



Signature & Feature Parks

Part of the City of Kitchener's Parks Master Plan



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Related sections

Places

Spaces

Community Gardens

Dogs

Natural Spaces & Climate Adaptation

Park Design Approach

Trails & Lighting

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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.

A scenic view of a park. In the foreground, a paved path leads towards a pond. The pond is surrounded by lush green grass and various trees, some with yellow blossoms. A small building with a dark roof is visible on the right side. The sky is blue with some clouds. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

Introduction

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

Background

This section focuses on describing Kitchener's most identifiable parks: those that are unique, significant, or otherwise unable to be categorized with the majority of other parks. They are destinations for many beyond the city's borders. These parks are defined in Spaces (2022), carrying over the definition from the previous strategic plan (2010). This booklet profiles these parks, their history, development, and significance to the City of Kitchener and beyond.



Park classifications

Classifying park spaces in a city is a common tool for understanding the park inventory and managing the vast amount of space for which the City is responsible. It may be intuitive to know there is a difference between Victoria Park and any given local Neighbourhood park or Huron Natural Area and a typical protected naturalized area. Spaces (2022) outlines these park types in a more detailed and updated framework.

The 2010 Parks Strategic Plan defined the “highest” level of park classification as providing multi-activity or multi-sport venues and/or serve specialized recreational, social and economic functions for the entire city that may also draw regional-scale audiences.

When “Legacy Parks” came to represent these high level parks, they were also defined by having unique landscapes and characteristics with significant natural, cultural, or historical components.

Since Spaces was presented to and approved by council, further engagement with community and other

City departments has influenced understanding of what a legacy park is. Legacy parks have been renamed as Signature & Feature Parks.

Signature park: Victoria Park

Victoria Park is a category to itself. It fully represents the previous definition of Legacy Parks. An example of a historical component is the former City Hall clock tower now in Victoria park. The clock inspired the city’s logo.

Feature parks: Kiwanis Park, Huron Natural Area (HNA), Rockway Gardens, McLennan, and RBJ Schlegel Park

Feature parks are some of the more identifiable locations in the city and represent significant spaces, investments, and some or all of the Legacy Park characteristics.

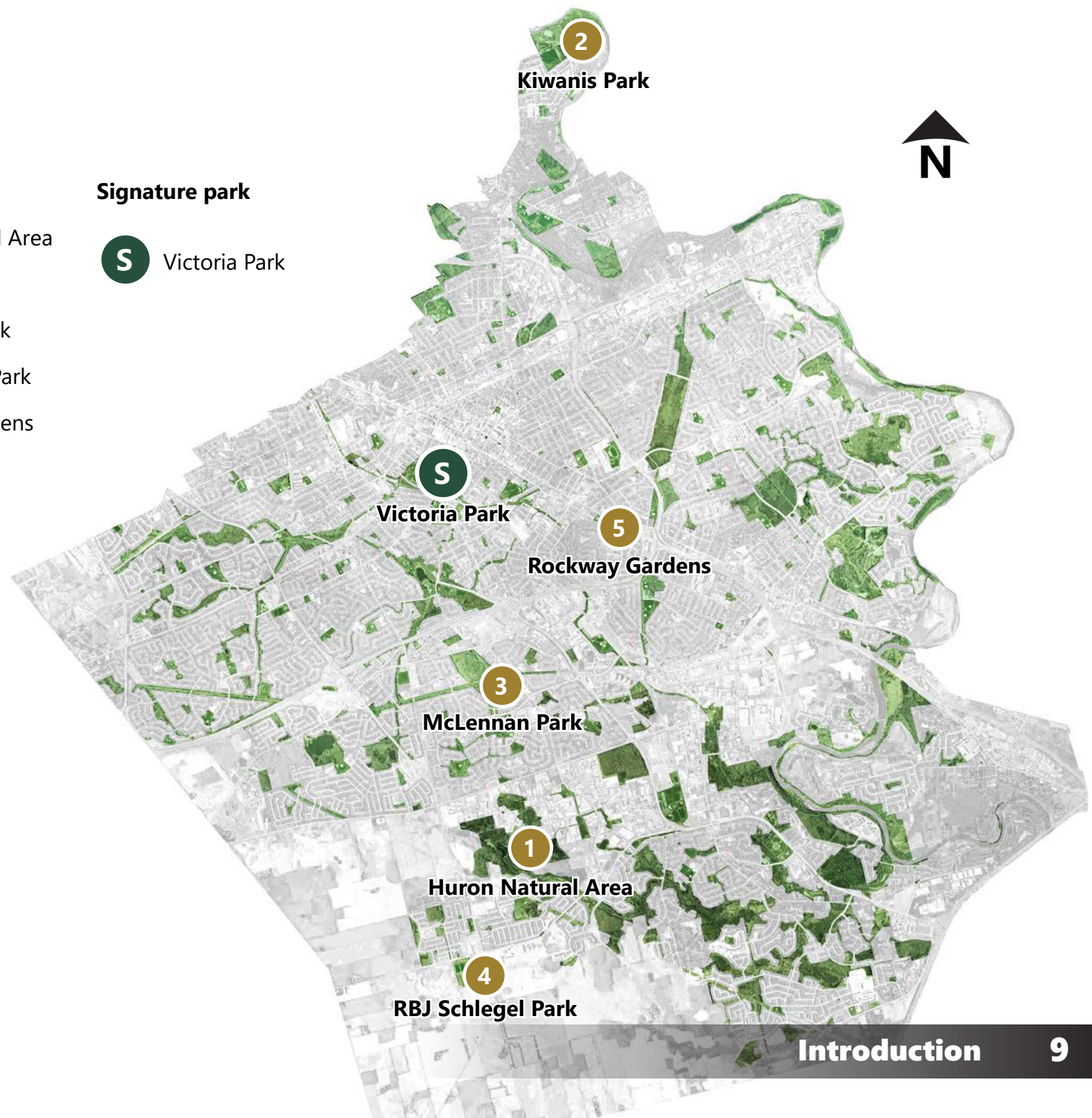
Map legend:

Feature parks

- 1 Huron Natural Area
- 2 Kiwanis Park
- 3 McLennan Park
- 4 RBJ Schlegel Park
- 5 Rockway Gardens

Signature park

- S Victoria Park



Impacts of classification

Spaces (2022) updated park classification system is meant to address Planned Park needs. The classifications help measure what we have against what is needed in the future. Since what can be achieved in the future is limited by Provincial policy, it is important to recognize that park development goals from the past are not realistic today. For example, Victoria Park and McLennan Park are not considered achievable in today's development environment due to their size and locations. Therefore, it would not be realistic to look at these parks as examples when setting goals for new, local park development.

There are other benefits to classifying special parks as Signature or Feature Parks:

Accurate budgeting

Asset replacements are typically assessed as a whole. For example, all playgrounds are assessed together. Locations for these assets are then planned through the capital budget process for renovation, upgrade, or replacement, occasionally paired with other infrastructure in the same location.

Signature and Feature parks each have historically been assigned their own asset management and operating budget with annual amounts allocated to address the specific needs of each park.

Unique amenities in each park

Victoria and Schlegel Park attract more visitors and have a wider reach, because of their size and variety of recreational offerings like courts, splashpads, seating areas, and playgrounds. Properly recognizing the demand and popularity of these parks will help define a budget for each facility and the amenities within them.

Each park within this classification also has its own development master plan and carries their own asset management and operating budget. With some exceptions, this classification of park can have stand-alone priorities and phased planning tailored to their unique context.



Signature park

Victoria Park

In 1894, Council, in what was known then as the Town of Berlin voted eight to six in favour of a new by-law adopting the Province's Public Parks Act. From there, the City envisioned an 11 hectare (110,000 m²) "city central park". Despite the narrow voting margin, Victoria Park was opened in 1896 and quickly became central to the city's development.

Today, it is the Signature Park in Kitchener. Victoria Park is a destination for local residents and beyond because of its size, tree canopy coverage, event programming, accessibility, downtown context, and natural and cultural history.

Key characteristics

Location and size

Originally deemed to be too far outside of town, Victoria Park now sits in the core of the city, 18 hectares (180,000 m²) of green space just outside of the Commercial Core community boundary. This size of park in such a central location is unachievable in today's park development environment.

History

The park is part of the Victoria Park Heritage Conservation District which includes the park and surrounding lands, and is designated under Part IV of the Ontario Heritage Act. The park itself still has architecture and landscape features from its creation including the Roos Island Bridge (1896) and Roos Island Pavilion (1924). The original Kitchener City Hall Clock tower was moved to the Gaukel Street entrance in 1975 and inspired the City's modern logo.

Water access

Locally known as Victoria Park Lake, the water feature is central to the park. Sandrock and Filsinger creeks enter the park into a large human-made pond at the north-west end and outlet into Schneider Creek at the southeast side of the park. As much as the "lake" is a functional part of the stormwater system, it has historically been viewed as an aesthetic and recreational asset.

Amenities and popularity

Victoria Park supports a wide variety of activities, including playgrounds, a splashpad, and court space, waterfront trails, and open turf space for picnicking. The popularity of the park as a destination location and venue for large-scale events has supported recurrent commercial activities like annual festivals. The Boathouse and other park vendors, further adding to its draw.



Feature parks

Kiwanis Park

Kiwanis Park is the city's second largest park at over 50 hectares (500,000 m²) in size. It is the northern-most property within Kitchener's city limits, nestled between residential properties and the Grand River. Kiwanis Park is remote in terms of location and is accessible by one local road only.

The park was originally developed by the Kiwanis Club in 1959 as a 19.4 hectare (194,000 m²) flood plain property. The club constructed an outdoor pool that opened in 1967, among other recreational features. The City of Kitchener had always owned the park, and in 2008 the Kiwanis Club handed over maintenance and management responsibilities to the City. The park continues to bear the club's name today.

Kiwanis Park offers an experience unlike any other in Kitchener's parks and is one of few Planned Park spaces with direct access to the Grand River.

Key characteristics:

Grand River

The majority of Kiwanis Park is within the Grand River floodplain. This limits its development potential but also provides many recreational opportunities. The Grand River serves as the park's backdrop with informal access to and views of the river along the Walter Bean Grand River Trail around its northern and eastern edges.

Amenities

Kiwanis has some of the largest park amenities of their kind in Kitchener. It is home to a wide range of well used facilities including playgrounds, sand volleyball courts, seven full-sized disc fields, a leash free dog park, a full-sized cricket pitch, and the city's largest outdoor pool.



Rockway Gardens

Although relatively small in comparison to other feature parks, Rockway Gardens stands alone as a park featuring highly manicured, modern-day, Victorian style gardening and passive park experiences.

The property was leased to the Kitchener Horticultural Society (KHS) beginning in the 1920s and today remains a between the two organizations. The park mainly offers passive activities and gardening programs that cannot be found in any other Kitchener park.

Key characteristics:

Gateway into Kitchener's core

Rockway Gardens serves as a main entry point into the central neighbourhoods and commercial core of the city. This is consistent with its original vision from the 1920s.

Supportive programming

Rockway Gardens also serves as an entry point to gardening. Kitchener Horticulture Society, in partnership with other public educational groups, offer community programming on gardening education, food and seed sharing, bulb sales, and various seminars hosted both within the park and around the city.



Huron Natural Area

From the mid-1980s, the city slowly began to build and protect what is now known as Huron Natural Area and in 1995, efforts were initiated to establish a formal joint venture and partnership with the Waterloo Region District and Waterloo Region Catholic School boards. The last major update in this park was in 2007 when the formal front entrance and extensive trail networks were developed over a two-year period. Although now thought of as one natural area, it is a collection of cultural landscapes, naturalized areas, ecological features, and experiences.

Key characteristics:

Location and size

Huron Natural Area is the largest open space property in the city at over 105 hectares (1,050,000 m²). As development continues around the property, it offers a vast naturalized setting among its industrial, commercial, and residential surroundings.

Trail networks

Seven kilometers of trails loop through and around the natural area, leading through its many ecological zones and providing a sense of exploration through each.

Water access

Within the natural area is the Board of Education pond, a natural body of water supported by the Strasburg Creek cold water stream. The pond is home to a wide variety of flora and fauna, most notably as a habitat for various turtle species. Boardwalks and viewpoints have been added to access the water while protecting its important habitat.

Natural playground and parking expansion

Kitchener's first natural playground was installed in 2014 as an active use area that complemented the park's wooded areas. As the popularity of the playground and trail system as a whole grew, a second parking lot was added in 2017. The expansion is a demonstration area for low impact development (LID), which allows rainwater to be absorbed into the ground where it falls.

Indigenous presence

There is evidence of indigenous settlement along the creekbank dating back to the 1500's. Archaeological findings are recognized on the site through art and signage. The City continues to work with Indigenous communities to ensure Huron Natural Area is a welcoming space for Indigenous people to gather for cultural celebrations and practices.



McLennan Park

A landfill until 1976 that was capped in the 1990s, this site was developed as a park in 2009 after a decade of planning. Though it has seen significant challenges, McLennan Park has become a recreational focal point in the overall park system. Its 100 foot (30 m) hill known locally as “Mount Trashmore” is used as a downhill bike track and toboggan hill. This type of recreational area does not exist elsewhere in the city.

Key characteristics:

Re-purposed landfill

McLennan Park represents a significant effort to re-purpose an area that would have otherwise been unusable space in the city and for surrounding residents.

Amenities

The park has a variety of active use options on top of its capped landfill. These include the previously noted 100 foot toboggan hill and downhill bike track, a splashpad, playground, washroom, various sports courts, skatepark, leash free dog park, and a large maintained lawn area.

Future considerations

Since opening in 2010, some of the amenities have had to close or be removed altogether due to unanticipated differential settlement of the lands. The Region continues to monitor the landfill and the on-going settlement concerns. The skatepark bowl was removed in 2018 due to settlement-related concerns. The washroom building was permanently closed in 2022 due to settlement preventing access and compromised utility connections. The splashpad, although open at this time, continues to require significant annual repair because of settlement-related drainage issues and will eventually need to be removed.



RBJ Schlegel Park

RBJ Schlegel Park (simplified to “Schlegel Park”) is the newest of the Feature parks, still under construction at the time of writing this master plan. The vision for the park was first developed in the early 1990s. It is now the hub of virtually all active park uses. It represents the most significant single investment in the city’s history responding to the city’s southwestern growth and demand for recreational infrastructure. When complete, Schlegel Park will offer one of the widest varieties of recreational activities of any park in the region.

Key characteristics:

Amenities

Schlegel Park is home to many active park uses: artificial and natural turf sportsfields, cricket field, splashpad, playground, basketball, tennis and pickleball courts, and an outdoor exercise area. The park offers activities for people of all ages and abilities.

Kitchener Indoor Recreation Complex

The park will be home to the new Kitchener Indoor Recreation Complex the city’s fifth and largest indoor pool, and its second and largest indoor turf facility. The indoor facility features a running track and community rooms, and plans are in place to develop an indoor gymnasium. The 190,000 square foot facility will serve the community for generations.

Heritage washroom

The property features a former residence resembling 1860s Scottish architecture. The house was to be protected, relocated and adapted to suit the park uses. It is now used as a public change room and washroom.

Stormwater

Unique to the park, all stormwater is managed onsite as there is no natural or human-made stormwater outlet. All rainwater that falls on the site moves back into the ground to the aquifer through low-impact development gardens or the one hectare stormwater management pond.



A riverside park

The Haldimand Tract

The Grand River stretches 280 kilometers, connecting villages, towns, and cities; and forests, wetlands, and grasslands. Its meandering corridor is both a city boundary and a natural heritage feature and was designated as one of Canada's heritage rivers in 1994. The river has shaped the evolution and development of Kitchener as a city.

For thousands of years, the Grand River watershed and all its tributaries were a source of sustenance, transportation, and spiritual connection for Indigenous communities living on their traditional territories.

The Grand River is located within the bounds of the Between the Lakes Treaty, No. 3, established between the Crown and Mississaugas of the Credit in 1784 and ratified in 1792. Through the Haldimand Treaty of 1784 the Six Nations, which includes the Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Tuscarora nations, were granted an area of 10 km on either side of the entire length of the Grand River in recognition of their support to the British during the American Revolution.

This area is called the Haldimand Tract.

The Grand River remains an important cultural and spiritual place for First Nations rightsholders and Indigenous persons living and working in Kitchener today.

Any parks and open space use within the Haldimand Tract and Treaty lands must recognize and acknowledge the importance of these lands to First Nations rightsholders, and their role in opportunities for action toward Reconciliation.

Continuous parkland along the Grand River

The benefits of a continuous, accessible, open space and parkland system along the Grand River have been acknowledged and identified within several plans and studies. These plans and studies include the Grand River Strategy (GRCA, 1993), the Grand River Corridor Conservation Plan (Region of Waterloo, 1995), Parks Strategic Plan (2010), the Leisure Facilities Master Plan (2013), the City's Official Plan (2014), and as recently as the City's 2023-2026 Strategic Plan to complete a Grand River park strategy.

The 2010 Parks Strategic Plan placed a high qualitative value on the open spaces along the Grand River with opportunities to contribute to public access to, appreciation and experience of the river valley. Through community engagement for Places, three priorities surfaced:

- Expand public open space within the Grand River corridor
- Create unique open space gateway features at major river crossings
- Develop a Riverside Park

The 2010 Parks Strategic Plan identified seven areas along the Grand River corridor that could complete the vision of a continuous public open space along the river. To anchor this vision of a contiguous public space corridor one of these seven areas would become a future Grand River Park. The seven areas are shown on the map included on this page.

It was recognized, however, that protecting these lands as part of the river experience was not expected in the short or medium term, nor necessary to meet objectives outlined in the Official Plan.



The Parks Strategic Plan provides an implementation strategy for the Grand River Corridor Conservation Plan and the City will endeavor to implement its recommendations where appropriate.

Official Plan [OP 8.C.1.2.] 



We will seek to maximize opportunities for public access to the Grand River to enable its recreational potential to be realized.

Official Plan, “Kitchener Tomorrow” 



To provide for a continuous public open space system, which includes the diverse natural areas of the Grand River and its major tributaries, supporting diverse recreational pursuits, environmental sustainability, active transportation and a high-quality public realm and urban landscape.”

Official Plan [OP 8.1.5.] 

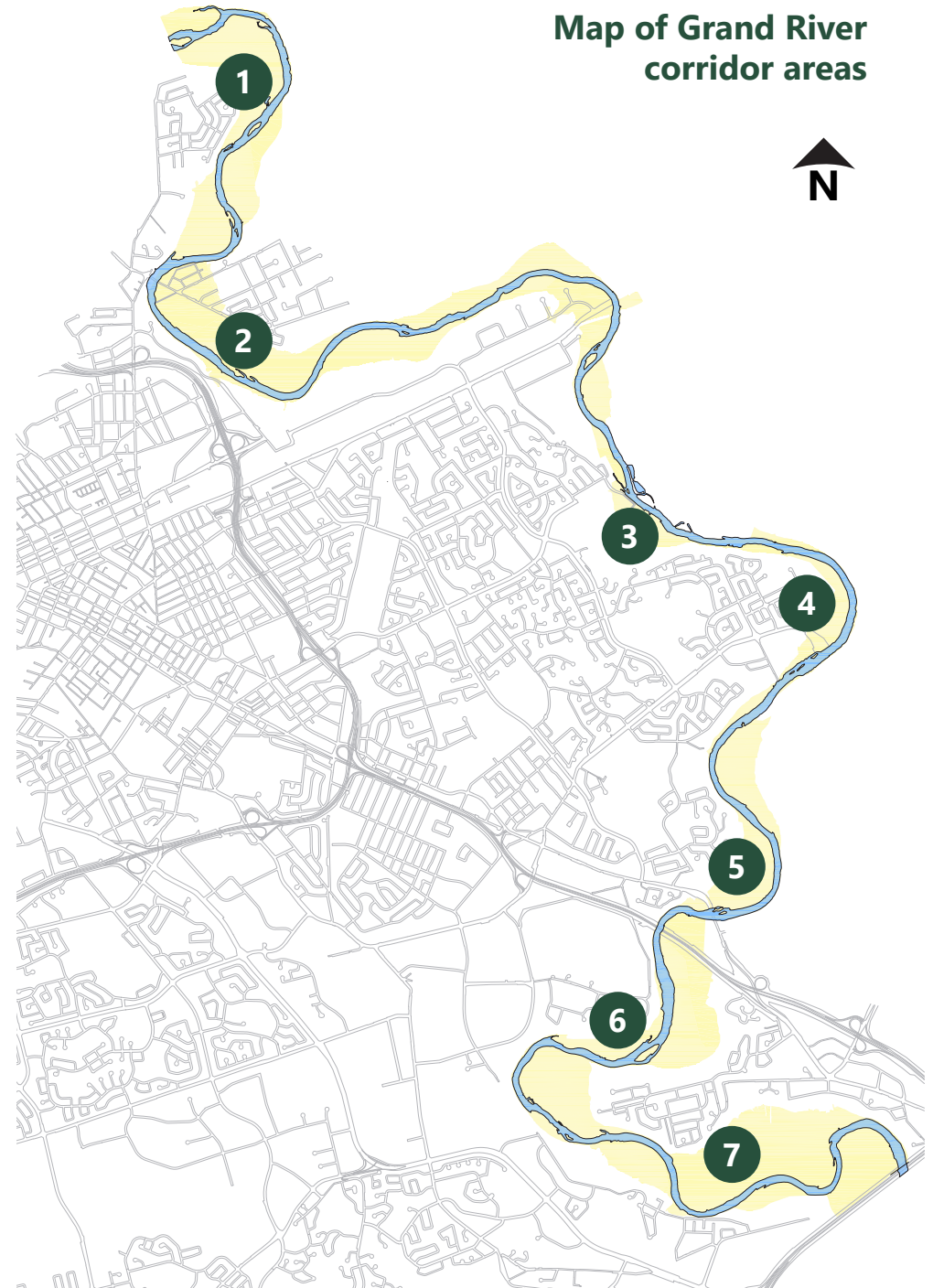


Map of Grand River corridor areas



Legend

- 1 the Bridgeport North floodplain
- 2 the Bridgeport East floodplain
- 3 Lackner Woods/Natchez Hills ESPA
- 4 Woolner Flats in Grand River South
- 5 the Freeport floodplain
- 6 the Hidden Valley ESPA/floodplain
- 7 the Pioneer Tower West floodplain.



A photograph of a child wearing a blue helmet and a blue patterned shirt, standing next to a yellow and black bicycle. The child is smiling and looking towards the camera. In the background, there is a wooden ramp or bridge structure made of planks, leading up a grassy hill. Another child in a pink hat and blue dress is standing on the ramp. The area is surrounded by trees and greenery, suggesting a park or recreational area.

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

Accessibility was a dominant theme that emerged during consultation.

Those who expressed accessibility challenges identified the following:

- Limited accessible parking
- Terrain barriers such as slopes, winter conditions, gravel pathways, gaps in pathways, and poor asphalt conditions.

Health and wellbeing

One connection drawn back to Signature and Feature parks from the engagement data was related to expansion, specifically of Victoria Park. We asked to rank four options to help focus park expansion and improvements in the Downtown, Civic Centre, and KW Hospital communities:

- Create fewer but larger parks
- Create more but smaller parks
- Improve existing parks
- Expand Victoria Park

The least popular option was to expand Victoria Park. Desired priorities included creating fewer but larger park spaces and improving existing parks.

Inclusion

Inclusion and access concerns were prevalent during engagement with residents.

Access barriers were noted to get to “larger” parks or higher tier service parks. These parks serve multiple communities and city-wide interests like City, Feature and Signature parks do. Getting to Victoria Park and Huron Natural Area was specifically mentioned as challenging. A greater proportion of respondents noted getting to larger parks as difficult, and a smaller proportion noted getting to larger parks as easy. Comparatively, access to Local Neighbourhood parks was largely perceived as very easy or easy.

Those who expressed access challenges identified the following as issues:

- Limited parking;
- Distance travelled;
- Not having safe, reliable methods of transportation including public transit, biking and walking;
- Parks being too busy and crowded.

Inclusion concerns that surfaced during engagement frequently related to Victoria Park. A number of residents communicated that the park is unwelcoming.

Engaged parties provided several reasons why they feel unwelcome in the park space. Aspects of the park that contribute to this include:

- Lack of accessible and safe play spaces;
- Tent encampments and public drug use;
- The legacy of place names and symbols;
- Not enough garbage cans;
- Not enough leash-free areas for pets.

Through engagement, several ideas surfaced for addressing these concerns. Kitchener residents suggested:

- Adding fencing around play spaces for children who may run away;
- Adding places to sit and rest in the shade;
- Ensuring folks living in parks have their short- and long-term needs met;
- Addressing the legacy of place names and symbols;
- More lighting on paths;
- More off-leash spaces for dogs;
- More well-maintained, accessible washrooms.





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.

A vision for a Grand River park

Continue with the Grand River Park Strategy as identified in the 2023-2026 Strategic Plan.

Each of the seven potential areas that could collectively contribute to a contiguous public open space along the Grand River was reviewed in 2015 for its potential to host a future riverside park. Grand River South, also known as Woolner Flats, was ranked highest based on its location, connectivity, site characteristics, and property status.

The vision for the park itself is yet to be defined and will be a balance of active versus passive programming and will include specific infrastructure to meet needs and service levels. The suitability of specific uses will be linked directly to the site's characteristics.

Among these seven sites, some options are not within the flood plain and may therefore allow for more active programming opportunities.

Efforts to finalize the future park's location along the river and park programming were completed in 2018. Property values and specific opportunities have changed significantly since that time. The riverside park development remains a strategic direction for the City, as highlighted in the 2023-2026 Strategic Plan. At its core, the park can become a community connection to the Grand River as part of the vision of a continuous public open space system along the water.

Long term plans

Initiate or update existing strategic and asset management plans for each Signature and Feature park including Victoria Park (underway), Huron Natural Area (underway), McLennan Park (underway), Rockway Gardens, Kiwanis Park, and RBJ Schlegel Park.

This master plan intends to provide high-level guidance for each Signature and Feature Park to use within each park's individual master plan. This is not to supersede future engagement processes of each plan, but to distill and communicate findings from the Places Parks Master Plan engagement pertaining to the city's larger parks.

Table 1 (to follow on page 36) depicts the major milestones and strategies that have been completed, are in progress, or have been planned for each of the Signature and Feature parks.

Park plan considerations

Barriers to feeling welcome

Feeling crowded in City, Feature or Signature Parks can be viewed as both a success for attracting visitors and also as evidence of a need to create more spaces for people to explore. Increasing demand leads to continual improvements not just at Signature and Feature Parks, but in local parks which can be accessed more easily.

Signature and Feature Parks will continue to be a popular draw by design. In some cases, there are no other viable open space options, particularly downtown and in growing residential areas near Victoria Park.

Efforts through the recommendations made in the Victoria Park Master Plan will begin to collect usage data with the goal of thoroughly understanding and documenting where, when, and how people use the park. This information will help target areas and periods of high and low use and serve as a baseline to inform future development decisions.



Access

As each Signature and Feature Park master plan develops, access to and within parks will be a priority. This could mean creating new or expanding existing parking lots, consulting with Grand River Transit on public transit routes, and building multi-modal access such as by trails, sidewalks and bike lanes.

Table 1: Strategies in progress and major milestones

Park	Original development	Master plan in place	Last updated	Major milestones						
				2007	2011	2012	2013	2014		
Victoria Park	1896	Yes	Underway		pond dredging and edge reconstruction three bridge replacements	major Boathouse and patio renovations		opening of David St. washroom		
McLennan Park	2009	Yes	Underway							
Rockway Gardens	1930	No	N/A	second gazebo installed						
Kiwanis Park	TBD	No	N/A		installation of dog park	installation of disc fields				
Huron Natural Area	2009	Yes	Underway				Strasburg Creek boardwalk expansion	natural playground installed		
RBJ Schlegel Park	2020	Yes	2013							

2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027		
three bridge replacement				three bridge replacement		re-opening of Boathouse Roos Island and bridge renovations					
		significant re-capping and additional park elements	skatepark bowl removal	washroom closure	comprehensive review of park assets		strategic park development plan update				
	complete outdoor pool reconstruction	full playground replacement				installation of cricket pitch					
parking lot expansion		major trail expansion to Strasburg Road					Indigenous placekeeping				
ground-breaking for initial park development			first phase opening		second phase opening			projected completion of indoor facility	final budget year for park development		

Recommendations summary



A vision for a Grand River park

Continue with the Grand River Park Strategy as identified in the 2023-2026 Strategic Plan.



Long term plans

Initiate or update existing strategic and asset management plans for each Signature and Feature park including Victoria Park (underway), Huron Natural Area (underway), McLennan Park (underway), Rockway Gardens, Kiwanis Park, and RBJ Schlegel Park.



