



Benefits to high-quality green space: The Escarpment Stairway on Parliament Hill provides residents and visitors with a “stroll” through a rugged forest.
Photo: Alberta Camicioli Photography

Parks are the new medicine

How COVID-19 made parks essential to healthy cities



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When this pandemic is all over, let’s all decide not to forget what got us through this distressing time.

Let’s face it ... 2020 was a difficult year for everyone. And 2021 has started with much of Canada in lockdown. What has made this year tolerable for me was spending more time with my kids than typical because we were all home together, working and learning. To make this time interesting and fun, we often escaped to the backyard, took walks, rode bikes on trails, and spent quality time outdoors.

Certainly, many reading this article probably experienced the outdoors in this way. Professionals have been touting the benefits of parkland and nature for years, but with the rise of the 2020 pandemic, and its continuation into 2021, the importance of these spaces has become front and centre.

Green Space is Nature’s Medicine

The mental health benefits of being outside in parks and open spaces has been studied for years. The scientific evidence is so clear that, in Vancouver for example, there is now a trend to give prescriptions for outdoor time.

This is important in the context of a discussion about COVID-19. If time spent outdoors has been documented to help with mental health, and we know that stress is high across Canada with new lockdowns in place, the role of parks to help Canadians cope is critical.

To contribute to this conversation, consider a recent study that surveyed youth across Canada to understand the effects of COVID-19 on their self-reported health and wellness.¹ Noted in the findings is that youth in larger cities were going outside less, and almost half of youth across Canada reported not going outside enough and lacking a connection with nature.² This is an upsetting conclusion, considering that stress levels are likely higher because of worry about the pandemic, disruption in routines, and concerns around the more sedentary lifestyles.

The study’s recommendations provide a checklist for municipalities to strive for in providing people with more opportunities to spend time outdoors, including:

- play equipment;
- public spaces; and
- walkable communities.

The recommendations reflect an increased understanding of well-being. Critically, the study recommends avoiding a return to the status quo.³

Perhaps the research makes these conclusions because of the impact of play structure and spray

1 Maximum City (June 2020), “COVID-19: Child and Youth Well-Being Study: Canada Phase One Report.” (**Municipal World Insider and Executive Members** can download this study in the research library on municipalworld.com. Access it from inside your membership area! Just search for “well-being.”)

2 Ibid, p. 10.

3 Ibid, p. 17.

Despite the challenges faced by municipalities to balance and manage all of their responsibilities, many cities across Canada have been incredibly creative in finding new ways to build parkland and open space.

pad closures from the early days of pandemic restrictions in Canada. These restrictions were an effort to keep residents safe and distanced during a time when so little was known about how the virus spread and how long it lived on surfaces. More severely, in many regions, cities and provinces closed the parks as well, leaving residents living in high-density housing with few opportunities to safely get fresh air and exercise. Thankfully, more recent lockdowns have excluded these restrictions, as the virus is much better understood so public health decisions have adapted as well.

Conversely, the use of outdoor spaces for passive recreation was certainly encouraged by public officials and public health experts, because hiking and cycling were considered safe activities. Cities across Canada also expanded patio spaces, cycling lanes, and walkable places.

Other research confirms these findings. A group of students from Redeemer University College in Hamilton surveyed residents around Gage Park, a Canadian Society of Landscape Architects Legacy Award-winning large green space in the heart of the city.⁴ They asked how the residents' use changed as a result of the pandemic, and any other changes they noticed in their time at the park.

The study⁵ concluded that more than 50 percent of respondents reported a negative impact on their mental health due to the pandemic, citing increases in stress levels as a major factor. If this is the case for residents with ready access to high-quality green space, it is fair to ask what the impacts on residents that do not have that benefit are.

How to Make Parkland a Priority

As more than 80 percent of Canada's population live in cities, and with more Canadians than ever living in locations without backyards or private green space, the local park is the closest and most readily accessible natural setting they have. With what has been observed over 2020 and into 2021, it is clearer than ever that access to parkland serves an

important role in healthy and liveable cities.

But how do municipal leaders continue to make parkland a priority?

Make funding a priority

Builders of green spaces face many challenges. When it comes to affording the costs to build and maintain parks, municipalities have overwhelming infrastructure deficits and struggle to generate money to pay for all the competing projects that aren't fully funded by development charges.

The tools available to municipalities to fund the shortfall in development charge collections are property taxes or user fees. And development charges aren't always an option to update existing parks to changing community needs. Charging a user fee for access to parkland should be a clear lose-lose situation, so the only option is property taxes, which has numerous and varied priorities all competing for funding.

During a pandemic, with businesses restricted and many lay-offs experienced, it is even harder to balance all of a municipality's funding needs against the desire to keep life affordable for its residents.

Recent grant programs, through provincial and federal governments, are an important source of funding to help municipalities move forward important city building projects, but only during the pandemic. These include the recent COVID-19 Resilience stream of the Investing in Canada program. Municipalities can take advantage of these programs to get projects done that otherwise might not be funded, and that have the additional benefit of providing job opportunities for local businesses.

Be thoughtful about location and community needs

The other main challenge faced by builders of green space is that there is a limited supply of land. So how are new parks located?

Many cities have master plans that define the standard for parkland supply to

achieve, such as one hectare of parkland per 1,000 residents. For those municipalities without park master plans, it can be difficult to know how to prioritize and focus efforts where most needed to address shortages in parkland provision.

An additional pressure is seen in larger cities with booming developments and intensification in built-up areas, spurred by provincial growth targets.

Naturally, development lands are limited, which leads to increases in the land prices; however, that also means that municipalities have to pay those same land values when trying to acquire parkland. This can make it challenging to achieve the balanced neighbourhoods that contribute to a high quality of life. Additionally, it is particularly difficult to get a parcel that is big enough for programmed sports, such as soccer, in areas of intensification.

How does a city create high-quality places for people to live when costs to buy and develop parkland in built-up areas make projects seemingly unaffordable?

Creativity Creates Opportunities

Despite the challenges faced by municipalities to balance and manage all of their responsibilities, many cities across Canada have been incredibly creative in finding new ways to build parkland and open space. Across Canada, innovation is allowing municipalities to create new public spaces in places not considered before.

Consider projects such as The Bentway in Toronto. That project turned unused and forgotten space under an elevated highway into an award-winning recreational space with ice loop, walking trails, and unprogrammed places for people.

4 Canadian Society of Landscape Architects Legacy Award: Gage Park, <https://www.csla-aapc.ca/awards/gage-park-2016>.

5 **Municipal World Insider and Executive Members:** You can download this study in the research library on municipalworld.com. Access it from inside your membership area! Just search for "public parks."

Another example of “found space” in Toronto is the transformation of a cross-city hydro corridor into the “Meadowway.” It features extensive walking trails, community gardens, and other amenities to increase the quality of life for residents.

Nation-wide examples include Vancouver’s planned park on top of Oakridge Mall that will create new acres of parkland in the centre of the city. Calgary’s Flyover Park, Montreal’s Parc Frédéric-Back, and Edmonton’s High Level Line are all exciting examples of looking at land differently and finding creative ways to make high-quality open spaces for people.

Changes in policy around who has priority in a city can help to find new places for parkland as well. For instance, an emphasis on active transportation that prioritizes cycling lanes, pathways, and walking infrastructure removes the priority from the commuter in a car. The creation and emphasis on public transit through cities works the same way. Suddenly, the need for massive parking

lots downtown is reduced, and a transformation to parkland can be facilitated. This has been a successful strategy across many municipalities – to “depave, and create paradise,” with apologies to Joni Mitchell.

For municipalities that are struggling to find creative solutions for parkland creation, it can be helpful to look to professionals who study and understand this work. These are the landscape architects, planners, and others that have the training and experience to help. Stormwater management, low impact development, and brownfield remediation are all taught in landscape architecture and other professional programs across North America. Professionals will be capable of leading these projects for years to come.

COVID-19 has challenged all of us to do things in new ways. For example, think about the move to virtual meetings and staff working from home. Consider the potential impact this might have on air pollution and even infrastructure requirements in the future. We can all

learn important lessons about how to challenge traditions and find new ways to solve problems.

Not the Old Normal

Canada has now acquired and is distributing newly approved vaccines, with front line health care workers having received their first dose. The hope is that sometime in 2021 Canada will get “back to normal.” But we must work hard not to forget the lessons of COVID-19 – and what is important.

Maybe children have it right. Their priorities are playing at the local park, having safe spaces to hang out, and friends. As our circles tightened with restrictions, these are the necessities that came into clear focus.

Coming out of pandemic life and into recovery, let’s try and make sure that a “new normal” is established – one where the mental and physical health benefits of outdoor spaces are valued and continue to be prioritized as essential to healthy and liveable cities. [MW](#)

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