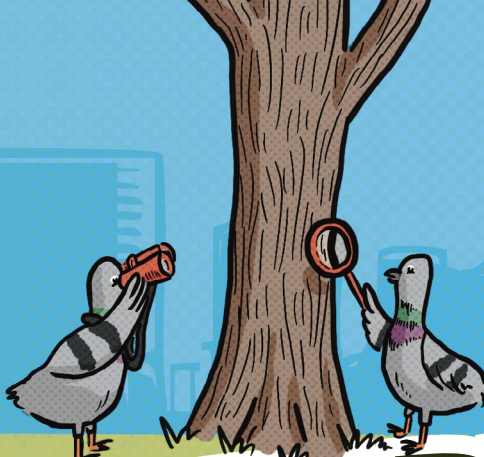




YOUR GUIDE TO

STARTING & GROWING A PARK GROUP



Every birder remembers their ‘Spark Bird’, the exact moment a particular bird turned a casual stroll into a lifelong fascination.

If you picked up this guide, you likely have a ‘spark park’, a place you care about deeply, and where you dream of getting more involved.

Parks are where we meet friends, share space with others, and connect with nature. They cool our streets, clean our air, and soak up storms. And they work best when people show up for them: when neighbours activate and care for a park, in collaboration with City staff, local non-profits, and other Torontonians.

That’s where you come in!

Getting involved is simpler than it sounds. It just takes people who care coming together around a shared goal. No big budget or special title required. This guide shows you how to get started and how to grow your group, one step at a time.



What is a Park Group?

A park group is a group of neighbours who care about the same park and decide to work together to make it an even better place for everyone.

You don’t need to be incorporated, have funding, or have experience working with the City. Your energy, local knowledge, and experience are the keys to getting started.



Your park group could look like:

- A few neighbours organizing a regular park clean-up
- Friends joining a community garden
- Residents starting a pollinator garden
- A community association or local arts group hosting park events
- Friends and families coming together for cultural celebrations, gatherings, and special occasions
- A youth group running scavenger hunts and games

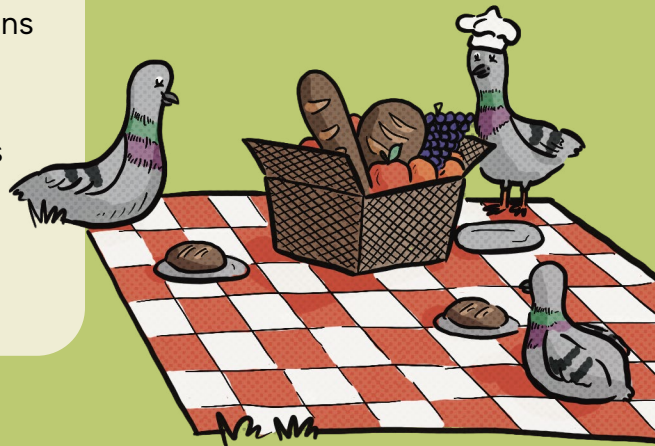


Some park groups meet regularly. Others come together for a short time around a single event or idea. They can be small or large, formal or informal.

What they share is that their local park matters to them, and they want to contribute to how it is used and experienced.

Park groups help:

- Advocate for park improvements and community needs
- Celebrate local cultures and traditions
- Care for and improve green spaces
- Create opportunities for neighbours to meet each other
- Help create more welcoming and inclusive park spaces



Getting Started From Idea to Action

Most community projects begin with a simple idea or need. As more neighbours join, many park groups evolve and respond to the needs of their community. Staying open to new perspectives helps create a group that reflects the community and grows alongside it.

Your spark might be:

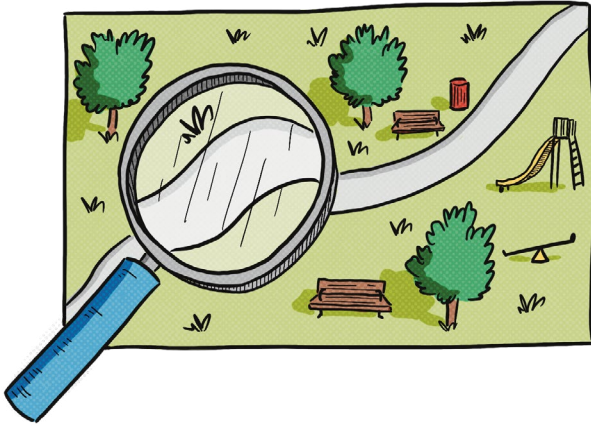
- I wish our park felt cleaner and more welcoming
- I want to spend more time outdoors and connect with others
- This park could be a place where people come together
- I want to share something I care about with my community
- I see an opportunity to make this park better for everyone
- I have an idea, and I wonder who else would want to make it happen

Start with your spark:

What would you like to see in your park?

What makes you want to be engaged?





Get to Know Your Park

Spend some time in your park at different times of the day and week.

When you're there, consider:

- Who uses the park?
- What activities are already happening?
- What features are available, such as seating, shade, washrooms, or water fountains?
- How does the park change across seasons?

Taking time to notice what's happening in the park can help you understand what it already offers and identify opportunities to make a difference in your community.

Find Your People

Getting involved is easier and more fun when you collaborate with others. Ask Park People or your City Councillor's office if a group already exists near you.

If not, start small and informally. Talk to neighbours or friends or connect with people you regularly see in the park. Post on your neighbourhood's social media pages or put a poster up in your local coffee shop or library.



Hold a First Meeting

Your first meeting can be simple — a short park meet-up, neighbourhood walk or coffee date.



The goal is to connect and see what interests people share.

Here is a sample agenda:

- *Introduce yourselves*
- *Share why you care about the park*
- *Talk about ideas you'd like to try*
- *Exchange contact information*



Try Something Small

Your first activity should feel simple and doable. A successful first event builds momentum. It also helps you recruit more group members and supporters by making your efforts visible, fun, and inviting.

Try:



A one-hour clean-up



A casual picnic or potluck



A birdwatching or tree-identification walk

Your first activity is an opportunity to learn. Take time to celebrate and to reflect and write down what worked and what didn't.

Maintaining Momentum

Life gets busy for volunteers. As your group continues to meet and plan activities, make time to check in on your goals and to share what each of you is interested in and available to take on.

Build a shared understanding of what you care about and where you want to go, and regularly communicate about the group's capacity and priorities. When everyone is clear on what the group hopes to do and how much time everyone has, it will be easier to adjust the timing, tasks, and details.



A Joyful Approach to Animating Your Park



Ready to plan more events and projects? Build on what your group already enjoys doing together.

The best ideas come from matching three things: **what your group enjoys and is good at, what your park offers, and what your neighbours are interested in.**

By rooting your plan in what you like and what your community needs, it will be easier to stay the course and recruit supporters and new members over time. The end result? Animated, beautiful parks that reflect Toronto's diverse and vibrant communities.

Not sure where to start?



Love cooking?

a weekly potluck or a community picnic



Want to stay active?

a walking meet-up or bring-your-own-games afternoons



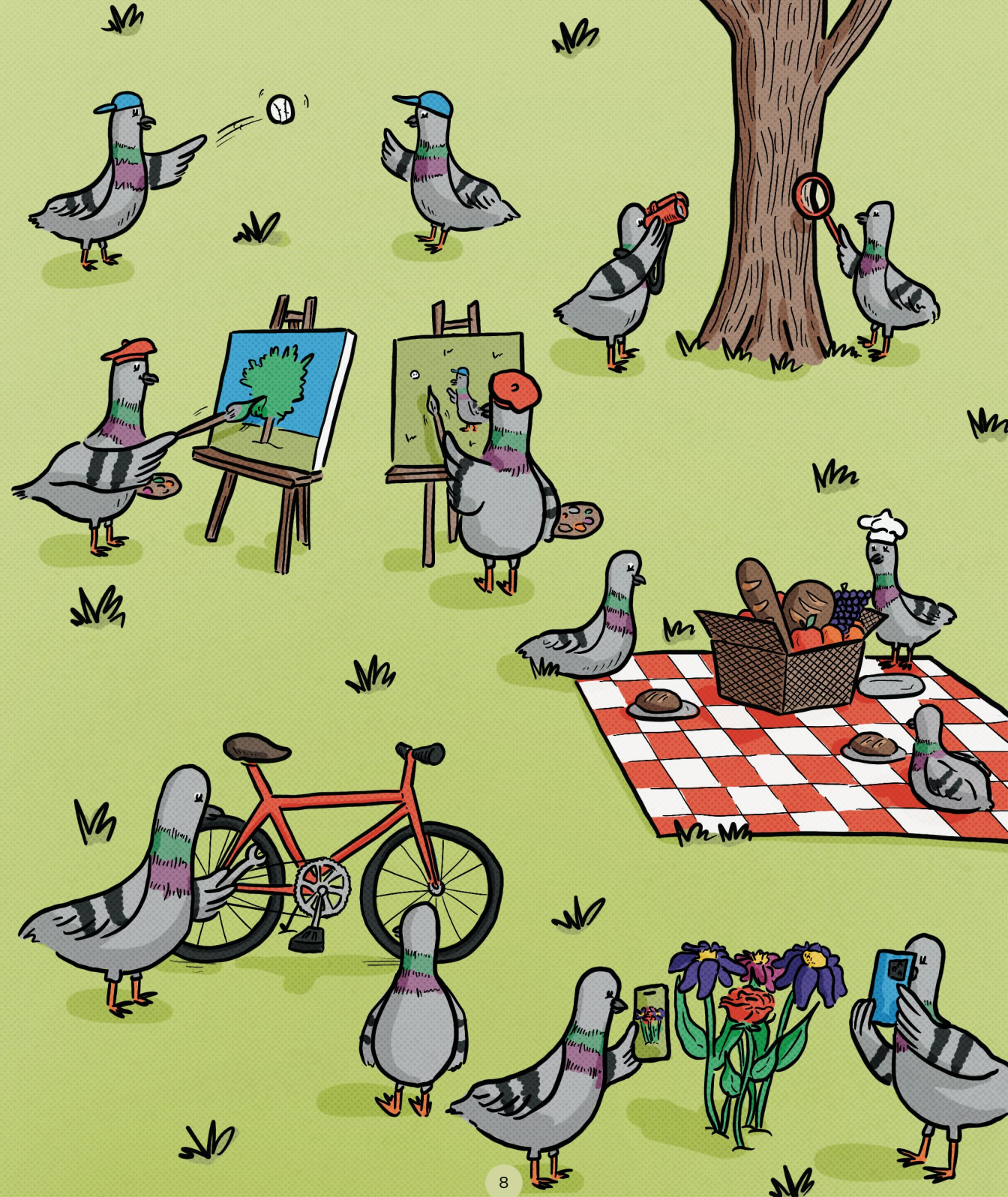
Love nature?

birding walks, outdoor sketching, 'awe' walks



Like making things?

story circles, a skill swap (bike repair, knitting), repair cafes



Pick Your Level

Every group starts somewhere, and you can build as you grow:



Just show up.

No planning, no permit. A picnic, a walk, a bench hangout. Decide and go.



Team up.

A little coordination. A recurring meet-up, a seasonal gathering, a small workshop series. A few hands and a shared plan.



Plan ahead.

Bigger and bolder. A festival, a market, anything with vendors or a crowd. Plan ahead and apply for any required permits (see *Working with the City* on page 14).



Park Clean-ups

Sometimes less is more: getting together with neighbours to pick up litter can open new spaces for activities and create a more welcoming park for everyone! A park clean-up connects you to your park space, your neighbours, and nature, and leaves you with a clean park and a happy group of neighbours. Check out our park clean-up toolkit, [Ready, Set, Clean!](#), to get started.

Embrace the Seasons

Your park group can play a big role in animating the park and keeping your community connected through simple activities that make the most of changing seasons.



Spring

Seed swaps, garden prep, clean-ups, first walks after winter



Summer

Festivals, games, evening gatherings, longer events



Fall

Harvest and cultural celebrations, pumpkin parades, leaf art, story walks



Winter

Short fresh-air meet-ups, hot-drink hangouts, natural ice rinks, bird counts

Many ways to get together

Park People supports park groups that offer free roller-skating, pumpkin parades, public art, green corridors, bird counts, and more. Muslims in Public Space (MiPS) brings Islamic art and identity into public spaces; Mabelle Arts builds community through art, food, and music. Whatever your group loves, you can explore ways to bring it into the park.

Navigating the City of Toronto

(Without Getting Overwhelmed)

Getting started with City processes

Working with the City doesn't have to be complicated. Many park activities don't require permits or formal approval. When they do, the process is straightforward – and there are people who can help you figure it out. The goal isn't to create barriers. It's to support safe, shared use of parks.

When you need a permit (and when you don't)

You DO NOT need a permit for:

- Small informal meetups (<24 people)
- Volunteer clean-ups (registration is encouraged)
- Spontaneous or low-impact activities without structures or installations



You DO need a permit for:

- Large events or gatherings (> 25 people)
- Tents, stages, amplified sound, or equipment
- Activities with vendors, fundraising, or food service
- Events expecting higher attendance or requiring space reservation



When in doubt, it's okay to ask. But ask early – before you've fully planned the event.

No-Fee Community Activation Permit

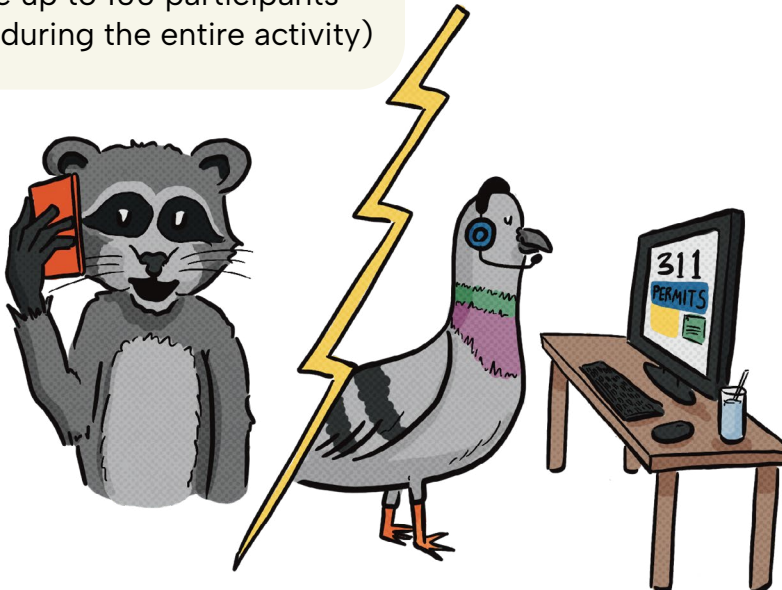
Some community-led park activities qualify for a no-fee permit. This option supports community-based, non-commercial activities that benefit the public, without creating financial barriers.

This booking is available for activities that:

- Take place in Toronto's parks
- Are free of charge and open to the public
- Are community-led and non-commercial
- Occur during a single day
- Take place between May and October
- Include up to 100 participants (total, during the entire activity)

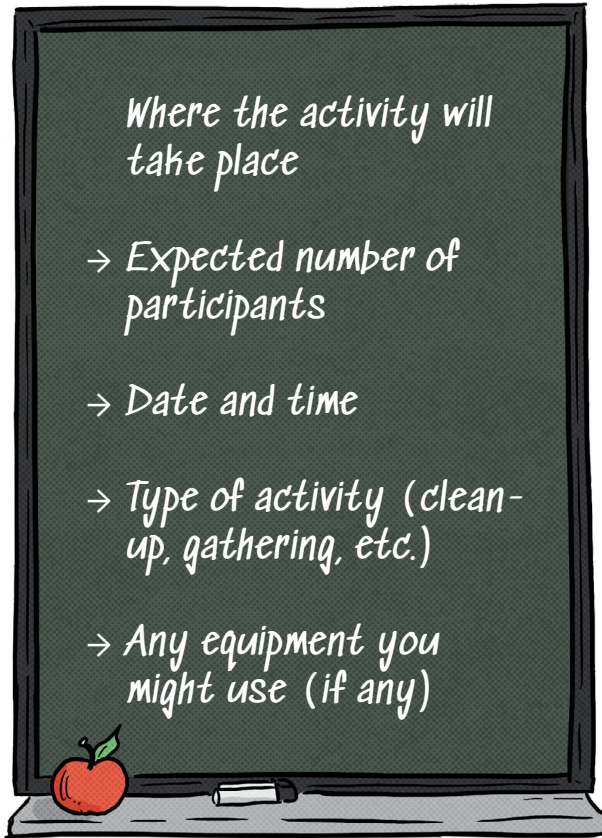
Activities must support one or more of the following themes:

- Learning about or experiencing nature
- Sharing Indigenous knowledge
- Encouraging physical activity and wellness
- Promoting community participation and social inclusion
- Celebrating arts and culture

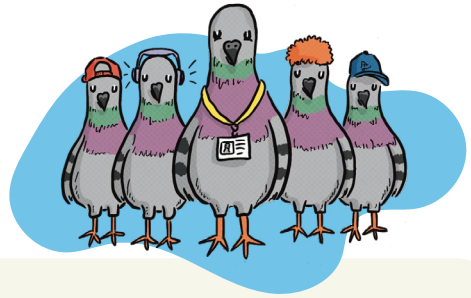


How to prepare before applying

Before you apply, gather the following details about your activity:



This is usually enough to get started – your plan does not need to be fully finalized.



How support works

- The City of Toronto, Park People and other community partners work together to support you
- The City provides access to permits and can give you guidance on park operations and what to take into account when planning your activities
- Community partners like Park People offer templates, tools, funding, and planning support

Together, our goal is to support park groups across the City to get started, to grow, to connect with each other, and to celebrate our shared commitment to parks and communities.

Building an Inclusive & Welcoming Group

Like Toronto's neighbourhoods, successful park groups bring together many different people.

It takes thought and effort to bring new people in. Building an inclusive group starts with understanding who is participating, who isn't, and what might be getting in the way.

Ask:

- Who is currently showing up?
- Who is missing?
- What might be making it hard for them to participate?
- Can we change how we do things to make it easier for people with different schedules, languages, cultural backgrounds and physical abilities to join us?



As your group grows, keep looking for opportunities to invite more neighbours in. You might need to find new ways to work together, like changing when and where you meet, or sharing meeting recaps with a bigger group.

Try one small action to improve inclusion at every new program or event. Maybe it's a shared meal subsidized by a local restaurant. Maybe it's a fun activity just for kids. Maybe it's handmade paper fans to keep cool, or reusable handwarmers to stay warm. How does each small step make it possible for more people to participate?

Planning Accessible Events

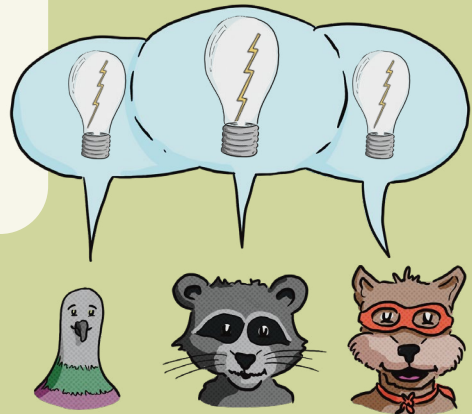
Making events accessible increases participation and helps more people feel welcome, including people with disabilities, caregivers, seniors, families with young children, newcomers, and those with different communication or sensory needs.

Choose accessible locations

- Choose routes and gathering spaces with stable, accessible surfaces
- Ensure seating, shade, washrooms, and public transit access as much as possible
- Leave space for wheelchairs, strollers, and mobility devices

Offer flexible ways to participate

- Provide options for people to join in the activity or sit nearby
- Let people join for part of an event
- Welcome caregivers and support persons

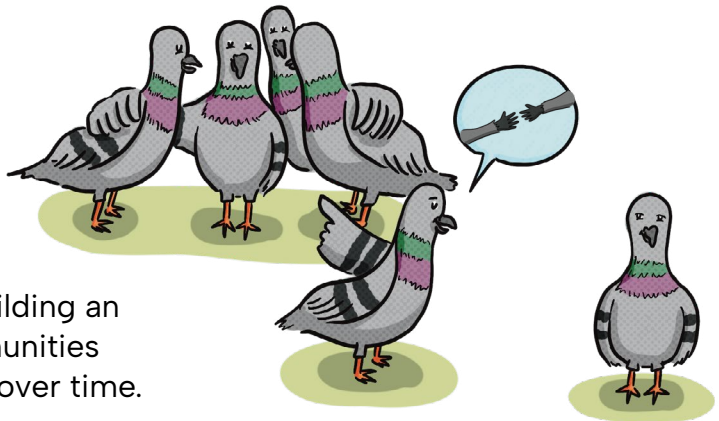


Support different communication and sensory needs

- Use clear, simple language in promotional materials and event instructions
- Share what to expect in advance
- Use clear signage and share your meeting spot
- Consider noise levels and offer quiet spaces for rest and reflection

Reach new people

- Partner with local organizations and trusted community leaders
- Use multiple communication channels (for example, social media and messaging apps) and languages where possible
- Consider timing, caregiving responsibilities, cultural observances and work schedules



There is no finish line for building an inclusive park group. Communities change and needs will shift over time.



Working in Relationship with Land and Community



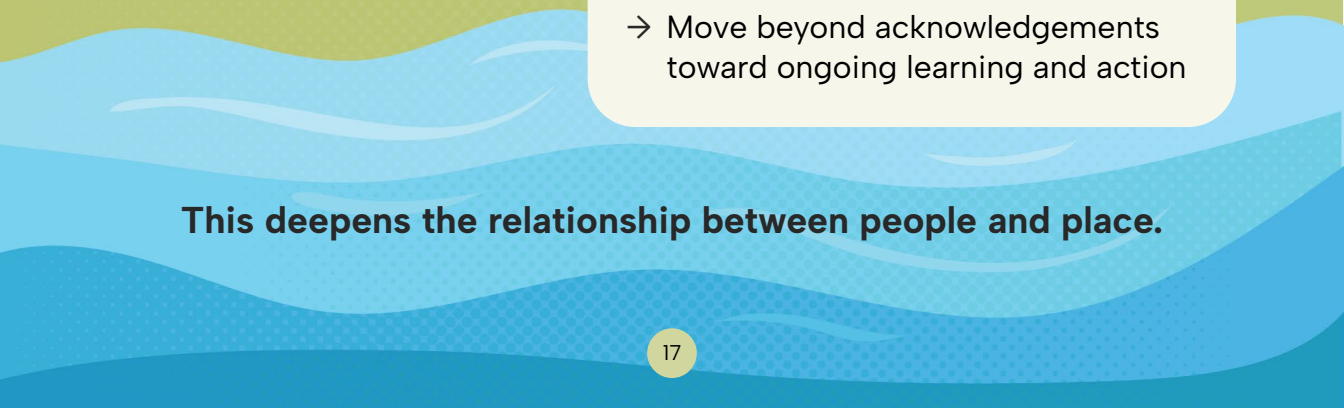
Municipal parks in Toronto are located on Indigenous lands and waters.

Parks play a vital role in providing shared spaces for all people and are an important space for reconciliation and decolonization. Look for opportunities to learn about the land, its history, and the relationships connected to it.

When planning your activities:

- Learn about the Indigenous territory your park is on
- Reflect on treaties and histories connected to the land
- Build relationships with local Indigenous communities where appropriate
- Move beyond acknowledgements toward ongoing learning and action

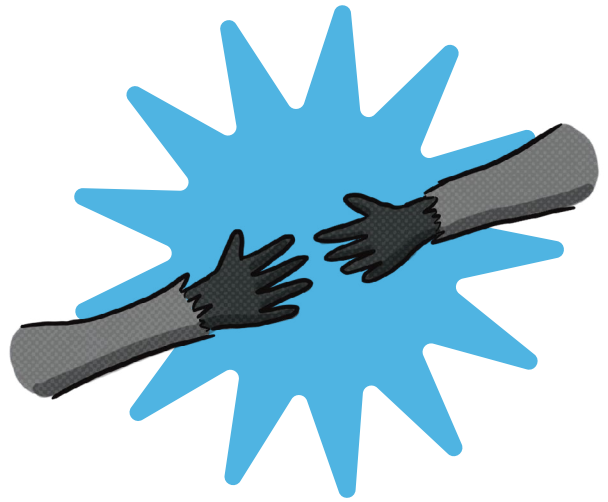
This deepens the relationship between people and place.



Inclusion is an Ongoing Practice

Inclusive groups are built through small, consistent actions.

At their best, they create spaces where more people can show up, and where care for land and care for community are deeply connected.



Successful groups commit to:

- Listening and learning from participants
- Adjusting approaches based on feedback
- Sharing responsibility and leadership
- Staying open to new ideas and perspectives



There is no finish line for building an inclusive park group. Communities change and needs will shift over time.

Funding, Resources & Support

In-Kind Support: Build from what you have

Park space, meeting rooms, supplies (e.g. tools, tables, chairs), volunteer time, and skills like facilitation or design often exist in your community already. Consider co-hosting events with other groups to help resources stretch further and to reach new audiences.

Business Improvement Associations (BIAs), Resident Associations, and City Councillor offices can also help you with in-kind support, such as promotion, volunteers, or donations. Recognize in-kind contributions to highlight the effort your community brings.

Funding: Where to look

Park People:

Provides budget templates, fundraising advice and in some cases direct funding.

City of Toronto:

Offers several micro-grants, including:

- [PollinateTO Grant](#)
- [InTO the Ravines Micro-Grant](#) (in partnership with Park People)
- [Neighbourhood Climate Action Grant](#)
- [Local Leadership Grant](#)

Check current programs before applying, as eligibility and deadlines change yearly.

Community Grants:

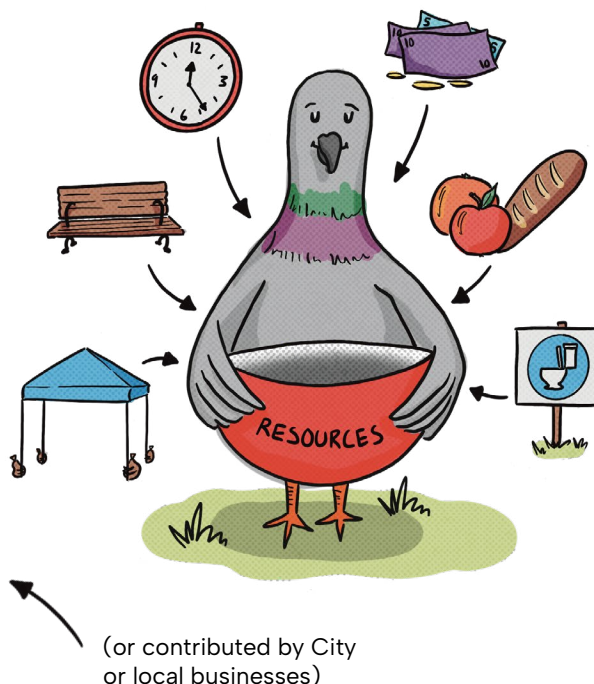
There are many community grant opportunities available, including Volunteer Toronto and the Toronto Foundation's [Civic Spark microgrants](#), [Indigenous Youth Roots Creation Grants](#), and [Community Tree Grants Canada](#). Before applying, check the current grant programs, as eligibility requirements and application deadlines can change from year to year.

Basic budget for a small event

Example: A park clean-up for 20 people.

Item	Cost
Income	
Donations	\$50
Microgrant	\$100
Expenses	
Printing/signage	\$20
Refreshments	\$50-\$75
Gloves and bags	\$30-\$50
Contingency	10%

A simple budget will cover your income, expenses, and a contingency for unexpected extras.



Scale up or down from there. A simple spreadsheet or list is often enough to begin.

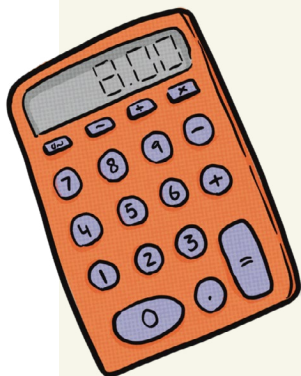
Visit www.parkpeople.ca/guide-start-a-park-group-in-toronto for an easy to use template to get started.

Valuing time

Volunteer time is your park group's biggest resource and the biggest contribution you are making to your park. To maintain your pace and avoid burnout, share the workload and spread out your activities. Recognize and celebrate peoples' contributions. And give yourself a break when you need it.

Measuring Change & Telling Your Story

Your group is making a difference in your community. Capturing your story can help you learn, improve, and share your work with others.



Good numbers to track:

- How many group members or volunteers you have
- Total volunteer hours contributed
- Number of events or activities held
- Number of participants at events
- Returning participants

Gathering stories and feedback

Alongside numbers, stories are one of the most powerful ways to understand community change.

Identify someone in your group who feels comfortable connecting with people and sharing their stories. Ask them to capture short quotes from participants and organizers during and after your park events. When your group meets, reflect on how you see the park and the community changing as a result of your work.





Using photos and testimonials

Photos and quotes help you document, celebrate and share your impact online and in funding applications. Photography is also a great way for a talented group member, neighbour or young person to contribute their skills.

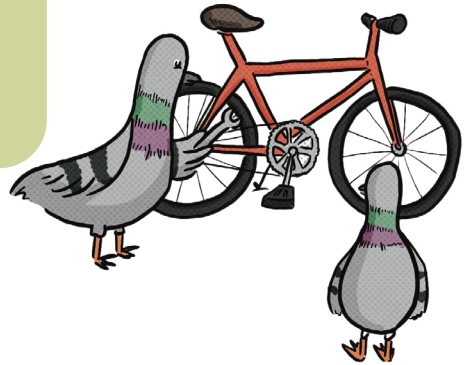
Make sure that the people you photograph or quote have given their consent. You can give stickers or buttons to participants who do not wish to be photographed so that you can make sure they are not included by mistake.



Use art as a fun way to capture quotes. Try a chalkboard or paper runner on a picnic table with a simple prompt (What did you love about today? What makes this park special?) and a stack of chalk or markers. Station a volunteer nearby to encourage and guide participants.

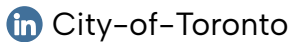
Ready to Get Started?

We're here to support you along the way!



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