

# Park Friends Group

park  
people

Toronto Alliance for  
Better Parks

# Guidebook



## Dear Park Person,

By picking up this guidebook, you are showing that you care about parks and communities in Toronto and want them to be better. Thank you!

Toronto has over 1,600 parks and the best way to improve them is by local residents like you getting engaged in their park through a park friends group. Toronto has had park friends groups doing great work in their parks for decades. Groups such as Friends of Dufferin Grove have turned their parks into dynamic community hubs and sparked a revitalization of the entire neighbourhood.

Park People is helping to grow the number of groups and build a connected network of groups across all communities of the city. This guide will help you join the growing number of people helping improve their local park. It will show you how to get involved with your existing local park group and the step-by-step process you can follow to launch a new one. You will find advice and inspiration from experienced park leaders across the city to help you become an effective voice and the spark for positive change in your park.

Thanks for joining Toronto's growing parks movement!

This guide was generously supported by TD Bank Group and Live Green Toronto.



Park People advocates for better parks by facilitating neighbourhood engagement in their parks, building a network of local community park groups and highlighting the importance of good parks to the well being of all residents of Toronto.



## What is a park friends group?

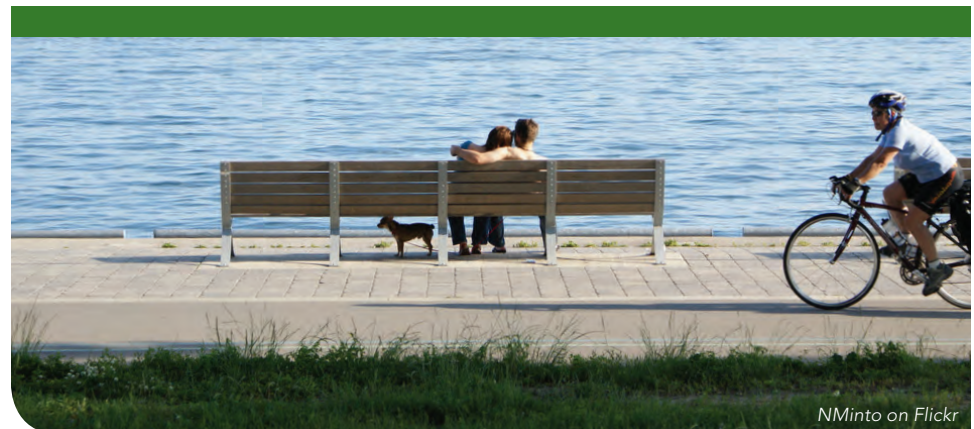
A park friends group actively contributes to the wellbeing and upkeep of their local park, as well as arranging activities in the park. Friends groups are made up of people like you, residents of all ages and backgrounds, who volunteer their time, services and funding to support and enhance their park.

The group can be exclusively focused on a local park (e.g. Friends of Elizabeth Simcoe Park, Friends of Christie Pits) or it can be working on a number of neighbourhood matters with one of them being an effort to improve and animate the local park (e.g. Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee, Danforth East Community Association). Just as every park in Toronto is different, each park group is different.



Toronto has more than **50** park friend groups. Some of these have been around for more than **20** years.

By working together and partnering with City staff and other local organizations and businesses, a park friends group improves park conditions and helps create safe, attractive and enjoyable programs and park facilities. Park friends groups are absolutely critical to building a strong park system in Toronto.



# How do I join an existing park group?

Anyone can join a park friends group and the group will be thrilled to have your help. You can find an up to date list, contact information and a website link for every park friends group in Toronto on the [www.parkpeople.ca](http://www.parkpeople.ca) website.



“As part of Green Space on Church, I spent the summer organizing free film screenings, community shows, yoga and dance classes to help animate our small but central green space. By organizing these events, we were able to draw hundreds of people out to enjoy the park in fun and creative ways. I personally learned more about my neighbourhood, got to know other residents, and engaged with my community centre in a meaningful new way.”

Julia Lo, Green Space on Church (a volunteer-run initiative incubated by The 519 Church Street Community Centre)



# Whose park is it?

## What is the relationship between a park friends group and the City?

We're all residents of Toronto and we all have a say and a responsibility for caring about our shared public spaces.

Park groups and the City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry and Recreation (PFR) Division work in partnership in the park. Each works with the same goal – keeping neighbourhood parks well-maintained and attractive community places. But a park friends group is not part of the City of Toronto government – it is an independent, volunteer community group.



Park friends groups are independent volunteer community groups.

The City owns the park property and has legal authority over it. PFR takes responsibility for the park and undertakes the key work in the park (e.g. maintenance, improvements). Park friends groups serve in an advisory and supportive capacity to the work of PFR. They provide an independent, knowledgeable and “on the ground” voice for the residents of a community and the users of a park about conditions, programs and needs for the park. They can also supplement the work of PFR by helping jumpstart and fundraise for park improvements and supplementing core maintenance and park programming (e.g. park clean up day, special picnic in the park).

PFR and ultimately, the elected representatives on Toronto City Council, have the final decision making authority for the park. To make the best possible decisions for each park, they need community input from the people who use it and care about it everyday.

# How do I start a new park friends group?

Park People is here to help and support you every step of the way! Contact us and we'll come meet with you and help you get started.



## Find Your Initial Core Group

Chat with your neighbours, fellow dog walkers, other parents in the playground, people in the same recreation programs. You will find others who share your interest in improving your park.



## Connect with your local city councillor's office and your local PFR park supervisor

Let them know you are starting a park group. You can find contact information for them at [www.parkpeople.ca](http://www.parkpeople.ca). They may be able to connect you with other individuals or groups in your area that have expressed an interest or a concern about your park.



## Hold Your First Meeting

Keep it simple. Start small with a good core of people and then grow. Focus on some initial key priorities – setting up a Facebook page or simple website with contact information, organizing a first public event, setting up a plan to reach out to your community.



## Hold Your First Public Event

Keep it simple and fun. Having an event shows your neighbourhood that you're starting to be active in the park and is a great way to attract new energy and broaden the interest in your new group: skating party with hot chocolate, park clean up with a picnic/party after, tree planting, playground meet and greet.



“ Starting a park group has been a great way to meet neighbours, learn more about my community, and see positive changes to our park. It has been a challenge but also very rewarding. ”

*Julie Dabrusin, Friends of Withrow Park*



# Does our new park group have to register with the City or get the City's approval?

There is no official process for starting or registering a group. Park friends groups are independent and you do not need the City's permission to start your group.

The critical component is that you be open and inviting to everyone – make your meetings open to anyone, share all information on your work, and ensure that your group represents the broad diversity of your community and the users of your park. And while you do not need permission, it will be important that you build good relationships with your local councillor and PFR staff.

It will be very helpful for your group to register with Toronto Park People and become one of our Park Friends. We'll post your website and contact information on our [parkpeople.ca](http://parkpeople.ca) website making it easier for people to find you. And joining the program will link you in with our network of dozens of other local park groups across Toronto where you can learn and share information and experiences.



“ Parks Branch staff welcome and encourage community involvement and engagement. By working together we can strengthen and enhance our valuable and vast park assets for this and future generations to enjoy. ”

*Richard Ubbens, Director, Parks Branch, City of Toronto*

# What is the best organizational structure for our park friends group?

There are no City of Toronto rules or guidelines on how a park friends group should be organized and operated. Just as every park is unique, every park group is unique and you will have to find the structure that works best for the members of your group. Having said that, here is a list of tips to keep in mind:



## Be Inclusive

Parks are shared public spaces and park groups need to include people with different interests and perspectives.



## Delegate

A Steering Committee is a great way to delegate. Try assigning one park initiative per person. For example, one person might want to organize a community garden, another might want to manage a Clean-Up Day, and another might want to take responsibility for outreach.



## Engage Your Community

Present your ideas to your community at public meetings, gatherings, on-line or in print. Work transparently and document and share community response.



## Expect to Negotiate

There will be competing interests in any healthy park group. One person wants a naturalized area while another wants a soccer field. Advocate for something that you feel passionate about but expect to compromise.



## Get Together

Shared dinners, events and lively meetings are the lifeblood of park groups. People need to see each other to provide meaningful support. Maintain momentum by getting together regularly.



## Share Responsibility

Consider a rotating chairperson at meetings. Invite Steering Committee members to update and add new content to your Facebook page or website.



## Pursue the “Yes” Initiatives

Some park groups get bogged down in keeping things out of their park. Over time, rallying around the “No” can be tiring. For complex “Yes” initiatives such as a farmer’s market, your councillor may ask you to petition the neighbourhood. This can be a great way to assess whether or not there is majority support for an ambitious project.



“Over time, a group’s momentum will wax and wane. The meetings have to be balanced with real events like a patio-build, gardening day or painting day so the community gets involved and feels connected to the park. And don’t forget the kids!”

Doug Bennet, Wabash Building Society  
(Sorauren Park)



## How do we work with park staff?

The City owns the park and has all legal responsibilities and authority in the park so it is critical that you establish a good partnership with park staff. Ask any local park group and they will say that one of the keys to their success has been building a constructive relationship with park staff.

The critical contact is your park supervisor. Your ward will have a park supervisor that oversees all parks in your ward (as well as one or two neighbouring wards). The park supervisor's job is to monitor and stay on top of all key problems and issues in their assigned parks. You can find the contact information for your park supervisor on the [www.parkpeople.ca](http://www.parkpeople.ca) website.

Get to know your park supervisor. Tour your park with them and discuss concerns and opportunities. Invite the supervisor to your meetings and keep them informed of your activities and concerns. You will need the City's permission for most events and projects you will undertake. You are not always going to agree on everything but it is vital to keep good lines of communication open.

You will have many other City staff in your park: summer park maintenance staff, recreation staff at rinks or community centres. Introduce yourself and your group – get to know them and say “hi”. They care about your park too.



“ We have developed a good relationship with our parks supervisor. Whenever there is any kind of questions or concerns regarding our park, we know that we can call Brian. ”

Carolyn Wong,  
Friends of Trinity Bellwoods



## How do we work with the local councillor and their office?

It is vital that you build a good relationship here as well. Find the contact information for your councillor and their office on the [www.parkpeople.ca](http://www.parkpeople.ca) website. Invite the councillor or one of their staff to public events you are undertaking in the park and to key meetings. Email them updates so they know what is happening in your park. Get them to post events and meetings on their website and newsletter.



Your councillor's support for improvements in your park will be crucial for obtaining City funding.

When minor issues arise in your park, make your park supervisor your first point of contact. Save the councillor's office for when your concerns are not being addressed or when there are major problems.

Your councillor's support for improvements in your park will be crucial for obtaining City funding. Bring in your councillor early when you are generating ideas or making plans for building new projects in your park.



“ We used to hold our AGM in the library or school and not many people showed up. We moved it to a local restaurant and called it a “Community Cocktail Party” and kept the regular business to a minimum so we could spend most of the night meeting and talking with people. We now get around 100 people out to our AGM/Party. People tell us they absolutely love them because the most important part of community building is building these friendships. ”

Natasha Granatstein, Danforth East Community Association (East Lynn Park)



# How do we reach out and work effectively with our community?

Reaching out to your local community not only means more people to share the work, it gives your group more legitimacy and, most importantly, makes the work more fun! There is nothing more disheartening than the same few people coming out to every meeting and event. Here are a few tips:

- Particularly in your early days, focus on fun, hands on events in the park rather than on lengthy meetings. You will find there's a lot more interest in a picnic or skating party rather than an Annual General Meeting.
- Once you are further along, a community meeting is a great way to find out if whether your group is doing a good job representing the community.
- Hold an occasional meeting in a bar or a café – make it a fun social night where people get to meet their neighbours.
- Reach out to all users of the park. You will be amazed that each group has their own formal and informal networks – dog walkers, walking groups, parents of kids at the playground, recreation users.
- Meet with local business people, faith groups, staff from local institutions (schools, hospitals, nursing homes). You will be amazed that everyone has a connection with the park.



# What's the best way to get our word out?

The key first step is to develop your core email list of everyone who has expressed an interest in the group and improving the park. Make it your top priority to keep building and adding to this list – it is your most important tool!



Talk to Park People and we will help you get started.  
[www.parkpeople.ca](http://www.parkpeople.ca)

The second step is to establish a website or Facebook page. Facebook pages are really easy and a basic website is also not that difficult. Talk to Park People and we will help you get started. Make your site attractive with lots of pictures of your park. There are links to every park friends group's websites at [www.parkpeople.ca](http://www.parkpeople.ca) – see what other groups have set up, talk to them to see how they did it.

Get the word out on your group's website, activities and meetings by putting up posters in the local recreation centre, library, councillor's office, cafes and businesses. Get the councillor to post information on their website and newsletter.



“ YOU are the spark! Share your dream for your park space with your closest friends in your neighbourhood and start the fire. Organize a community meeting with your councillor and advertise with flyers and in your local paper. Collect emails at the meeting and ask each person on that list to invite one other neighbour to get involved. Set up your park group on Facebook and ask everyone to join. Now you are ablaze! Nothing is impossible! ”

*Dawn Chapman, Friends of Moncur Park*

# What activities and issues should our group focus on?

It's limitless what you can make happen in your park! Your priorities will depend on the needs you identify in your park as well as the talents and interests of the people involved. One person can't do it all – try assigning key people with a specific initiative. Below are just a few of the ideas and projects undertaken by park friends groups in Toronto.



## Park maintenance

Hold a clean up day, bench or building painting party.



## Park improvements

Plan, advocate and fundraise for a new playground, better lighting and paths, benches, picnic tables and outdoor furniture, splash pad, basketball court, off-leash dog area.



## Greening the park

Plant and maintain trees, shrubs and gardens, implement the Adopt-A-Tree program, do a tree inventory to determine the health of your forest canopy, clear invasive species such as burdock.



## Children and Youth

Improved playgrounds and recreation facilities, children's garden, basketball court.



“ The more high tech and built-up our city becomes, the more we need the restorative power of nature for our physical and mental well being. Our parks need lots of quiet natural spaces where we can see wildlife, where we can escape from the pressure, the rush and the concrete. Colonel Samuel Smith Park is such a place – a tranquil, waterfront sanctuary of wetlands, woods, shore and meadow. Every spring Friends of Sam Smith Park co-hosts the Spring Bird Festival to celebrate the spring migration. ”

*Terry Smith, Friends of Sam Smith Park*



## Community events

Picnics, festivals, film nights, skating parties.



## Park tours and hikes

Host a Jane's Walk, tree tours, historical walk.



## Food in the park

Start a farmer's market, plant a community food garden or a community orchard, building a bake oven, bring in healthy local food concessions, build a greenhouse.



## More food in the park

Building a fire pit or a bake oven for cooking and events.



## Arts and culture

Theatre and dance projects, music, mural painting.



## Winter projects

Embrace winter in your park by building a natural ice rink, host a winter festival, skating parties with hot chocolate.



## Reviewing and providing input into events occurring in the park

Ask your Park Supervisor and Councillor to ensure that your group is informed and consulted on potential major public events in your park.



“ We organize a bazaar in our park every Friday that includes food, South Asian clothing, jewelry, textiles and free shows and art classes for children. It creates economic development opportunities in our community because almost all the vendors are women from our community. And it brings hundreds of people into our park every week to meet, share information, enjoy and have fun. ”

*Sabina Ali, Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee (R.V. Burgess Park).*



# Do we need to incorporate as a non-profit or become a charity?

When you are starting out, keep it simple and easy. Unless you are getting into significant fundraising or cash flow, there is no need to incorporate as a non-profit. Park People can assist you if you decide to incorporate as a non-profit.

Becoming a legal charity that can issue tax receipts for donations is very time consuming and expensive. If you are considering doing fundraising for your park, there are far easier alternatives than becoming charitable (see the fundraising section).

# Can we open a bank account?

Yes. Even if you do not incorporate as a non-profit, you can easily get a bank account at most banks for your park group and many feature low-fees for community groups.



“ As part of a Winterfest family activity at the park started by our community association, we started building natural ice rinks in Botany Hill Park. In Scarborough there is only one outdoor ice rink open to the public and no shinny is allowed.

The great thing about our community rinks is that there is no time limit for use, they are close to the homes of the children, adults and seniors who use them. We have had many people, some of them new Canadians, who have learned how to skate on our rinks, and the teenagers love the shinny. ”

*Brian MacFarlane, Curran Hall Community Association (Botany Hill Park and Morningside Park)*



“ Our ongoing park transformation project, A Park of Many Paths, has grown out of a long-standing commitment to be in the community in which we work, sharing everyday life with people living there and working with them to create new works of art that (in their transience or permanence) transform the Mabelle Park. Through this process of collaborative creation we uncover opportunities to teach and learn, get to know one another and become friends. We learn to work together to make positive changes in our neighbourhood. We begin to see our own lives, stories, hopes and dreams reflected in our surroundings – often for the first time. ”

*Leah Houston, Artistic Director, Mabelle Arts (Mabelle Park)*



## How do we get improvements made to our park?

Your group can be the critical catalyst to making great new projects happen in your park.

The important first step is to determine your priorities. You won't be able to improve everything in your park at once. Is it a new playground? Lighting? Benches? Tree plantings? A volunteer landscape architect, PFR's Landscape Architecture Unit or Park People can help you get an understanding of the costs of your ideas.

Next connect with your park supervisor and city councillor's office. The City's budget for park improvements is usually set a number of years in advance. Has any funding already been allocated to your park for any projects in the coming years? Present the case for your priorities, tour the park, and show the need and the public support for these improvements. If your project has many different elements, consider getting a landscape plan done by a volunteer landscape architect or with the help of PFR. The plan will help your group communicate visually the type and scale of improvements you're promoting.

Get a letter of support from the councillor and their commitment to advocate for your project. Get the project approved in principle by the park supervisor – you don't want to be fundraising for a project and find out there are environmental, safety or other concerns.

Consider how to build public support for your project: petitions, talking to the media, reaching out to other community organizations.



## Where can we find sources of funding for our project?

The most important source of money is the parks budget. The City spends \$100 - \$150 million every year building new parks and making improvements to existing parks. The budget and the priorities are set each year as part of the City's annual budget. For the most part, funding for projects is set some years out. For example, you may successfully get the City to budget for your playground improvements but the funding may be slotted for two years from now.

As well, talk to your councillor about whether there may be funding available for park improvements in your area from development levies (this is sometimes called Section 37 funding).

You should talk with PFR's Partnership Development Unit. Staff in the unit work to develop partnerships with businesses, grant funding organizations and community groups to support park improvements and programming. They have an excellent network of contacts and can offer you very good advice and feedback on your project and ideas. They can be reached at [partnerships@toronto.ca](mailto:partnerships@toronto.ca)

Any chances of City funding are significantly improved if you can bring other funding to the table. In addition to your own fundraising (see below), consider applying to various government, private and corporate foundations. Contact information for all of these grants is available at the [www.parkpeople.ca](http://www.parkpeople.ca) website. You should also reach out to your local BIA and service clubs (Kiwanis, Rotary, Lions, etc).



# What's the best way to do our own fundraising?

Fundraising is never easy but it's a critical way to show that there's support for your project in your community. Here are a few ideas that have been used by park groups in Toronto:



## Partner with Toronto Parks and Tree Foundation

Instead of becoming their own charity, The Friends of the High Park Zoo partnered with the Foundation, who provided an opportunity to collect donations online for their project. The TPTF is able to issue tax receipts for donations on behalf of the friends group. [www.torontoparksandtrees.org](http://www.torontoparksandtrees.org)



## Partner with a local service club or charitable group

Instead of becoming your own charity, partner with an existing charity who can collect donations and issue tax receipts. For example, the Rotary Park Rejuvenation Committee reached out to their local Rotary Club to partner in fundraising for improving the park.



## Recognize donations by "selling" a specific element in your project

In Riverdale Park, a group sold engraved paving stones to refurbish a path. In High Park, straw bales were "sold" as part of a new building to support the Children's Teaching Kitchen.



## Hold a fundraising event

A group held a benefit concert to support making the playground in Jeff Healey Park more accessible for all children.



“ By selling paving stones with personal engravings at different price points, Shade the Barns was able to fundraise over \$20,000 over the course of nine months. It was very useful to have a colourful campaign poster which we also sold, and distributed for free in black and white for kids to colour. We utilized social networking media as well, including Twitter, Facebook and setting up a Tumblr website with information and updates. We also had a presence in the community, distributing information door to door and having an information table on market day. ”

*Jennifer Goldberg, Shade the Barns*

# Who can help us?

You are not alone and there are many people who want to help you succeed! Toronto Park People is here to support and guide you every step of the way. Call or email us with any problems, concerns or questions. Check out all the online information on our website. Sign up for our newsletter and check our Facebook and Twitter feed to stay on top of new developments in our parks. Come to our Park Talks and Park Summits to meet and learn from other park groups. We can also link you to other park groups who have faced similar experiences or challenges as you.



Toronto Park People is here to support and guide you every step of the way.

In addition to contact information for your city councillor and Parks, Forestry and Recreation staff, on the [www.parkpeople.ca](http://www.parkpeople.ca) website you will find links to many organizations that can assist you such as CELOS, Evergreen, LEAF, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, Toronto Parks and Trees Foundation, and many, many others.



“ Our main focus has and will be enhancing the playground equipment in the park and as such, our priority is fundraising. Collectively we brainstorm ideas and decide upon the best methods to move forward to raise money. Our Councillor's office and the City of Toronto's Partnership office has been instrumental in helping us reach our fundraising goals, navigating through the City's processes, and in organizing community events. People like to plan and talk, but what they need to realize is the main thing they should be doing is hitting the streets and start asking for donations. ”

*Janine Rechsteiner, Friends of Jeff Healey Park (formerly Friends of Woodford Park)*

# Who do I call?



# Help Us Help Parks

Park People is the only group that brings together all who care about parks. Our strength is in numbers and in our ability to be a collective, productive and vocal force for better parks. If Toronto's parks are to remain healthy and thrive we need your help.

**Park People works in partnership with communities, park staff and private enterprise to:**



**Facilitate** neighbourhood engagement in local parks



**Provide resources and information** for local park citizens on best practices



**Build a network** of local community park groups



**Bring public attention** to issues affecting parks



**Highlight the importance** of good parks to the social, health, environmental and economic wellbeing of all residents of Toronto

To find out how you can get involved or to make a charitable donation go to: **[www.parkpeople.ca](http://www.parkpeople.ca)**

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**Join us in making Toronto parks the pride of our city. Become a park person today!**

