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We should have as our goal that all Torontonians live within a 10-minute walk of a pool, park or sports facility

By ADAM GIAMBRONE



It's one of the hotter summers in recent memory, and our large expanse of Parks and Recreation facilities offer a needed break from the concrete jungle.

Our parks system is based on some lucky geology, which long ago created ravines and watersheds that feed our rivers and provide naturalized settings. Who could forget the archipelago off our coast?

These beautiful parks harbour historical treasures, but their potential is not being fully realized.

This isn't as much an issue for people with suburban backyards as it is for the large population of apartment dwellers in places like Malvern and Rexdale, or for the increasing number of downtown condo residents living in units sometimes smaller than 600 square feet. Our urban green treasures need to be celebrated and promoted.

While we're unlikely to reach the 35 million visits that New York's Central Park gets (seven times that of the Grand Canyon), we could do a better job of promoting our parks and using them as a tourist draw.

Perhaps the waterfront, which will one day function as one large linear park, will have the same draw as Millennium Park in Chicago or Stanley Park in Vancouver.

But in order to achieve this, we need to upgrade our facilities - from the tired Toronto Island ferry terminal to the lowly worn-out park washroom buildings. We also need to add utilitarian features like working drinking fountains and benches where people can linger.

We should also consider tapping our city's arts community to enliven parks with

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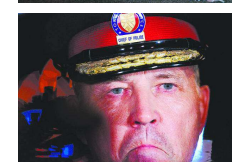
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art installations and programming that contributes to the natural settings.

Each year, more than 1.2 million residents participate in recreation and leisure programs offered by the city. This intense use takes its toll, as does the weather, and time and again this is the primary focus of the department's capital budget. Some 90 per cent goes to fixing what is broken or needs replacement.

However, we need to think about expanding green space in a city whose population grows by 1 per cent or so every two years. With 1.5 hectares per 1,000 people, Toronto has less parkland than New York City or Chicago and less than half the park space of Boston. In fact, our 4,300 hectares works out to just 16 square metres per person.

Our city spends around \$375 million, or \$130 per capita, for operations and programs of our Parks, Forestry and Recreation Department, which oversees our parks and street trees and provides services in and around our community centres and pools. To put that in perspective, Toronto spends about the same as Montreal, although Montreal has only 60 per cent of the population.

We need to find ways of doing things differently to help use our funds more efficiently.

We should begin by empowering communities and engaging them in the management and programming of their local parks.

In most cases, having the community maintain the parks on a regular basis is not sustainable. Those tasks are better left to professionals and city staff, but local residents can play a big role in helping to create programs.

Places like Dufferin Grove Park, with its myriad community activities, is a model for what we should aim to offer. Whether it's Friday night dinners, community theatre, farmers' markets or other programs oriented around the bread oven and food, Dufferin Grove has shown that active community centres don't need four walls.

While almost everyone in the neighbourhood loves Dufferin Grove, its existence is constantly challenged by regulations. We need to find new models that let residents come in. Rules need to be flexible and management structures accommodating if residents are to be active players, not just in the consumption of services, but also in their provision.

Finding ways to engage residents would be a great way of expanding the quality of our parks and the programs they offer.

Moreover, in our growing city, more and more newcomers do not have backyards, so community-led non-traditional "community centres without walls" like Dufferin Grove are important.

In many parts of Scarborough, North York and Etobicoke, kids can't walk to a neighbourhood pool or other community asset to get relief from extremely hot and humid summers.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that many of the areas experiencing the recent gun violence also are those with fewer recreational facilities and programs, lacking neighbourhood community-building activities.

In all the debate about budgets and not being able to afford the city we want, this is an essential discussion to have. One of the cheapest ways to make neighbourhoods safer is through building a sense of community and giving kids opportunities to learn and have fun in a safe place.

Children's programs offered by the city and other agencies give kids a place to be and to learn social interaction skills different from what they pick up elsewhere. They also allow them to explore their city in a way that they can't do alone.

We should be able to find some community safety money to expand our summer camp programs and the small overnight camp the city operates to give all urban kids that quintessential Canadian experience.



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We also need to think about year-round programs. While having green space is important, we also need rec facilities that offer programming.

We should have as our goal that all Toronto residents live a 10-minute walk away from a community centre with programming, a pool, a park, a library and recreation sports facilities.

These facilities aren't cheap: a new community centre costs \$20 to \$30 million, a new library \$10 to \$15 million and playgrounds \$100,000 to \$250,000. But imagine a 15-year capital program that allocated \$45 million additional dollars a year to building these facilities. That's doable, considering we only spend 4 per cent of our current capital budget on parks.

Some of the funding could come from the Public Health budget, which is cost-shared with the province, since lack of exercise is a leading cause of medical problems, and Toronto Public Health is charged with encouraging healthy lifestyles.

Ongoing efforts to limit tax increases means Toronto hasn't seriously considered enhancing its parks and their programs as it should. Toronto has amazing natural beauty. Surely it would be well worth the \$15 to \$20 a person it would cost to better maintain and program.

1.2 million

Torontonians participating in recreational programs each year

90

Percentage of parks capital budget spent on repairs and maintenance

1.5

Hectares of park space per 1,000 people in Toronto, less than New York, Chicago and Boston

\$375 million

Total amount Toronto spends (operating and capital) on parks annually – the same as Montreal, which has a little more than half T.O.'s population

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