

Downsview Park: City planning through the development of a model sustainable community

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Abstract

Downsview Park is a story of transformation. From its roots as a former military base, Parc Downsview Park Inc. (PDP) seeks to transform the site into a unique urban recreation greenspace for the enjoyment of future generations on a self financing basis. Key to doing this is the creation of a national urban park that then creates a community around it to support, nurture and transform it. The process is complex and requires the support of a variety of stakeholders that surround the site as well as national partners on behalf of the national government of Canada that PDP take on the task without any direct financial support from the federal government, just the opportunity created through the land. The process has begun with the creation of the park design that is the result of 179 expressions of interest from 22 countries around the world and is built on the values of sustainability, stewardship, play, legacy and beauty. In combination these values are the corporate themes of heritage, innovation, technology, community and environment and are woven in to form an integrated theme. The site is undergoing a transformation that includes the possibility of a subway development and the creation of an urban development plan and sustainable community development guidelines that become a calling card to the marketplace of ideas and the potential of leading edge technologies and opportunities. This paper explores the challenges that have been presented to date and the progress that has been made and the opportunity to bring more partners into the planning in order to demonstrate how such a transformation can happen with hard work, commitment and determination to get the job done right. *Keywords: Downsview Park, sustainability, public open space, Canada Forest, policy development, self-financing, international design competition, sustainable community development guidelines, public consultation, urban development plan.*



1 Introduction

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” [1].

The Downsview Lands consist of 260.6 hectares (644 acres) of federally owned land in the northwest portion of the City of Toronto and the geographic centre of the Greater Toronto Area. 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, developed according to the principles of environmental, economic, and social sustainability.

More than 130 hectares (360 acres) of the total land area are earmarked for park and recreational activities. Approximately 102 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. PDP’s mandate requires that it be self-financing, with no appropriation of funds from the Government of Canada.

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.

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.”

Experts from many diverse disciplines recognize sustainability as the development strategy for the 21st century. A sustainable community fosters the interdependence of social, ecological, and economic well-being. A balance among the three components enables each component to achieve its maximum potential [2]. PDP plans to create that balance through the integration of common elements among the various land uses across Downsview Park.

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.



2 Downsview Park history

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.

Downsview is named after an 1830s farm settler that coined the phrase “this is a Downs View” and subsequently a farm was called “Downs View” It was named because of its high elevation and its excellent view looking southward towards Lake Ontario. The Downsview lands were acquired from the aboriginal peoples with the Toronto Purchase in 1787.

In 1851, construction of the Ontario, Simcoe and Huron Railway began and by 1853 much of the railway had been completed. The railway ran north through Downsview to Lake Simcoe and Lake Huron transporting passengers, freight and mail. It exists today as the Canadian National Railway, bisecting Downsview Park.

Although Downsview was initially a small rural community, it soon grew to become an urban industrial centre, well connected to the region by both commerce and culture. De Havilland Aircraft of Canada located to Downsview in 1929 and began assembling airframes at a small airfield in Downsview south of Sheppard Avenue adjacent to the railway. Later, land was expropriated from the community to enlarge the airfield and permits its use by jet fighters of the Royal Canadian Air Force and buildings were expanded.

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 [3].

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.

Since 1996, the site has been incrementally transformed, in the perception of the members of the surrounding community as well as nationally, from a military base to a park. This transformation is both physical, (characterized by the replacement of the barbed wire fences that characterized the base with open, welcoming entrances) as well as attitudinal (characterized by the introduction of programs and events designed to attract visitors to the site while the physical transformation can finally begin.



2.1 The creation of Parc Downsview Park Inc.

Parc Downsview Park (PDP) Inc's 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 Inc. was created in 1999 to formally assumed responsibility for managing and developing Downsview Park and to harness the opportunity presented with the closure of CFB Toronto. The government recognized that it had an unparalleled opportunity to make a positive impact on the City of Toronto through the retention of the former base lands under federal administration and to transform the land in an urban area to improve the quality of life for the community and a model for all of Canada.

Since that time great strides have been made affirming the mandate and refining the vision of Downsview Park as an environmentally, economically and socially sustainable community. Downsview Park represents one of the largest sustainable development opportunities in Canada. Detailed, thoughtful plans are in-place to achieve the vision.

In February 2004, Parc Downsview Park Inc. (PDP) received the final conceptual design for the Park Plan. The Park Plan is the cornerstone for the development of Downsview Park. The exciting and dynamic plan defines the character of the sustainable community and provides the strategy and process for building the balance of Downsview Park. The Park Plan was the culmination of a series of informal and formal stakeholder consultations held in the summer and fall of 2003 as well as the expertise of a multi-disciplinary design team. The process originated with the International Design Competition in May 2000 that chose *Tree City* as the winning concept for Downsview Park.

The values and principles of the February 2004 Park Plan are driving the ambition for the overall park development. In 2005 PDP began the further evolution of the plan into the Comprehensive Park Plan project to revisit and refine the February 2004 Park Plan for the primary public open space.

Subsequently as part of the creation of the Urban Development Plan and Sustainable Community Development Guidelines of which the Comprehensive Park Plan forms part of PDP commissioned a number of technical studies on various subjects including recreation, hydrology, and geotechnical, aquatic and terrestrial ecology along with transportation, infrastructure and energy. These studies and the Comprehensive Park Plan and Urban Development Plan will provide necessary background material to transform the primary public open space.

Currently the park design team are preparing the Comprehensive Park Plan that started with the development of the Canada Forest. This work is being integrated with the Urban Development Plan and Sustainable Community Development Guidelines, to create the Downsview Park Sustainable Community Master Plan.

2.2 The Downsview Park International Design Competition

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 because, unlike most of Canada's parks, the Downsview site does not offer an extraordinary landscape that needs to be preserved or protected. Instead, 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.

The jury members unanimously selected Tree City as a project of incomparable vision and promise. The Jury's Report considered Tree City a design concept that links current living conditions to the reality of an urban park for the 21st century. 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 [4].

2.3 The Canada Forest

In spite of the continued delay in the lands being transferred to PDP, the first phase of the construction of Downsview Park began in 2005. The first step was to regenerate the soil, which has been compacted by more than 50 years of non-agricultural use, so that it will again support the lush vegetation that is planned for a very significant portion of the site. A major feature of this initial work is the development of the Canada Forest which was started with a partnership with Natural Resources Canada and its Forest 2020 initiative. The planting of a forest within an urban setting actualizes one of the compelling images embodied in the *Tree City* design.

PDP has adopted a ten year schedule for the implementation of the Park Plan. In 2005-2006 it was decided that the immediate implementation of a significant, visible portion of that plan was required to maintain public credibility. Significant activities will occur in each year that will transform portions of Downsview Park, culminating in full realization of the plan in 2011-2012 provided it can be done on this timeline on a self financing basis.

The planting of the Canada Forest began in 2006 and will extend over two to three seasons depending on the availability of supplies from the nurseries. PDP specified that most of the plants for the Canada Forest must be native and grown from local seed sources and reflective of species that are representative of other parts of Canada but can grow in the current climate. The contractor is responsible for the supply and installation of plant material and oversees the new plantings for two years. The contractor is further responsible for developing and maintaining a database of all planting stock, including labelling the plant colonies in the fields and maintaining their survival rates.



2.4 Urban development plan

In September 2005 Parc Downsview Park (PDP) Inc. issued a Request for Proposal for the preparation of the urban development plan and sustainable community development guidelines. The Urban Development Plan will provide PDP with a planning tool to ensure that PDP's values and goals can be realized through the best long term development strategy for Downsview Park. It will determine the best use for each block will ensuring that PDP generates sufficient return to meet the mandate of constructing and maintaining Downsview Park in perpetuity.

Completion of the workplan will lead to the development of: a Street, Block and Community Plan; an Open Space Plan that integrates the park element physically into the rest of the site; sustainable urban design criteria including building and open space relationships that reflect ecosystem healthy, alternative energy sources, street scaping, pedestrian, bicycle, & vehicular relationships; an Energy Utilization Plan with an emphasis on renewal energy sources; sustainable building standards reflecting LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standards, such as super efficient building envelopes, re-use of building materials from existing site, thermal mass systems, green roofs, passive solar strategies, alternative renewable heating/cooling methods & water conservation strategies; sewer and water plans; sustainable housing plans; and, transportation planning and development

2.5 Public consultation

There is 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 impacting on development decisions. Parc Downsview Park Inc. was acknowledged for consultation excellence in the past and wants to maintain a high standard in the future.

The primary goals of Parc Downsview Park's (PDP) public consultation activities are to inform and educate the public about Downsview Park; to build awareness, understanding and support for Downsview Park, maximizing stakeholder confidence in PDP, its activities and strategies; to engage the public through an effective two-way flow of communication between stakeholders and PDP; and, to introduce Downsview Park to new audiences as well as expand existing audiences' understanding and encourage active involvement in the Downsview Park's development.

PDP is striving to set the standard for the values of transparency, accountability and accessibility in the eyes of the public and exceed the expectations of PDP stakeholders and demonstrate PDP's commitment to meaningful public consultation and participation.

Consultation has been an important tool guiding PDP's success in obtaining public input on planning principles & guidelines, concept plans, proposed uses, park concepts & programs, development applications and design guidelines; identifying issues of public concern; establishing a common vision with the



public on concepts and ideas to incorporate into the park's development; developing ideas for the parkland; and, refining the park design concept so that it can be implemented.

The community is a very significant, important stakeholder for PDP and it is important for it to be engaged on a consistent and on-going basis as Downsview Park continues to evolve. On a day-to-day basis, it is the local community that brings the park to life and subsequently helps to enhance its image and build its reputation as a place for all people, throughout the four seasons. However, PDP has a national mandate and it is expected that Downsview Park will be a place that all Canadians visiting this part of Canada can relate to. As such the website and larger promotion of the Downsview Park is key and ongoing. This will ultimately bring value to all Canadians.

3 Financing the development of the Downsview Park Sustainable Community

Downsview Park offers many advantages for both short and long-term leasing opportunities. Development sites, buildings and facilities are available for commercial and business enterprises. PDP has 1.7 million gross sq. ft. of space which can be leased for: office/ commercial, warehousing, trade shows, industrial, recreational and film production. Downsview Park is strategically located in the geographic centre of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The site is located only a short distance from Toronto's downtown core, Pearson International Airport and major highways (400 & 401). The site is easily accessible by Toronto's subway system, and by local and regional roadways.

In July 2006, Parc Downsview Park (PDP) Inc. received title to the Downsview Lands Approximately 231.5 hectares (572 acres) were transferred under PDP control

This is exciting news for PDP, the local community, our tenants and all our stakeholders. Now that PDP has control of the land, it can move forward with confidence and purpose to fulfill its mandate and achieve its vision. In particular, PDP is now able to proceed to make the necessary capital investments to attract more valuable, longer term tenancies that generate the funds to build the park on a self-financing basis.

Transfer of the land allows PDP to build the Downsview Park Sustainable Community through implementation of the Downsview Park Community Master Plan for the primary public open space and also continue to foster partnerships with private, public and not-for-profit sector organizations who share PDP's vision.

In the absence of the transfer of the land, PDP was required to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Department of National Defence. The MOU ensured that PDP could conduct its activities, including implementation of the park design, in accordance with its approved mandate and corporate plan. However, the MOU had a significant, negative impact on PDP's ability to generate the revenue required to finance the development of Downsview Park. This challenge no longer exists.



PDP will now keep all revenues generated from tenants occupying space at Downsview Park. Prior to the land transfer these revenues flowed to the Government of Canada's Consolidated Revenue Fund. PDP will also continue to retain the revenue generated through PDP's own programming initiatives

3.1 The Downsview Park Foundation

The Downsview Park Foundation will assist with the development of Downsview Park by generating financial support and gifts from corporations and the general public. The Foundation was incorporated in November 2002 as an independent corporation with its own mandate and Board of Directors.

The objects of the Foundation include to promote and encourage the development and use of the designated parkland areas for the benefit of the general public; to promote and encourage the development of a unique urban recreational green space on Downsview Park for the perpetual use and enjoyment of future generations; to contribute to the cost of building, developing and operating Downsview Park by way of gifts to PDP and to other organizations, institutions or trusts, which are registered charities and which agree to utilize such gifts for purposes consistent with the objects herein; to support charitable projects, programs and activities including community projects, programs and activities carried on at Downsview Park.

In 2005 the Downsview Park Foundation was granted charitable status through the Canada Revenue Agency so that it can raise funds for the Park. It is expected that it will take several years to build up donor support in the community for the Downsview Park Foundation given the unique nature of the project. The park design includes additional features that will be added to the site as appropriate and when funding is available. PDP anticipates that the Downsview Park Foundation will sponsor fundraising for those elements.

4 Downsview Park today

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.

4.1 Community and educational programs

In keeping with the vision of the site as a place "for Canadians to enjoy in all seasons", a year-round roster of school and community programs has been created to show the potential of the site as a legacy for future generations. Community programs are designed to reflect such values as: culture, heritage, community, technology, innovation, environment, legacy, sustainability, stewardship beauty and play. A representative list of titles includes: The Park in Winter, Heritage Day, National Wildlife Week, Earth Day and Doors Open



Toronto. Many other partnerships are part of what makes Downsview Park special and we haven't started to fully realize its potential.

Downsview Park offers many unique curriculum-based programs for elementary school students in the Greater Toronto Area. Designed to support Ontario's Ministry of Education Curriculum Guidelines, the programs, offered free of charge, year-round in the Discovery Centre at Downsview Park, offer creative and inquisitive children the opportunity to explore the rich natural and cultural heritage of Downsview Park and to tackle the challenges posed by sustainability.

Over the past nine years, thousands of children have participated in Downsview Park's School Programs. The programs include Flight in the Park, Energy Conservation, Waste Not Want Not, Water World, Tree City and Park in Winter. These programs continue to be reviewed and evolve to expand awareness of the Downsview Park and its activities.

4.2 Seasonal and special events

In addition to this Downsview Park hosts a roster of four large scale seasonal events which help to define the character of the park as a venue for the entire family, including Canada Day, our largest annual event that attracts up to 80,000 people and is widely recognized as the most spectacular Canada Day celebration in the Greater Toronto Area. A tradition of one-of-a-kind attractions (e.g. Canada Day 2000 Downsview Park hosted the largest Citizenship Court in Canadian history) have helped to raise the profile of the park as a national attraction.

Over the years Downsview Park has also become a venue for a variety of cultural festivals that reflect the ethnic diversity of the Greater Toronto Area. These include Festival de Verano (A Latin festival) Viva Goa (a celebration of Goan culture) and The South Asian Trade Show, to name a few.

5 Sustainability metrics

Key to the success of PDP's sustainable community is the development of an empirical yardstick by which progress can be measured. PDP is challenging the conventional notion that sustainable parks in urban areas are just islands of nature. PDP's view of sustainability requires a symbiotic relationship between business and park: the park as a business and PDP's business as a park. Downsview Park aims to be a demonstration of economic, social and environmental sustainability objectives working together to create a new harmony.

Open spaces in highly urbanized areas are almost always degraded by human engagement. Downsview Park is a public space that was used for another public purpose. Nature working on its own is not sufficient to bring about a socially and ecologically desirable regeneration of the site. Sustainability policies and indicators will help PDP assess the impact of its actions over time in achieving the economic, social and ecological balance and integration. The policy process and indicators process can now commence more aggressively given the recent transfer of the land, and through the Guidelines and other processes



5.1 Sustainable community development guidelines

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 will contain 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 [5].

6 Conclusion

Parc Downsview Park Inc. (PDP) is determined to achieve the mandate which has been entrusted to us by the Government of Canada and build the Downsview Park Sustainable Community.

Transfer of the land along with the authority to borrow allows PDP to proceed to invest more confidently in building the Downsview Park Sustainable Community through implementation of the Park Plan for the primary public open space and to continue to foster relationships and partnerships with private, public and not-for-profit sector organizations who share PDP's vision of a sustainable community. It will also allow PDP to attract more valuable, longer term tenancies that would bolster the financial position of the corporation.

The past successes of PDP have been considerable and the future potential of Downsview Park is immeasurable. A great deal of progress has been made to achieve the vision for Downsview Park. PDP has created a winning formula for the creation of an urban park for the 21st century and that becomes a leading edge sustainable community.

References

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