

Downsview Park: A Sustainable Community in the Making

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Abstract

This paper will describe the history of the evolution of the Downsview Park project including the mandate and vision, the various steps that have been taken to move the implementation of the opportunity forward and the current stage now where the public is being reengaged in the form of advice on the development of the Sustainable Community Development Guidelines and the Urban Development Plan for the site. An analysis will be offered as to what sustainability has meant to the development of the opportunity to date and why sustainable development will become the only way that development can take place in order to truly create a society that we can all live in and truly prosper in. Downsview Park seeks to demonstrate how sustainability is achievable and through the development of indicators and other forms of accountabilities, the ability to integrate living, working, playing and learning all in one place will be the hallmark of the new way of living in a modern world. It will describe how and why a federal crown corporation has been tasked with this responsibility to achieve this important and relevant outcome for the benefit of Canadian society.

When the Government of Canada announced the closure of Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Toronto in 1994 it stipulated, “the existing DND-owned lands associated with the Downsview site will be held in perpetuity and in trust primarily as a unique urban recreational greenspace for the enjoyment of future generations”.

Downsview Park is the name given to the whole sustainable community composed of 231.5 hectares [572 acres] that includes public open space, recreational, cultural, residential, commercial, institutional, sports and entertainment uses, all of which will be developed according to the principles of environmental, economic, and social sustainability. Downsview Park is also referred to as the Downsview Park Sustainable Community. More than 146 hectares (362 acres) of the total land area are earmarked for park and recreational activities.

Downsview Park will be a leading edge sustainable community. It will set 21st century standard for excellence in landscape architectural design, recreation, urban planning and sustainable development. The goal is to define the leading edge of green development, implement green technologies and promote green business and to offer in the City of Toronto, for the people of Canada, a wonderful place to showcase environmental social and economic sustainability on a self-financing basis.

Parc Downsview Park Inc. (PDP) is committed to sustainability in all its dimensions and environmental, economic and social sustainability are in evidence in the current and planned operations and activities of Downsview Park.

The lands where Downsview Park is located have a very rich history and have experienced a number of previous land uses. These uses, which have included agricultural production and a military base, have helped shape Toronto and Canada and have made Downsview part of some of the most important moments in Canadian affairs. The historical uses have also defined the physical environment of the park.

After the Second World War, the Government of Canada recognized the Downsview Lands strategic importance with its proximity to Toronto's industry and infrastructure. Downsview was considered by the government to be well suited as an air station and logistical support base because of the existing airfield and hangar facilities.

The idea of transforming the Downsview Lands into a national urban park was first advanced in 1994 as the closure of the military base was being contemplated. The lands were seen as a large underutilized tract of land, contained valuable old assets as well as some heritage buildings which could be renaturalized and developed as a national and international showcase for environmental, social and economic sustainability.

Parc Downsview Park Inc.'s (PDP) aspiration is to create a sustainable community, with a national purpose and identity, of great magnitude and prestige for all Canadians and to grow Downsview Park into a model for the world.

PDP is a federal Crown Corporation, established to design, develop and maintain Downsview Park. PDP's mandate stipulates that PDP is to be a self-financing and that all revenues received shall be applied to park infrastructure, operation and maintenance requirements in perpetuity. Accordingly, approximately 71 hectares (212 acres) will be dedicated to opportunities that complement the park while providing revenue to finance the construction, development and management of the Downsview Park Sustainable Community.

While PDP seeks to generate both capital and cash flow from the Downsview lands, it will be done in a way which adds value to the public open space. Further, PDP will ensure that the vision and values of Downsview Park are evident throughout the property in a seamless and integrated fashion.

PDP is now actively moving ahead with its ambitious plans to build the Downsview Park Sustainable Community. Administration of most of the land for Downsview Park was transferred to PDP in 2006. PDP now actively manages the land for the purposes of achieving its mandate. Those actions include constructing and maintaining the urban green space; maintaining, protecting and leasing real property assets; providing a varied program of activities for the public; providing facilities for public and private access; and cultivating relationships with current and future partners in the creation of Downsview Park.

In the early stages of Downsview Park's development, the Downsview Park International Design Competition was held to realize the vision of creating a unique

urban recreational greenspace, with the goal of making Downsview Park internationally recognized as one of Canada's great urban parks and a model for 21st century park building and beyond. The objective of the design competition was to promote innovative design proposals that would respond to the social and natural histories of the site, while developing its potential as a new landscape, one capable of sustaining new ecologies and an evolving array of public uses and events.

The design competition resulted in an exceptional design team and concept for Downsview Park known as Tree City. The winning design did not propose itself as a traditional national park. Rather, the site provided an opportunity to think about what it would mean to create an entirely new definition of the urban landscape, one that had the potential to redefine humankind's relationship with nature. It is a fascinating and cutting edge design, which will give Downsview Park worldwide recognition. Downsview Park may have as much influence on parks for the 21st century as New York's Central Park did for the 20th century.

Sustainability is the one word which best captures the essence of the vision of Downsview Park. Sustainability is implicit in the mandate given to PDP by the Government of Canada and is at the core of PDP's interpretation of the mandate. That vision is to create a community that is a showcase of sustainability for the world.

The vision, as developed by the Board of Directors states: "Downsview Park is a unique urban recreational greenspace, a safe and peaceful place, developed according to the principles of environmental, economic and social sustainability, for Canadians to enjoy in all seasons. The park reflects Canada's mosaic brilliance and celebrates its past present and future accomplishments." PDP is committed to sustainability in all its dimensions and environmental, economic and social sustainability are in evidence in the current and planned operations and activities of Downsview Park.

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Sustainable Community Development Guidelines will define the influence of the park plan on the other areas of the Downsview Park Sustainable Community and provide an explicit framework for the development of the entire site. These vital guidelines will ensure that the entire site (the greenspace, the cultural and recreational lands, the residential lands, and the business/commercial elements) become one seamless and integrated community and a showcase of urban sustainability for the world to see and experience.

The Sustainable Community Development Guidelines also a land use plan and development policies; streets, blocks and community plan; an open space plan;

sustainable urban criteria; sustainable building standards; an energy utilization plan; a sewer and water reduction plan; a sustainable housing plan; a public participation and marketing plan; a financial needs assessment for PDP; and, new ideas for further investigation.

This past year, PDP refined the urban development plan for the entirety of Downsview Park. The Downsview Park Development Plan integrates the open space plan with the development plan to demonstrate the vision for the site. The Downsview Park Development Plan identifies various neighbourhoods across Downsview Park, each of which is anticipated to include a variety of land uses. The Downsview Park Development Plan is the subject of a 25-year financial model that demonstrates its economic viability.

PDP has preserved flexibility in the specifics of the Downsview Park Development Plan in order to maximize its ability to negotiate with partners to achieve the best possible result for Downsview Park in each situation, while striving to maximize the land retained by PDP. PDP's processes will be open and transparent as it encourages innovation and excellence from itself and those with whom it does business. Downsview Park will be built with everyone who shares its vision and values.

Public consultation has been a key planning principle in the development of Downsview Park because of significant local community and stakeholder interest and expectations for Downsview Park. As such, public consultation has played and will continue to play an important role in the successful development of Downsview Park, including development decisions. In the past, PDP has been acknowledged for consultation excellence and wants to maintain a high standard in the future.

PDP has hosted a variety of public consultation events and participated in public consultation events hosted by other organizations. In addition, the dissemination and exchange of general information have been facilitated through newsletters, articles, a Web site and a public consultation phone line. For example, public input into the park vision significantly influenced the competition brief for the Downsview Park International Design Competition in 1999 and more recently in the principles and concepts for PDP's Urban Development Plan and Sustainable Community Development Guidelines.

As it builds the Downsview Park Sustainable Community PDP is also forging partnerships, strategic alliances and strong, positive relationships with the local and surrounding communities, other governments and various organizations. Some of these relationships have been formulated through tenancies while others are executed through commitments to work together in future or through joint committees on broader initiatives.

Downsview Park today is a vibrant place where hundreds of thousands of Canadians are educated and entertained through a wide variety of community programs and seasonal events. These programs and events promote and broaden the awareness of the significant historical, environmental and cultural features that make Downsview Park

unique. They have also established Downsview Park as a place for people of all ages to play, learn and enjoy in every season.

Works Cited

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