

***Stakeholder Meeting #2
St. James Park Master Plan and Park Improvements
Feb 11, 2016, 10:00am – 12:30pm***

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Date: Feb 11, 2016, 10:00am – 12:30pm
Time: 2.5 hours
Location: St James Cathedral Centre, Lecture Hall (2nd floor), 65 Church Street

Context and Overview

Plans are being made to revitalize St James Park including its walkways and structures, and to add a new playground area. The project addresses distinctive components of St. James Park, including important heritage concerns, public art, performance spaces and park usage.

Objective

The objective of Stakeholder Meeting #2 was to seek input on the preliminary park master plan concepts and solicit high-level comments on site planning of the major programming elements, refinements to circulation and direction on the preliminary concepts for the pavilion proper. The concepts would be refined and then presented at the upcoming Public Meeting in March.

Participants

Stakeholder Meeting #2 was attended by several members of the St. Lawrence BIA, the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood Association, and representatives of St. James Cathedral. Beatrice Taylor represented the City of Toronto Parks, Forestry & Recreation department. Councillor McConnell and her staff member Claudia Calabro were also in attendance.

The design team, led by PMA Landscape Architects, was represented by principal Fung Lee, project manager, Heather Cullen, and consulting architect Roland Colthoff, Principal of RAW.

Landscape design lead Fung Lee gave a 70-minute presentation of the preliminary park master plan, with additional information on the pavilion design concepts from consulting architect Roland Colthoff. The presentation is available for viewing here: www.stjamesparkmasterplan.wordpress.com/stakeholder-meeting-2-feb-11/

The meeting was facilitated by MASS LBP's Jane Farrow and note-taker Zahra Syed. The input gathered is summarized here, unattributed, and available for public review. A Meeting Agenda is included as Appendix A.

Project Updates

City of Toronto PFR staff member Beatrice Taylor offered the following updates:

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- The project workplan is on track, spring 2016 is the time frame for decisions about final plans, and a tender slated for issue in winter 2017, and construction slated to begin in Spring/Summer 2017.
- Labour negotiations with City of Toronto employees may disrupt the consultation dates, stay tuned for further updates but for now, the next public meeting is confirmed for Thursday March 24, 6:30 to 8:30 pm
- Status of public art: In a meeting with the City of Toronto public art officer, it was determined that the Nancy Holt piece would be restored and relocated. As well, there may be flexibility for moving the Robert Gorlay statue and in-ground plaques in the north-west quadrant.

Master Plan Presentation – Fung Lee, PMA Landscape Architects

Lead designer/landscape architect Fung Lee, Principal of PMA, gave an overview of the project, the history and analysis of the park inventory, as well as the Vision Statement and design goals. The presentation is available for viewing here.

(www.stjamesparkmasterplan.wordpress.com/stakeholder-meeting-2-feb-11/)

It was recommended by a participant that the design team look up the updated Toronto Preservation Board Report that was recently published.

Feedback from Stakeholders

Playground

There was strong support for siting the playground in the east quadrant where the public art piece by Nancy Holt entitled "Catch Basin" currently sits but will be re-located to another location in the city. It was felt that this was a strong location as long as fencing issues were addressed along Jarvis and Adelaide, and the overall design approach suited the location. The north location was not favored because it would occupy the park space that is central and open, and currently used by all ages for informal sports. The concern was that users entering the northwest entry point would arrive at the park and identify the park as a playground.

In response to the slide titled Park + Playground Scale Comparison (slide 127), questions were asked about the ratio and percentage of playground space was being proposed for St. James Park, and how that would compare to the footprint of other playgrounds in neighbouring parks. Beatrice Taylor clarified that there is no set formula for playground size related to overall park size, but rather the playground size is dictated by how many users are anticipated, the type of play and the required safety zones around it. The design team said that they will continue to think this through in further design iterations and the designers will aim to deliver a rich play experience within the St. James context.

There was generally no response to the precedent images in terms of the type/ style of playground.

Circulation

The proposal to widen the primary paths and maintaining its relative orientation with some “straightening-out” was generally acceptable. There was a question whether the width would be able to accommodate vehicles that enter the park, to which Fung Lee responded that the main paths will be widened to 2.7m. Fung explained that this is the minimum width to accommodate vehicles, and that the design also needs to minimize disturbance on adjacent existing trees and their root zones.

A secondary pathway around the park, as suggested in the pathways and circulation primary plan, would give people walking through the park an alternate route and alleviate congestion adequately.

Permeable surfaces for secondary pathways, like stone screenings, were discussed. Some people voiced reservations about using these materials because they could appear ‘messy’ as loose material tends to migrate, and has operational issues and implications. Pea gravel has proved unsuccessful in Moss Park.

Park Entrances

Participants felt that park entrances should be highlighted, celebrated, and have equal weight and clear connections to the pavilion site and design. A desire for more seating at the entrances was expressed, with the caveat that the entry designs have an upgraded quality in character. Concern was expressed about the loitering that happens around the north-west park entrance on Adelaide and adjacent parking lot. The design team was asked to try to come up with ways to encourage ‘respect’ for this park entrance and discourage the loitering that currently occurs here.

Formal Garden

Widened and additional garden paths are being proposed to permit additional bench seating around the fountain and entrance area, as a strategy in the master plan to anticipate and accommodate the increased number of pedestrians entering the park from King Street, thereby allowing more permeability into the park. The addition of some widened paths and accessible benches are also required for compliance with accessibility guidelines, allowing users with mobility aids and strollers to access the formal garden. Participants voiced concern that this might put pressure on the garden itself and asked the design team to consider maintaining (i.e. not adding) circulation routes and seating in order to limit the foot traffic and in the formal garden area. A participant noted that more pathways does not necessarily mean less plants. The eastern portion of the garden has been expanded to formalize and make more purposeful, the southeast entry point.

The removal of the existing fence was raised for discussion, to allow for more visual permeability into the park in the long-term. The general response was to maintain the fencing around the formal garden in light of the desire to protect the formal garden from overuse and dogs; the garden should remain the 'oasis' in the park. Keeping the central entrance to the garden as a secondary entry point will deter many people from travelling through the garden and keeping it the retreat that it is. It was determined that Beatrice Taylor of PFR would reach out to the Toronto Garden Club to seek their input. Participants also expressed the desire for additional seating in the Formal Garden, preferably in the garden spaces proper. It was noted by a Cathedral rep, that the eastern portion of the formal garden was planned to be the woodland garden that never occurred.

Connecting Park Lands and the Cathedral Lands

A desire for enhanced pedestrian connections (spurs or secondary paths) running east-west from the Cathedral on the north side and south side was voiced, thereby creating a larger circuit around the park and Cathedral. There was general support voiced for a pathway that would complete a smaller loop around the Cathedral on the east side, mirroring the west. This would return a similar pathway layout originally existing around the Cathedral, and the BIA encouraged the designers to look in the archives for this plan.

A proposal was discussed about removing part of the berm between the Cathedral and central plaza has consequences of losing three-to-five trees to gain a clear view and improved physical connection to the Cathedral lands. Pros and cons of both approaches were shared, with no clear preference expressed, though some people noted that a small retaining wall, to retain the existing berm could be used as informal seating or for an opportunity for heritage marking or commemoration. Consideration towards deconstructing the berm in a "gentler" means (i.e. no retaining wall) thereby saving more trees was encouraged.

Event Site Capacity & Surfacing

There was discussion about the size and type of events that need to be accommodated within the park, with general agreement that the facilities should be designed to accommodate crowds of approximately 750 people. No permanent washrooms are preferred, but designated sites for temporary port-o-potties for events could be considered. There was general support for prioritizing and maximizing grassy surfaces throughout the park in order to retain the 'park-like' feel, and considering that there are fewer than a dozen major events (movie nights and music events) in the park year round.

Participants were concerned however that strong consideration should be given to ensuring the area in front of a stage or pavilion does not become muddy or hard packed earth, and investigate porous but firm surface materials. There was discussion as lawn used as a flexible gathering space for events and the implications. It was preferred because it softens sound more than hard surfaces that reflect sound throughout and beyond the park. Approx. 100 chairs are set up for 12 events a year. Options of mixing hard and soft surfaces as well as reinforced turf were discussed. It was felt that above all, that wherever the event area was situated, it remain flexible and adaptable, able to accommodate a range of activities both passive and active. Residents encouraged the exploration of siting the pavilion near the current crossroads (sim. to Concept 3) and consider enlarging the walkway/plaza area as the hard surface in front of the stage (i.e. as opposed to Concept 2 which essentially “doubles-up” the amount of paving)

Pavilion Options and Considerations

Participants were generally supportive of the baseline design approaches put forward that incorporated local heritage elements, were highly adaptable and flexible, fairly transparent, and had an open roof design to discourage vagrancy and overnight stays.

Issues and concerns that should be taken into account as the designs evolve are:

- ensure the pavilion design does not produce a ‘backside’ or flank that is hidden from public view
- be careful not to ‘detach’ the pavilion too far from existing traffic flows that would make it less engaging on a daily basis
- make sure the pavilion does not inadvertently create ‘two parks’ and that the unifying ‘porch’ function of the pavilion inside the park be retained
- consider how the noise will flow out or around, and in what direction
- minimize the removal of trees
- it was discussed that storage space could be provided in a space disassociated with the pavilion; it could be offsite entirely (as it is currently) or in a separate storage container/ shed on-site
- consider having the playground interact seamlessly with the pavilion space and site, noting that when the playground and pavilion would be used at different times of the day
- all the park entrances should be consistent with or relate to the pavilion, in design and/or materiality
- Whichever design is chosen, it should include arches to reflect the local architecture and style.
- Year round use for events and for passive use must equally be considered.
- Temporary shelter was favored to discourage overnight loitering, but provide protection for planned events

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- A transparent structure is ideal for the park to allow the existing trees and topography to interact with the structure and not be blocked; also encourages clear site lines for safety and connections
- Participants commented that while the events created pedestrian congestion at the central plaza area, this was not seen to be a primary motivator for locating the gazebo/performance pavilion off of the crossroads of the two major paths.

Pavilion Concept 1: Rectilinear

- This proposal was complimented for its flexibility and ability to work as a performance, installation, event and relaxation space. 'It announces its presence strongly.' A couple participants also appreciated its classic siting strategy at the helm of the park or greenspace.

Pavilion Concept 2: Curvilinear

- This concept was admired for its softer, organic approach that was 'more compatible and harmonious with the park' while still being multifunctional.

Park Lighting

Heritage and Architectural Lighting

Fung Lee presented an approach to the Heritage and Architectural lighting (i.e. of the Pavilion) that would highlight the architectural features as opposed to strictly a simplistic wall-wash of the façade. General support was voiced for a strong heritage lighting approach, in the parks and interacting with the Cathedral that built on the precedents established with the historic St. Lawrence buildings. It was noted by Councillor McConnell that it might be feasible to use public money towards lighting the east side of the Cathedral and that the lighting approach needs to be consistent with the Heritage Lighting Report and the intent of that lighting designer.

Functional and Safety Lighting

Pedestrian scale lighting through the park, that lined up coherently with the planned and existing pathways was agreed to.

Seasonal Lighting

Uplighting of trees was discussed as a general positive approach to consider, especially if it could be changed seasonally (i.e. in colour). Participants expressed concern that the uplighting to avoid creating safety hazards with bright upturned lights, or over-lighting plants and trees. Fung Lee assured that the final lighting design would have to be night-sky compliant according to the City of Toronto Green Standards and policy. The BIA are extremely open to a more permanent solution to seasonal lighting vs. the current method of installing string lights seasonally.

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Feature Lighting

In-ground and under-lighting benches were generally responded to positively, but there was concern about cost, and that it has the potential to “over-light” the park. Of the four categories of lighting, feature lighting was general seen to be of lesser priority – unless it can be combined with functional lighting i.e. at benches.

The priorities for lighting are to focus on improving the Safety Lighting, Seasonal Lighting, and Heritage Architectural Lighting.