



Park Design Approach

Part of the City of Kitchener's Parks Master Plan



All photography and graphics by City of Kitchener staff unless otherwise noted.



Related sections

Places

Spaces

- Community Health & Wellness
- Community Gardens
- Natural Spaces & Climate Adaptation
- Park Amenities
- Play
- Signature & Feature Parks
- Splashpads
- Sports & Games
- Trails & Lighting

Content

<i>Introduction.....</i>	<i>06</i>
<i>Data Sources.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Findings.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Recommendations.....</i>	<i>18</i>

A scenic view of a pond with reeds and a forest under a blue sky, seen from a wooden deck. The foreground shows the wooden planks of the deck and a railing. The middle ground is filled with tall reeds in the water. The background is a dense forest of green trees under a clear blue sky with a few wispy clouds. The sun is bright on the right side of the image.

Acknowledgement

Places & Spaces is focused on the park service provided to the Kitchener community. Parks and open spaces are integral to communities, providing spaces where people play, explore, and build connections with the environment and with others.

The City is uniquely positioned to provide, care for, maintain, and secure public access to parks and open spaces for all members of its communities. The City of Kitchener recognizes that these public spaces are planned and built on land that is the traditional territory of the Chonnonton, Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee Peoples. We recognize our responsibility to serve as stewards for the land and honour the original caretakers who came before us. Our community is enriched by the enduring knowledge and deep-rooted traditions of the diverse First Nations, Métis, and Inuit in Kitchener today. The significance of this land to Indigenous communities is respected, and we value the role that parks and open spaces can play in Reconciliation.

The City of Kitchener acts as a steward for almost 2,000 hectares of land as part of a parks and open space system. Through the implementation of Places & Spaces, we will work to better understand and address community needs and the barriers preventing use of these spaces, so that all community members in Kitchener might feel welcome, safe, and able to use our parks and open spaces.



Introduction

This section focuses on the background information and specific details that inform the context for the recommendations made for this topic.

Background

The Park Design Approach section will guide the long-term development, renovation, and maintenance of the parks and open space system in Kitchener in a way that reflects community needs identified through engagement while minimizing operational resources needed for its ongoing maintenance.

Planning for park upgrades

Approaches to long-term planning and selection of parks for renovation have varied over time. Predicting which parks will need to be updated, and when, can be difficult to project. A combination of factors influences these predictions. Parks can be chosen for renovation based on a combination of some of the following factors:

- Park location, size, or classification
- Nearby community facilities
- Public interest
- Nearby projects such as road re-construction
- Alignment with community grant opportunities (e.g., LoveMyHood, RISE)
- Infrastructure replacement needs (e.g., age of the existing infrastructure)
- Nearby sub-division development projects
- Available amenities in the neighbourhood
- Connected strategies (e.g., Integrated Stormwater Master Plan or Leisure Facilities Master Plan)
- Existing park master plans

Signature and Feature parks benefit from a dedicated annual funding forecast to meet their needs. These larger parks represent five of the total 275 Planned parks that require active maintenance, infrastructure planning, and replacement. All other Planned parks, by contrast, compete for the same budget resources to address aging or non-existent infrastructure year after year.

A park design must be considered with other department strategies in mind as they can impact major infrastructure decisions. Parks that often need to

consider a connected strategy are typically located close to public pools or community centers or are in spaces that include facilities for organized sports.

Projecting park maintenance

To develop parks both successfully and sustainably, maintenance needs to be considered. Every piece of a park requires maintenance. Maintenance can be frequent like grass cutting, garbage removal, janitorial cleaning, and playground safety inspections or it can be more long-term like, pavement repairs, or light replacements. As Kitchener continues to grow, a reliable method does not exist to project park maintenance needs and budgets to support these more frequent and long-term maintenance needs.

Coordinating park development efforts

In the past, parks have generally been selected for upgrade one at a time with programming in one park planned in isolation from programming in other nearby parks. This has resulted in parks that are close to one another offering the same type of park experience with similar playgrounds, benches,

and picnic table amenities. This approach does not consider other important factors such as enhancing biodiversity, surrounding economic activity, elements that encourage social interaction, active transportation, changing demographics, and climate adaptation. Not all amenities or functions can be designed for in every park, but coordinating these elements across local parks that are near to each other can create a healthy network of complementary experiences in parks and open spaces for residents. Planning and development processes that secure new parks in sub-divisions may or may not consider overall connectivity to existing parks and open spaces in their plans. Looking at the collection of local parks more holistically will support a variety of park experiences that fulfill multiple functions for the community.

An evolution of engagement-informed design

Parks department engagement practices have evolved considerably since the 2010 Parks Strategic Plan. For many years, the approach to engagement included a single opportunity for the public to provide feedback on a limited number of pre-determined designs. A

final design was then created considering public input and other operational factors. This design was then constructed.

Through a process taking place over several years and with consideration for evolving engagement best practices, significant changes have led to a far more in-depth approach. Today's park renovation projects typically include several stages of engagement to hear from the public both earlier in the planning process, and at interim design stages. Each stage typically includes a combination of in-person meetings and online surveys to gather feedback on designs. As much as possible, a consistent approach to public engagement for park renovation projects is needed. With an engagement-driven decision-making approach, the City can equitably address needs that arise from changing neighbourhoods and communities.

As part of the 2023-2026 Strategic Plan action to "Enhance the city's engagement practices", the City is currently undertaking a review of corporate engagement practices for all departments, which includes a review of the Community Engagement Policy and related processes.

Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS)

Spaces (2022) categorizes privately owned public spaces, or POPS, as Alternative Open Spaces. POPS typically exist as part of high-density residential developments. These developments require general outdoor amenity areas (e.g., courtyards, enhanced streetscapes, central plazas, or rooftop spaces) that are used either as private amenity spaces for residents of the development, or as privately owned public spaces. It is important to note that POPS are not equal to public parks but are a complement to the public park system. This is why POPS are considered Alternative Open Spaces.

The concept of POPS is not new. Larger municipalities, such as Toronto, have had POPS guidelines since 2014. POPS have publicly available amenities and remain privately owned. Kitchener has only one property under such an agreement: a passive seating area at 460 Belmont Avenue connected to the Iron Horse Trail.

In order to ensure long-term access to POPS by the community, legal agreements are required permit them to function as valuable public spaces. Phase 3 of Breithaupt Block, for example, includes a POPS space

that is secured for public use through a public access easement.

The Planning Act now allows developers to provide POPs as an alternative to public parkland. As infill development continues to put increased pressure on existing park spaces, Kitchener should establish guidelines and policies to maximize the contributions of POPs as Alternative Open Spaces created through development to the public park system.







Data Sources

This section highlights the relevant sources of information and research used to develop recommendations for this topic. A total of 12 data sources, including engagement, have informed the Parks Master Plan recommendations. For more detailed information on each data source, please refer to the Places booklet.



Legislation



Equitable engagement



Engagement with the broader community



Engagement with City of Kitchener departments



Engagement with partner organizations



Comparative analysis



External research



Policy



City of Kitchener strategies



Region of Waterloo strategies



Best practices



City of Kitchener staff experience



Findings

Several themes emerged across topic areas, engagement audiences, and data collection methods. The following section reflects major themes that cut across several datasets from engagement methods. Findings relevant to more than one theme are reflected in each. For more detailed information on the overall engagement effort, please refer to the Places booklet.

Accessibility

It is important to acknowledge the broad spectrum of accessibility considerations when planning any given park and open space, including access to washroom facilities, accessible play structures, stable trail surfaces, and more. In many cases, accessibility considerations fit together well and benefit the whole population. For example, maintaining stable, paved trails can support both mobility devices and the enjoyment of the park space by the general public. However, some accessibility considerations can contradict each other. While metal slides can be slippery and therefore less safe, plastic slides can interfere with cochlear implants. It is important in all cases to engage meaningfully to understand how to make parks and open spaces accessible and enjoyable for all.

Inclusion

Feeling welcome and included in a space can mean very different things for different people. Spending free time, connecting with each other, playing, and relaxing are all subjective experiences. For some, having picnic tables to sit and socialize is important. For others, having places and equipment to play cultural sports and games will contribute to feeling welcome. It will be important to understand this diversity of experiences in an ongoing way to create parks and open spaces where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

Accessing parks and open spaces is also a consideration when planning inclusive spaces so that residents can meaningfully participate in the amenities those spaces have to offer. Those who expressed access challenges identified the following:

- Limited parking;
- Limited accessible parking;
- Distance travelled;
- Not having safe, reliable methods of transportation; including public transit, biking and walking;
- Parks being too busy and crowded;
- Terrain barriers such as slopes, winter conditions, gravel pathways, gaps in pathways;
- Poor asphalt conditions.

Environmental sustainability

It is vital to understand how to best preserve and promote environmental sustainability in parks and open spaces. Public engagement shows how environmental considerations can be included in all decisions, from conserving water in splashpads to leaning in to naturalized play spaces to adding more food-bearing trees in public spaces to support food security. Learning from evidence and local knowledge holders will be key to ensuring sustainable actions are consistently taken.

Health and wellbeing

Similar to the Inclusion section, things that support the health and wellbeing of people can vary. Many engagement sources recognize the physical, social, and mental health benefits of including natural spaces. Some of these findings include:

- Facilitating community connectedness through natural spaces, community gardens, cultural events, and spaces for all to play;
- Offering warming and cooling stations throughout parks and open spaces;
- Supporting methods to improve food security, including community gardens and knowledge to grow, process and store food;
- Taking a human rights approach to decision-making for public spaces.

Continually connecting with diverse community groups to support health and wellbeing through parks and open spaces is critical.

Information

Ways to approach the meaningful design of parks and open spaces relies on two-way information sharing between the public and City of Kitchener. Overall, engagement findings reflected a desire to have more information to help people engage with these spaces. Signage, historical and traditional teachings, information about the natural world, and information to support accessible and inclusive visits to spaces were all requested. A positive design approach will both be embedded with helpful information and will result in sharing helpful information to the public.

Safety

A safe design approach is one that prioritizes engagement how, when, and where it is safe to do so. Open lines of communication can support ongoing sharing of feedback regarding the safety of both the design approach and parks themselves.

Partnerships

Thoughtful relationship development and engagement processes with community members, partners, and groups underlines all of the above themes as a means to implementing recommendations in a meaningful way. Partnership opportunities were identified across virtually all topic areas as a way an to build equitable, accessible, meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable parks and open space network.



Recommendations

This section summarizes the recommendations specific to this topic that are informed by the broad and local context, data sources, and findings. Each recommendation begins with a number representing the order in which its implementation is prioritized. For a comprehensive list of all recommendations made for this master plan update and the implementation framework, please refer to the Places booklet.

Engagement-informed design

Tailor park experiences and amenities to the communities that use them and as supported through equitable community engagement.

Identifying park experiences valued by the communities they are situated within supports a responsive design approach to changing communities. Engagement that is tailored to the needs in the community will help scope key considerations when investing in park infrastructure. Feedback through recent engagements has highlighted the increasing importance of more seating and shade in parks and open spaces.

Implementing equitable engagement practices includes adopting the recommendations resulting from the corporate engagement review.

Pursue strategic master planning for select parks

Create development plans for identified parks or park networks impacted by multiple connected strategies, initiatives, asset needs, and future recreational opportunities.

Recommendations relating to major infrastructure improvements must be considered with connected City strategies because they overlap and impact park locations in a targeted way.

Parks identified for master planning of major infrastructure changes recommended through the Places strategy and other relevant strategic plans include:

- Budd Park
- Heritage Park

- Kaufman Park
- Laurentian Park (and network)
- Lions Park
- Queensmount Park (and network)
- Rosenberg Park
- Weber Park

Rather than find available space for desired amenities and develop it within the existing park amenities to minimize impact on other park uses, the recommended approach is to create a master plan for each park that considers the long-term use of the overall park to create a balanced and purposeful approach to major infrastructure changes. A master plan will maximize construction opportunities, cost-sharing, efficiency, and longevity with local consultation in mind.

07: Local park networks

Design local parks as networks of unique and complementary park experiences to deliver a variety of services while avoiding redundancies.

A network of parks is defined in this Parks Master Plan as a group of several local parks of various sizes often within walking distance from one another and generally in the same Planning Community. Parks designed as a local network should not be separated by a major road or highway. Upgrading park infrastructure using a network design approach responds to local context and encourages broader thinking about social, economic, and environmental benefits. By designing local parks as networks, the city benefits from:

- A balance of complementary active and passive recreation opportunities across a network (e.g., opportunities to sit and enjoy nature, picnic, or play organized sports)
- Ecosystem function integration for the whole community (e.g., by integrating green infrastructure that can help manage stormwater for the whole community)

- Faster upgrades that provide adequate spaces for a variety of community interests (e.g. sitting and gathering spaces, off-leash areas, sport courts, playgrounds)
- An increased overall level of recreational value

Selecting appropriate parks for a network design approach will consider:

- A collection of several local parks within 500 to 1,000 meters from each other with no major physical barriers (e.g., major roads or highways) between them
- Alignment with other City strategies as appropriate (e.g., Sustainable Urban Forest Strategy, Cycling and Trails Masterplan, Integrated Stormwater Masterplan)
- Consideration of complementary park programming, connectivity, and environmental improvement opportunities together
- Opportunity for distinct passive and active programming areas across identified network parks appropriate to park classification (e.g., traditional playground, splash pad, sports fields or courts,

community gardens, vs. unprogrammed fields, naturalization areas)

- Multiple parks in need of upgrades in close proximity to each other
- Placemaking opportunities for City grant programs

The network-based approach should also be applied through community planning, draft planning, and sub-division design and construction stages. New parks should be planned and designed to promote local and broader community connectivity, provide a variety of recreational programming opportunities and experiences for residents and provision of park amenities to the updated standards outlined in the Park Amenities booklet in this master plan.

11: Resource relationship-building

Resource engagement for and in-between projects and in alignment with the outcomes of the corporate engagement review.

As engagement methods for park projects have evolved to respond to best practices and community expectations, the funding and time requirements to do so meaningfully and effectively have not been accounted for nor been well resourced. Further, outreach to the community is limited to project-specific engagements, limiting the City's understanding of the impacts of the design decisions made in park spaces.

Properly resourcing engagement efforts through dedicated staff with engagement expertise, standardized methods tailored to project complexity, and with appropriate budgets will support a park design approach that is responsive to community need. Engagement practices should be in alignment with the outcomes of the review of the Community Engagement Policy.

14: Standard agreements for POPS

Develop a standard policy to outline the public use, design, and maintenance agreements for privately owned public spaces (POPS), consistent with the Park Dedication By-Law and Policy.

Kitchener maintains the position that POPS are not equivalent to public parkland. However, developers have recently proposed POPS more often as alternatives to parkland. The Park Dedication By-Law and Policy outline the reduction in parkland dedication for developers for POPS, and the general requirements they need to meet for the City to accept POPS. As the trend of POPS proposals continues, a more refined document is necessary to guide the legal agreements and physical development of these open spaces. A standard policy will allow the City to remain consistent with its approach to POPS proposals, efficiently guide their development and create spaces that make a positive contribution to the network of parks and open spaces.

Formalizing long-term agreements enabling POPS to remain accessible to the public will secure ongoing

public-private partnerships that enhance and protect the public space system for generations. There are benefits and risks associated with formal, long-term POPS developments. Risks can be resolved through standards, guidelines, and agreements.

Benefits:

- Establishes protection of public use for otherwise unused or inaccessible areas of high-density developments
- Provides a variety of open space experiences and explores types of recreational spaces that are not possible in a public park setting such as unique urban spaces, creative amenities, or a direct connection to small businesses and restaurants

Risks:

- Administration of a long-term agreement, typically 30 years or more, can add complexity and cost to basic park management
- POPS can often be in areas with structures such as parking garages. This poses significant physical

barriers that severely limit or eliminate park programming opportunities such as playground pieces or basketball nets requiring footings

- POPS remain in private ownership and operation. Ongoing public access cannot be guaranteed (e.g., gates may control or restrict public access)
- Quality of amenities is at the discretion of private condominium boards. If funding is reduced, maintenance and replacements may stop over time
- Residents of a development with a POPS are responsible for the cost of maintaining publicly available parkland in addition to their standard property taxes that contribute to funding for the public park system

19: Connect operating and life-cycle planning to capital works

All reporting and budget planning for capital park development to include recognition of changes to maintenance procedures and future life-cycling requirements including funding, labour, and equipment needs.

Assessing and projecting ongoing operating and life cycling costs with each new or renovated park will help identify if the funding required to maintain the new or replaced infrastructure should be increased or if it can be managed within the existing operating budget. This approach will provide transparency as to the real cost of meeting and maintaining park service level expectations and inform allocation of funds to deliver those services. Decisions to pursue each development or re-development will be informed by the projected life cycle costs, reinforcing a measured and sustainable approach.

27: Data-driven capital forecasting

Employ evaluation criteria to prioritize park renovations. Criteria to include community priority, park asset conditions, and accessibility.

Standardizing criteria for park renovations will provide an objective and transparent selection process. Established criteria will prioritize distribution of park spaces in areas of identified need through Spaces (2022). All the influences on the park renovation schedule will also be considered. Partnering with internal departments and external organizations to meet shared goals through redevelopment efforts is a key planning step.



Recommendations summary

Engagement-informed design

Tailor park experiences and amenities to the communities that use them and as supported through equitable community engagement.

Pursue strategic master planning for select parks

Create development plans for identified parks or park networks impacted by multiple connected strategies, initiatives, asset needs, and future recreational opportunities.

07: Local park networks

Design local parks as networks of unique and complementary park experiences to deliver a variety of services while avoiding redundancies.

11: Resource relationship-building

Resource engagement for and in-between projects and in alignment with the outcomes of the corporate engagement review.

14: Standard agreements for POPS

Develop a standard policy to outline the public use, design, and maintenance agreements for privately owned public spaces (POPS), consistent with the Park Dedication By-Law and Policy.

19: Connect operating and life-cycle planning to capital works

All reporting and budget planning for capital park development to include recognition of changes to maintenance procedures and future life-cycling requirements including funding, labour, and equipment needs.

27: Data-driven capital forecasting

Employ evaluation criteria to prioritize park renovations. Criteria to include community priority, park asset conditions, and accessibility.



