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York Street Park and Rees Street Park – January 22, 2018 Public Meeting Activities Report by Groundswell

January 22, 2018

The following summary report is a Synthesis & Preliminary Analysis of Key Insights as part of the engagement process for York Street Park and Rees Street Park conducted by Waterfront Toronto in collaboration with the City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry and Recreation division, Bespoke Collective and Groundswell Projects.

Comments, questions or concerns? Please contact:

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**York St. & Rees St. Parks Community Consultation
On January 22 2018 at Harbourfront Centre 6-9pm**

Synthesis & Preliminary Analysis of Key Insights by Groundswell Projects
Submitted February 1, 2018

PARKS KEY THEMES:

The following are the key themes that emerged from the Envelope Wall, Meet Your Neighbours and the Story Circle activities. These themes were entwined throughout the data collected through all three of these activities. The more detailed comments on the Envelope Wall post cards and the qualitative data from the interactive activities provided a better understanding of the underlying motivation and interests associated with the solutions the participants proposed and asked for.

How can the design of York St. and Rees St. Parks help residents and visitors enjoy more outdoors stress-free? Participants expressed a strong desire to spend more time outdoors, both in planned and unplanned ways: in all seasons, for longer periods of time and in more spontaneous or unplanned experiences, such as over lunch, on a break or in daily activities, both during day time and night time. Participants want park design to support these experiences by making them easy and stress-free. They described wanting to relax and enjoy their experiences, using words and phrases such as “unimpeded, stress-free, not spending time looking for...” The identified factors that would help to facilitate such stress and worry-free experience included:

- Access by different modes – safe bike locking stations and affordable car parking (for people coming with families);
- Environmental comfort in parks – protection from wind, lighting, shade;
- Washrooms – to stay out longer;
- Signage and wayfinding;
- Separation of conflicting uses: having a dedicated dogs off leash area was seen as something that would help create more stress free environment for people with children (not worrying about sitting on and touching the grass);
- Access to free (unpaid) activities in parks; and
- Proximity – having a park nearby allows people to go outside during a break or lunch, or for daily walks;

What would it mean to provide immersive experiences with nature in urban parks such as York St. and Rees St. Parks? The importance of nature and green space in parks for participants was connected with their desire to escape the city, while still being in the city. Participants used words/phrases such as “refuge, escape, away from the city, and disconnected from the city” to describe this experience. They see this escape achieved through an immersive experience with nature. They described their connection to nature in a highly sensory manner, through sight, touch, smell, eg. “Walking barefoot on the grass.” They expressed desire to see more naturalized areas in parks, including trees, grass, native plants, etc.

This aspiration for a more immersive experience with nature was paired with a desire to exclude from parks the things and experiences that participants identified with cities. Fear of seeing more concrete came out strongly in the comments. In this regard, the Gardiner bents in York St. Park were viewed as more concrete and requests to remove them were framed as ‘removal of concrete.’ Other city-related experiences that participants wanted not to see in parks included

noise and congestion. The desire for a stress-free experience in parks could also be interpreted as being related to the desire for escaping the daily city experience.

How can we bring interaction with water in York St. and Rees St. Parks?

Participants identified views of the lake and interaction with water as an important experience that helps to create connection with nature. There was a sense that views of the lake create a feeling of space and expanse, described as another way to escape the density of the city. There was an overall desire to see more direct access to water on the waterfront. For Rees St. and York St. Parks participants described interaction with water via water features.

How can park design facilitate diverse social experiences for users? There were three types of social experiences identified. The first was about creating places for play, for both younger children and for youth (teenagers). There was a sense that this was missing from the area, considering a number of schools and children's programs around. The second was people watching, including seeing active uses, play and interaction among people in the parks. People described this as "energizing" and feeling connected. The third type of social experience was interacting with others. This included spending time with loved ones and friends, as well as meeting new people. To facilitate this, participants wanted to see comfortable spaces for sitting and rest. One person even said that they wanted to see support for visitor access so that "my friend will visit me." Interaction with others also included interest in seeing a diversity of people using the park (eg. a mix of people not one culture at a time) and creating inclusive spaces. The associated fears included a fear that parks may become dominated by one group and exclude others, and also fears of congestion.

Could the leftover bents in York Park be re-invented from just concrete to being part of the park? Some participants wanted them removed, while others wanted to have them left. Arguments pro removal were about removing concrete from parks. Arguments pro keeping suggested integrating them into the park via public art, and a fear that the removal may delay park development.

How can we create distinct spaces that are not overdesigned? There is interest in seeing design that would help shape the two parks as distinct spaces, but also not over designing and overprogramming them. Public art was mentioned as a priority. There was interest in art that could be interacted with.

Could a dedicated "dogs off leash" area bridge the interests of both, dog owners and non-dog owners? There was strong support for a "dogs off leash area" in York St. and Rees St. Parks. This support came from dog owners as well as non-dog owners. Non-dog owners were interested to see a dedicated area for dogs because it would help create "clean" areas without dogs, for sitting and playing on the grass.

There was differentiation between Rees and York Park, but these comments do not provide a clear picture of what is different about the two parks: Participants made the differentiation between the two parks in their comments on the Envelope Wall postcards. This shows that they do see the two parks separately. However, the comments about both parks were of very similar nature, i.e. participants seem to be asking for similar things at each location. For example, there were comments asking for a dog park, a water feature and a play area for both parks. The only clear differentiation for Rees St. Park was the focus on preserving views of the lake. For York St. Park, there were more requests for public art.

Recommendations for further research and additional engagement:

- *What kinds of feelings and sensory experiences do people identify with city and with nature?* The interest in immersive experiences with nature was framed in many cases as an escape from the city. It would be useful to better understand what are the sensory experiences and feelings people identify with the city and with nature to help inspire the design of parks. It would also be useful to understand if these experiences and feelings are the same or different for residents of the different parts of the GTHA. For example, among the city-like experiences that were mentioned are congestion, concrete and density; in contrast with relaxation and open space associated with nature. Sensory mapping is an activity that could be used for this purpose.
- *What are the differences between visitor and resident perspectives?* This community consultation did not clearly capture the different needs and perspectives of residents and visitors. Facilitators' observations and conversations suggest that it may be useful to further explore the differences between how these two groups experience the waterfront.

Dotmocracy results:

Top 5 both parks:

Disconnecting, unwinding, and relaxing
Enjoying public art
Enjoying the outdoors/fresh air
Connecting with nature and wildlife
Taking my dog to play and socialize

Top 5 Rees:

Disconnecting, unwinding, and relaxing
Enjoying public art
Enjoying the outdoors/fresh air
Enjoying views of the lake
Connecting with nature and wildlife

Top 5 York:

Disconnecting, unwinding, and relaxing
Enjoying public art
Enjoying the outdoors/fresh air
Connecting with nature and wildlife
Using the park at night

Top 5 by age:

<18	18-34	35-50	51+
Feeling safe	Disconnecting, unwinding, and relaxing	Enjoying public art	Disconnecting, unwinding, and relaxing

Playing with friends	Enjoying public art	Connecting with nature and wildlife	Enjoying the outdoors and fresh air
Connecting to wifi with a wireless device	Enjoying the outdoors/fresh air	Disconnecting, unwinding, and relaxing	Enjoying public art
Disconnecting, unwinding, and relaxing	Purchasing food and drink	Taking my dog to play and socialize	Using the park at night
Using the park at night	Enjoying views of the city	Taking my children to play and socialize	Enjoying music

Participation:

Total – 100; <18 = 2; 18-34 = 27; 35-50 = 32 or 33; 55+ = 38 or 39.

Potential categories for analysis of Dotmocracy (suggested by Parks, Forestry & Recreation):

- Passive park experiences
- Contemplative experiences
- Active experiences
- Interactive experiences
- Learning experiences
- Cultural experiences
- Social experiences