

Staff Report



To	Committee of the Whole
Service Area	Public Services
Date	Monday, April 4, 2022
Subject	Park Plan

Recommendation

1. That the Park Plan dated February 2022, included as Attachment-1 to this report, and the proposed actions and recommendations noted within the plan be approved.
 2. That the use of the alternative rate prescribed in the Official Plan be retained as a necessary and appropriate means of calculating parkland dedication to support the City's parkland needs.
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Executive Summary

Purpose of Report

To provide the Park Plan to Council and seek approval to implement the plan's recommendations. The Park Plan is a strategic document that outlines the vision and goals for Guelph's park system.

Key Findings

The Park Plan is a component of the Parks and Recreation Master Plan (PRMP). The Park Plan is being completed in advance of the PRMP to support time-sensitive legislative changes to the Parkland Dedication By-law required before September 2022.

The parkland assessment and strategic directions of this plan will be integrated and prioritized with other parks and recreation strategies in the final PRMP. The Park Plan focuses on Guelph's land needs for the future and:

- Defines the city's park system to understand existing conditions;
- Outlines future challenges and opportunities facing the city's park system;
- Demonstrates that parks are important to the community to support revenue tools for park acquisition;
- Sets values for an optimal level of service as the city grows and changes; and
- Develops strategic directions for parkland retention, optimization, and expansion.

The vision for Guelph's park system acknowledges that parks and recreation are essential to everyday life. The Park Plan seeks to develop a sustainable, inclusive, and adaptable park network that connects people to each other, active living, and the environment. Six pillars of the plan help support the vision by providing direction for future actions and decision-making.

The plan has been developed through community engagement, comparator research, and technical analysis. Through various platforms over the course of the PRMP and Park Plan projects, over 1,500 people engaged with City staff. Consultation took the form of stakeholder meetings, advisory committees of Council, intercept polling, online engagement, and direct email correspondence, totaling over 20 different opportunities to share feedback.

The Park Plan is built on identified growth trends and parkland assessment to develop strategic directions and actions to retain, improve, optimize, and grow the city's park system. The Park Plan includes recommendations that will be carried forward to the PRMP and be integrated into a comprehensive implementation plan.

Financial Implications

The Park Plan primarily addresses the city's parkland needs for the next 30 years. The financial impacts of this plan and estimated costs for land acquisition will be developed and evaluated through future studies and reports to Council. Three key factors will need to be considered:

- The City will need to rely on more than parkland dedication to meet parkland needs, which may include purchasing land with tax dollars, partnerships or alternative tools and arrangements.
- The City will need to ensure that the alternative rate that is prescribed in the Official Plan continues to be used as an appropriate means of calculating parkland dedication to support the city's parkland needs.
- The City will need to be strategic about how future parkland is planned to reduce the financial burden on taxpayers.

The needs identified in the Park Plan will be considered amongst other capital budget funding needs faced by the City of Guelph. This will occur during previously established strategic budget processes and guidelines.

Report

Introduction

The Park Plan is a strategic document that sets direction for Guelph's park system. It is a high-level planning tool that guides how the city's park system responds to the growing and changing community. The Park Plan is a component of the larger Parks and Recreation Master Plan (PRMP), which addresses all of the city's park and recreation system needs including land, infrastructure, indoor facilities, outdoor facilities, services, and operation. The Park Plan will be integrated into the broader PRMP so that overall priorities and long-term financial and resource strategies can be developed.

The Park Plan is being advanced before the completion of the PRMP to address provincial legislative changes. Bills 108, 138, and 197 require municipalities in Ontario, including Guelph, to enact a 'new' Parkland Dedication By-law by September 18, 2022. To support this by-law, the Planning Act requires that municipalities have a Park Plan in place that examines the need for parkland in the city.

Guelph's population is forecasted to increase by over 60,000 people by 2051. Over the next thirty years, there will be more pressure on the park system as

neighbourhoods become denser and demographics change. There is increasing pressure to provide quality parks and recreation spaces, while also keeping up with local housing needs and infrastructure. It's important that Guelph's park system is planned to provide optimal services as the population grows and changes. Land will need to be used more efficiently and the park system will need to be expanded and reshaped to accommodate outdoor recreation.

Park Plan focus

Parks and parkland are areas of land set aside primarily for human enjoyment, recreation, and connection to nature. These lands are the focus of this plan; however, the Park Plan recognizes that there is land in the city that complements the park system but is not considered parkland. These complementary lands are part of the 'park continuum.' These complementary lands offer similar benefits to the park system and form part of a publicly accessible system of green spaces that contribute to community identity, local character, and sense of place. The park continuum includes parks as well as the following lands:

- School properties
- Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) properties
- University of Guelph and Arboretum lands
- Open spaces, stormwater management ponds and rights-of-way
- City trails
- Natural Heritage System (NHS)
- River systems.

Land can have multiple functions and offer a variety of benefits to Guelph's community, but some land is not primarily for human enjoyment or recreation. Parks are differentiated from other land to ensure Guelph residents continue to have dedicated space for recreation.

Guelph's park system currently has over 400 hectares of parks of all classifications, sizes, and shapes. To complement the park system, the City offers more than 130 kilometres of trails, and owns and/or manages close to 850 hectares of NHS. All of this land covers close to fifteen percent of the city area and doesn't include other publicly accessible land on the parks continuum that may be available for people to enjoy.

Vision, values, and goals

The PRMP and Park Plan are built around a vision statement, values, and pillars that support the City's Strategic Plan. The PRMP and Park Plan vision is:

Parks and recreation are essential to everyday life in Guelph. To be future-ready we need parks that are sustainable, inclusive, adaptable and have a built-in ability to respond to a growing and diverse community. We need to connect people to each other, active living and the environment.

Building on Guelph's corporate values, parks and recreation service delivery is based on the following values:

- Participation and inclusion of all citizens
- Well maintained parks and facilities

- Effective management and sustainability of resources
- Fairness and equity
- Healthy and engaged community
- Protection of the environment

The Park Plan framework includes six pillars that support the vision for parks and recreation. They help provide direction for future actions and decision-making. Action plans and future performance indicators will be developed to measure success.

The pillars of the Park Plan are included in Table 1 and are organized based on alignment with the pillars of the Strategic Plan.

Table 1. Pillars of the Park Plan

Strategic Plan Pillars	Park Pan Pillars
Building our future	1. We nurture a healthy and vibrant community. 2. All people can participate in recreation. 3. Recreation facilities and parks are welcoming and meaningful places for all people. 4. Infrastructure is maintained, sustainable and responsive to community changes.
Sustaining our future	5. We support the protection, restoration, and management of the natural environment.
Working together for our future	6. We work together with our community.

Assessing Guelph’s park system

Using evidence-based research, demographics, benchmarking, community opinion, policy analysis, and trends, the Park Plan assesses Guelph’s current park system. The assessment includes a thorough review of park quantity, quality, accessibility, equity, functionality, and recreation needs to determine an optimal level of service. The optimal level of service is the amount and type of service that meets community needs/desires and is sustainable, affordable, and realistic. The optimal level of service in the Park Plan is based on these key principles:

- Everyone can access a park within a reasonable walk from their home.
- There are a variety of park types with different functions in all areas of the city.
- Parks need to accommodate a variety of recreation amenities and programming.
- A similar level of service should be provided throughout the city, recognizing that urban form or neighbourhood demographics may require a different approach to parkland (e.g., areas of high-density development may have different park needs than areas of single detached homes).

Key findings from the parkland assessment include:

92 percent of people live within a ten-minute walk of a park

A successful park system is supported by walkable and wheelable neighbourhoods with safe and comfortable routes to parks. A walking route analysis was undertaken

to determine how many of Guelph residents live within a ten-minute walk of a park. The analysis reveals that 92 percent of residents live within a ten-minute walk or 800 metres of a park. This is higher than the Canadian average of 87 percent.

The City provides about two parking spaces of parkland per person

Many municipalities, including Guelph, provide targets for their parkland supply. Targets are set based on the vision, values, and goals for the municipality. Guelph currently provides 3.1 hectares of parkland per 1,000 people. This is lower than the City's target of 3.3 hectares per 1,000 people set in 2009, however it is higher than many other comparator municipalities.

Since 2009, the City has acquired about 45 hectares of parkland. Approximately 65 percent of this was acquired through development, and the remaining 35 percent was acquired through repurposing city lands (Eastview Community Park). This results in parkland growth at a rate of 2.5 hectares per 1,000 people since 2009.

For greater clarity, the Park Plan converts the parkland provision rate to a measure of parkland per person. The City currently provides about 31 square meters of park space per resident. This is slightly larger in size than two parking spaces (27m²) or the area under a medium sized tree canopy.

The City's current parkland provision target is not sustainable

More parkland will be needed in Guelph as the population grows, and how growth occurs will impact the City's ability to expand the park system. Approximately 58 hectares of parkland is planned through current development applications and in secondary plan areas.

By extrapolating the City's current parkland provision target of 3.3 hectares per 1,000 people to the forecasted population in 2051, the City will need to acquire 230 hectares of land. This is 174 hectares of land above the 58 hectares already identified. Acquiring this amount of land while balancing mandated growth targets without creating significant impacts to City financial planning, built form, building height, and density is likely not achievable. Through a future parkland acquisition strategy, the City will need to review and set a new parkland provision target and/or assess whether a new key performance indicator is a more suitable way to assess land needs for the future. Parkland needs and a future parkland acquisition strategy will be explored as part of the PRMP. Financial strategies to support parkland provision targets will also be explored in the upcoming Development Charges Background Study. This analysis may result in an Official Plan Amendment in the future.

Implementation and recommendations

Strategic directions within the Park Plan were developed to guide the retention, improvement, optimization, and growth of the City's park system. The Park Plan includes recommendations that will be carried forward to the PRMP and integrated into a comprehensive implementation plan so that parks and recreation priorities can be set together. Priorities, financial strategies, and phasing for these recommendations will be assigned as part of the PRMP.

A full list of the plan's recommendations is found on page 96 of the Park Plan. Below is a summary of recommendations organized by type of work:

Setting clear directions

Building on the Strategic Plan, there are some overall directions set in the Park Plan that are integral to day-to-day work within the Parks Department. These directions are aligned with the City's Strategic Plan pillar of 'Working Together for our Future' and include:

- Communicate better through clear policies.
- Enhance decision-making through greater use of data.
- Develop long-term financial and resource strategies.
- Work together with our community in partnerships.
- Focus on anti-racism and discrimination, based on principals developed through the Community Plan update.
- Develop meaningful relationships with Indigenous people.

Exploring how we prioritize work

Guelph's park system should be improved first where it is needed most using the following criteria to identify future priorities:

- There are parks assets that require renewal or replacement to provide the desired levels of service.
- Areas of growth or population increase.
- People can't access a park within a reasonable walk from their home.
- There are high concentrations of equity-deserving populations.
- There is demonstrated need or desire for service level expansion.
- Existing parks are working harder to serve more people.

Park access and provision of strategic directions

Increased growth will increase demand for parks and outdoor recreation. The City will need to use land more efficiently, expand the park system, and create new spaces to accommodate recreation needs. The following directions will help the City to achieve its vision for the future:

- Develop parkland acquisition policies for development sites.
- Update parkland policies and provision targets in the Official Plan.
- Develop strategies for acquiring and intensifying parkland.
- Continue to develop partnerships with other public landowners.
- Develop policies to support conversion of surplus land to parkland.
- Develop design guidelines for developments adjacent to existing parks.
- Balance parkland needs with impacts of other infrastructure.
- Improve pedestrian crossings of major barriers.
- Strata parkland could be considered in unique circumstances.

Park improvement recommendations

Improvements and intensification of parks will be important to accommodate the growing and changing population in Guelph. Recommendations for park improvements to meet recreational needs will be addressed in the PRMP, however the following high-level recommendations have been included in the Park Plan as they relate to park access and provisioning:

- Seek opportunities to represent Indigenous people in the park system.
- All parks should have accessible paths.
- Develop a sports and facility development strategy.

- Create a park development manual.
- Increase urban forest canopy and naturalized spaces in parks.

Monitoring success

An overall action of the Park Plan is to “enhance our decision making through greater use of data.” Collecting and managing data about parks will help to monitor the plan’s success. As part of a data management program, performance measures should be developed and tracked regularly.

Progress on the implementation of the actions and recommendations will continue to be communicated quarterly, and this will be transitioned to the Parks and Recreation Master Plan update page of guelph.ca. Future monitoring and reporting on the progress of the plan will be examined through the PRMP.

A review and update of the plan is recommended in 2028 at the five-year mark. A five-year review may include revisiting goals, priorities, and aligning work plans with a future Strategic Plan or new opportunities. A full update is recommended in 2033.

Financial Implications

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- The City will need to rely on more than parkland dedication to meet parkland needs, which may include purchasing land with tax dollars, partnerships, or alternative arrangements.
- The City will need to ensure that the alternative rate that is prescribed in the Official Plan continues to be used as an appropriate means of calculating parkland dedication to support the City’s parkland needs.
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Consultations

Internal engagement

The Park Plan was developed in collaboration with key staff across many departments. Involvement from staff in Parks, Environmental Planning, Policy Planning, Engineering, and Finance ensured a collaborative approach to future park planning and development.

External engagement

The Park Plan conducted engagement of the community, stakeholders, school boards, Indigenous governments, and agency partners. Through various platforms over the course of the PRMP and Park Plan projects, over 1,500 people engaged with City staff. Consultation took the form of stakeholder meetings, advisory committees of Council, intercept polling, online engagement, and direct email correspondence, totaling over 20 different opportunities to share feedback.

Where possible, staff incorporated community feedback data from related City projects or other ongoing initiatives. Specifically, data and feedback collected as part of the ongoing PRMP and the Parkland Dedication By-law update was used to inform the Park Plan.

Common themes identified throughout engagement include:

- Parks became extremely important to residents during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in increased need for parks, trails, and greenspaces.
- Protecting parks and creating new parks is a priority.
- Upgrading parks and maintaining facilities is a priority.
- Areas with high population, areas of high socioeconomic need, and areas with few parks are priorities for locating new parks.
- Parkland dedication (land or cash in lieu to buy parks) from developers is the preferred way for the City to acquire more parks, with an emphasis on acquiring land.
- Leasing land and purchasing land with tax dollars for parks are lower ranking methods for acquiring parkland.
- Having easy access to a park is extremely important to residents. This includes having parks accessible via bus routes, as well as appropriate surfaces and equipment, particularly for those using mobility devices or strollers.
- Linking parks and trails throughout the city is a priority.
- A wide range of park amenities and features are needed throughout the park system.

The draft Park Plan was posted on the city's website on February 3, 2022 and shared through advertising and correspondence to residents on the mailing list. The Park Plan is a representation of a community informed plan. Council's decision about the plan will be shared in the same way.

Strategic Plan Alignment

The Park Plan supports three of the five pillars in the Strategic Plan. Table 1, above, shows how pillars of the Park Plan align with pillars of the Strategic Plan.

The Park Plan most closely aligns with the 'Building our Future' pillar, as parks nurture social well-being, provide landmark beauty and offer a safe place where everyone belongs. Parks can help support these Strategic Plan priorities by:

- Working to enhance community well-being and safety through direct service and program delivery;
- Managing existing infrastructure; and
- Continuing working to develop new assets that respond to Guelph's growing and changing social, economic, and environmental needs.

The Park Plan is aligned with the 'Sustaining our Future' pillar as parks contribute to caring for the local environment and respond to climate change. Parks can help support these Strategic Plan priorities by:

- Protecting the green infrastructure provided by woodlands, wetlands, watercourses, and other elements of Guelph's natural heritage system;
- Investing in "green" infrastructure to prepare Guelph for the effects of climate change; and
- Increasing Guelph's tree canopy.

The 'Working Together for our Future' pillar of the Strategic Plan is supported by the Park Plan by delivering better information to the community about parks and working with community partners. The Park Plan supports these Strategic Plan priorities by:

- Developing strategic partnerships with stakeholders to improve service delivery; and
- Exploring new funding options, service-delivery models, and partnerships to ease taxes for residents and businesses.

Attachments

Attachment-1 Park Plan, dated February 2022.

Attachment-2 Council Presentation

Departmental Approval

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