

OTHER

Waterfront Parks Strategy 2019

Leash-Free Zones Policy 2018

Waterloo

ONTARIO
POPULATION: 137,420

ANALYSIS

- * At 43%, Waterloo is above average in percentage of parkland that is under special policy protection for sensitive ecosystems.
- * Waterloo is one of 56% of cities that offers a community park group program.
- * At 56%, Waterloo is above average in ratio of parkland that is natural area.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * Waterloo is developing its first woonerf, or 'living street', in the Northdale neighbourhood, which will include enhanced public space, trees and vegetation, and possibly a snow-melting system.
- * Waterloo's annual Lumen festival of light, art, and technology uses participatory art installations in parks to engage communities with public space in new and non-traditional ways.
- * Following the installation of an artist-designed community harvest table that seats 200 in Waterloo Park, the city is expanding the harvest table initiative to other parks.



INVENTORY / AMENITIES

6.9

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 946)

56%

Increase from 2019 due to updated information.

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 530)

43%

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: 405)

15%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 6,400)

5 ha / 1,000

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

1

of dog parks

4

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

8.6

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 1,180)

No

Policy to waive permit fees

2

of community park groups

Partners in Parks Program

Community park group program

Neighbourhood Matching Grants and Mini Grants

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$49

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$6,688,122)

\$12,738,000

Capital budget

\$50,126

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

Community Benefits Charge

This tool was introduced in 2019 and is still under review. Previous Provincial legislation allowed 5% of development site or cash-in-lieu.

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

*Corporate Climate Change Adaption Plan
2019*

Stormwater Management Master Plan 2019

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Accessibility Standards 2016

Older Adult Recreation Strategy 2015

Guelph

ONTARIO
POPULATION: 136,000

ANALYSIS

- * At about 70 volunteers per 1000 people, Guelph has the highest rate of volunteers in parks.
- * At 69%, Guelph has the second highest ratio of parkland that is natural area.
- * Guelph is one of a third of cities with an off-leash dog parks strategy.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * Throughout summer 2019, Guelph's Park Activation Stations brought free toys and activities to four parks—including sensory play, mural painting, a mini library, magnet boards, parachutes, and four-foot inflatable balls.
- * Through a partnership with rare Charitable Research Reserve, Guelph parks staff and residents helped to identify and protect turtle nesting sites in the city's green spaces, contributing to the rescue of 2,000 turtle eggs in the region.
- * Guided by its Natural Heritage Action Plan, Guelph is working to enhance stewardship in parks through developing adopt-a-space, EcoAwards, and educational programs.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES

10.4

This total does not include an additional 365 hectares of publicly accessible green space owned by the Province, University, etc.

Increase from 2019 due to GIS improvements.

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 1,410)

69%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 975)

69%

This number captures protected lands designated within the natural heritage system (NHS).

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: 975)

16%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 8,800)

3.3 ha / 1000 population

5-10 minute walk from residential area served

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

51

of dog parks

15

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

70

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 9,500)

No

Policy to waive permit fees

13

of community park groups

N/A

Community park group program

N/A

Community grant program

FUNDING

N/A

Operating budget / person
(Total: N/A)

N/A

Capital budget

N/A

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

Community Benefits Charge

This tool was introduced in 2019 and is still under review. Previous Provincial legislation allowed 5% of development site or cash-in-lieu.

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Recreation, Parks, and Culture Strategic Master Plan 2009 (update in progress)

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Natural Heritage Action Plan 2018

Urban Forest Management Plan 2013-2032

Stormwater Management Master Plan 2012 (update in progress)

Emerald Ash Borer Plan 2009

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Facility Accessibility Design Manual 2015

Older Adult Strategy 2012

Think Youth 2013 - 2018

OTHER

Leash-free Policy 2019

Guelph Trail Master Plan 2005 (update in progress)

Montreal

QUEBEC

POPULATION: 1,704,694

NOTES:

The city is made up of 19 boroughs that are responsible for managing about 1,300 local parks. The boroughs also have separate powers and budgets to see to the cleaning of public spaces and offer social development initiatives, sports and cultural activities and urban planning services to the local population. Each borough can decide on how it breaks up these services.

ANALYSIS

- * At 2.6 hectares of parkland per 1,000 people, Montreal sits in line with other dense cities such as Toronto and Vancouver.
- * Montreal is one of 56% of cities that have a seniors strategy that includes parks.
- * Montreal is one of 63% of cities with a citywide park system master plan updated within the last 10 years.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * In 2019, Montreal's mayor, Valérie Plante, became ICLEI world ambassador for local biodiversity and will serve as the global representative of the protection of nature and biodiversity by local governments.
- * Montreal is planning the new **Grand Parc de l'Ouest**, which could become Canada's largest urban park at over 3,000 hectares.
- * Montreal has created a **publicly accessible map** of surface thermography in the city, showing heat islands and tree canopy.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES

2.6

There are 1,953 additional hectares of green space in Montreal, including school parks and other green spaces belonging to federal and provincial institutions.

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 4,470)

39%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 1,760)

N/A

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: N/A)

12%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 36,520)

2.44 ha / 1000 people

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

49

of dog parks

97

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

N/A

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: N/A)

Depends on the borough.

Policy to waive permit fees

N/A

of community park groups

No

Community park group program

N/A

Community grant program

FUNDING

N/A

Operating budget / person
(Total: N/A)

N/A

Capital budget

N/A

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

10% of development site or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

*Plan directeur du sport et du plein air urbains
2018*

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Ville de Montréal Biodiversity Report 2013

*Climate Change Adaptation Plan for the
Montréal Urban Agglomeration 2015-2020*

*Toward Sustainable Municipal Water
Management 2013*

Plan de foresterie urbaine 2009

Tree Policy of Montréal 2005

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

*Accessibilité universelle-Plan d'action 2015-
2018*

*Multiple additional universal accessibility
plans*

Municipal Action Plan for Seniors 2018-2020

Quebec City

QUEBEC

POPULATION: 542,298

ANALYSIS

- * At 62%, Quebec City is above average in ratio of parkland that is natural area.
- * Quebec City is one of 52% of cities with a policy to waive permit fees for financial need.
- * Quebec City is one of 77% of cities that reported having at least one park **partnership** in place with a non-profit.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * Through a purchase of **four waterfront lots** and negotiations with a golf course, Quebec City is on its way to **developing a large park** along the Montmorency River as part of its plan to improve riverfront green space connections.
- * The city has budgeted \$105,000 for the design and construction of the **new Parc de la Rivière-Jaune**, addressing a gap in a neighbourhood lacking park access.
- * Guided by its **public art strategy**, the city is supporting **cultural mediation** projects that involve **collaboration** between professional artists and residents to create public art.



INVENTORY / AMENITIES

4.3

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 2,350)

62%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 1,452)

N/A

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: N/A)

5%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 45,428)

Neighbourhood park: radius of 500 m

Community park: radius of 1,000 m.

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

2

of dog parks

28

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

N/A

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: N/A)

Yes

Policy to waive permit fees

N/A

of community park groups

N/A

Community park group program

Places éphémères

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$19

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$10,400,000)

\$7,200,000

Capital budget

\$75,000

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

10% of development site or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Plan de mise en valeur des rivières (in development)

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Place aux arbres 2015-2025

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Guide pratique d'accessibilité universelle 2010

Plan d'action pour les aînés 2017-2020

Longueuil

QUEBEC

POPULATION: 238,479

NOTES:

23% of land within the city is agriculturally zoned.

ANALYSIS

- * At 65%, Longueuil is above average in ratio of parkland that is natural area.
- * Longueuil is one of 63% of cities with a citywide park system master plan updated within the last 10 years.
- * Longueuil is one of 52% of cities with a policy to waive permit fees for financial need.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * Longueuil's first participatory budgeting process saw [five park and trail projects](#) selected for funding in 2020.
- * Through a call for citizen-led tree planting projects, Longueuil supported 17 planting initiatives in 2019, [displayed on an online map](#).
- * In 2020, Longueuil released a new [urban agriculture policy](#).

INVENTORY / AMENITIES**4.6**

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 1,087)

65%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 708)

N/A

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: N/A)

9%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 11,580)

1 ha / 1,000 people

7 minute walk to a neighbourhood park

15 minute walk to a community park

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

4

of dog parks

5

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION**N/A**

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: N/A)

Yes

Policy to waive permit fees

8

of community park groups

N/A

Community park group program

Projets communautaires de plantations d'arbres

Community grant program

FUNDING**\$43**

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$10,300,000)

\$22,558,000

Capital budget

N/A

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

10% of development site or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Plan directeur des parcs et espaces verts 2014

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Politique de protection et de mise en valeur des milieux naturels 2005

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Plan d'intervention à l'égard des personnes handicapées 2018-2019

Plan d'action municipalité amie des aînés 2018-2021

OTHER

Politique d'agriculture urbaine 2020

Politique en saines habitudes de vie 2016

Politique familiale 2017

Gatineau

QUEBEC

POPULATION: 284,373

NOTES:

Extreme weather events and floods have had significant impacts on Gatineau's park system this year.

ANALYSIS

- * Gatineau has the third highest amount of parkland per population, with nearly 18 hectares per 1,000 people.
- * At 66%, Gatineau has the fourth highest ratio of parkland that is natural area.
- * Gatineau is one of 52% of cities with a policy to waive park permit fees for financial need.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * After 2017 and 2019 floods required residents to vacate their properties in the Pointe-Gatineau neighbourhood, the city has dedicated \$1.4 million to redevelop and beautify the now-vacant lots.
- * Gatineau hosted an internal parks forum with speakers and brainstorm sessions to kick-off their parks master plan process, inviting city councillors, city staff, and non-profit partners.
- * In 2019, the annual **Grand Ménage** clean-up activity which targets green spaces had a budget of \$32,000 and mobilized more than 16,000 participants who collected around 5 tonnes of waste.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES

17.6

This total does not include roughly 2300 hectares of provincially or federally owned green space in the city. In addition, 41% of land within the city is agriculturally zoned, protecting it from development.

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 5,000)

66%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 3,310)

<1%

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: 10)

15%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 34,194)

Neighbourhood park: 800 m

Community park: 800 to 5,000 m

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

7

of dog parks

22

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

N/A

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: N/A)

Yes

Policy to waive permit fees

46

of community park groups

N/A

Community park group program

Grants for the community garden program

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$86

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$24,500,000)

\$5,000,000

Capital budget

N/A

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

10% of the development site or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Plan directeur des infrastructures récréatives, sportives et communautaires 2012

Plan de développement du plein air urbain à Gatineau (en voie d'élaboration)

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Plan de gestion des arbres et des boisés 2013

Environmental Policy

INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Gatineau, an Inclusive City

*Plan d'action intégré triennal 2017-2019
Famille, aînés (MADA) et accessibilité universelle*

OTHER

Politique de développement social

Fredericton

NEW BRUNSWICK
POPULATION: 65,197

NOTES:

Extreme weather events, and Hurricane Arthur in particular, have had significant impacts on Fredericton's park system.

ANALYSIS

- * With nearly 8 community gardens per 100,000 people, Fredericton is above the median of 5.
- * Fredericton is above average in parkland per population, at 12 hectares per 1,000 people.
- * Fredericton brought in \$10,000 in outside funding this year, making it one of 56% of cities who reported funding from corporate or philanthropic sources.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * In early 2020, the city released final draft management plans for Odell Park and Killarney Lake Park that set a long-term strategy for these two major parks, and designate distinct management zones within each park to balance ecology and recreation.
- * Guided by public engagement, the city has developed initial plans for a new park in the Lian Valcour Neighbourhood which will feature natural play equipment and all-ages design.
- * Fredericton is running a pilot project to install smart sensors on infrastructure in parks to capture baseline data on park use prior to redesign.

INVENTORY / AMENITIES

12.1

This total does not include lands belonging to the University of New Brunswick, which are also used by City residents for walking, hiking etc.

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 786)

27%

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 211)

N/A

There are 1851 hectares of environmentally significant areas (ESA lands) in Fredericton in total, however the number of hectares within the municipal parks system is unavailable.

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: N/A)

6%

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 13,410)

N/A

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

2

of dog parks

5

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

8.4

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: 550)

No

Policy to waive permit fees

5

of community park groups

N/A

Community park group program

N/A

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$38

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$2,508,000)

\$559,000

Capital budget

\$10,000

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

8% or Cash-in-Lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

NOTES:

Extreme weather events, and Hurricane Arthur in particular, have had significant impacts on Fredericton's park system.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Recreation Master Plan 2008

Halifax

NOVA SCOTIA
POPULATION: 430,512

ANALYSIS

- * At 77%, Halifax has the highest ratio of parkland that is natural area.
- * Halifax is above average in parkland per population, at nearly 13 hectares per 1,000 people.
- * Halifax is one of 63% of cities with a citywide park system **master plan** updated within the last 10 years.

HIGHLIGHTS

- * The **new 152-hectare Shaw Wilderness Park** is coming to Halifax, funded by all three levels of government plus private donations.
- * Halifax is developing a playing field strategy to better understand usage and inventory requirements, and to create field quality standards.
- * Accessibility audits in Halifax parks are planned within the **2020-2021 Business Plan**.



INVENTORY / AMENITIES

12.6

Ha parkland / 1000 people
(Ha total: 5,425)

77%

Includes natural areas within all parks greater than 3 hectares. Increase from 2019 due to improvements in data collection?last year only natural areas within parks over 50 hectares had been parsed.

% of natural area of total parkland
(Ha total area: 4,185)

N/A

% of parkland that is ESA/protected
(Ha total: N/A)

1%

Halifax Regional Municipality is ~5930 km², where ~75% of the area is unsettled, containing vast areas of crown land and lakes, which yields a very small percentage of parkland.

% of total city land area as parks
(Ha total: 592,700)

N/A

Parkland provision goal (distance to park / ha per 1000 people)

38

Includes dedicated and seasonal off-leash areas.

of dog parks

17

of community gardens/urban farms

PEOPLE / PARTICIPATION

N/A

of volunteers / 1000 people
(Total: N/A)

No

Policy to waive permit fees

7

of community park groups

N/A

Community park group program

N/A

Community grant program

FUNDING

\$40

Decrease from 2019 due to last year's budgets including indoor recreation facilities, whereas these budgets are parks-specific.

Operating budget / person
(Total: \$17,415,672)

\$15,010,000

Capital budget

N/A

\$ sponsorship/donation/corporate

10% of development site or cash-in-lieu

Provincially legislated tools available for parkland development.

PARK MASTER PLANS

Halifax Green Network Plan 2018

ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

Urban Forest Management Plan 2013

Park Naturalization Strategy 2019

park people
amis des parcs