

Summary of comments from Aura Lee Playing Field Survey results

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This report is a companion to the report by Richard Gilbert on the results of the *Aura Lee Playing Field Survey* conducted by the Harbord Village Residents Association (HVRA) in January and February 2011. His report provides numerical analysis of the responses to the multiple-choice questions. This report presents and analyzes the responses to the one open-ended question in the survey, where residents were also invited to add comments to provide context to their responses to the multiple-choice questions.

These comments reflect the diverse and often conflicting opinions within the neighbourhood as to what should be done about the playing field. While the survey identifies priorities for residents about such areas as beautification, community engagement, and health and fitness, the goal of this report is not to make specific recommendations. Instead it seeks to summarize the major themes raised by respondents and help inform a lively debate as this project moves forward. The major themes are summarized below. In many cases, supporting comments are including in quotations.

Overall recommendations

The following are some of the key messages that arose from the comment sections of the survey. They should be taken in context with the responses to the multiple-choice questions summarized in the companion report.

- Residents support a multi-use, multi-season facility for recreation and fitness; however, there are competing interests between those that would like to use the area for sport and those that would like a non-designated green space for families and leisure activities.
- The majority of respondents feel the space is underutilized and poorly maintained. Any development would be a positive addition as long as it did not intrude on the peaceful enjoyment of those residents living in the immediate area.
- Many residents supported upgrading the tennis courts. However, the approach to ice skating was much less clear. While most support ice skating in some form, residents are divided on whether a rink should have permanent boards or be more versatile. Regardless of their interests, respondents strongly support a multi-use rink where users could influence how ice time is determined.
- There is a diversity of opinion regarding an off-leash/dog run area. This diversity is evident whether respondents lived in sight of the field, or not. Respondents felt that if an off-leash areas were to be considered, that it be well monitored and fenced-in.
- Any plan for the space needs to include replacing the chain link fence.

- There is widespread support for a dedicated green space, with a range of opinion from those who endorse or oppose a children's playground.

1. State of the park currently

Many respondents emphasized that Aura Lee Playing Field is a unique space because it overlaps community participation between the University of Toronto and HVRA residents. They emphasized that the university has a unique opportunity to demonstrate its innovation and commitment to community engagement by drawing upon expertise from within the HVRA. While many respondents appreciated a forum to express their opinions in writing, they also understood that the playing field belongs to the university and its responsibility ultimately resides with the institution.

“There is no reason why [the park] can't [work] with creative thinking. It needs to remain flexible, as was done at Varsity. It needs to remain green, with a significant component of 'natural infrastructure' And, as one of the few green spaces in the HVRA and downtown area, it needs to allow for community engagement.”

Many residents expressed that they feel frustrated when they walk by the space and see it underutilized and poorly maintained. For many, an immediate priority is improved maintenance, particularly to the south parkette.

“It's been a disappointment to live in the area and to see the disused rink sitting there empty in an affluent downtown neighbourhood with lots of kids who could be using it.”

“I would like it to be a welcoming environment for children - clean, painted, swept, garbage pails installed and regularly emptied... I would encourage good lights in the dark area to the north of the field house, to discourage it becoming a 'hang-out' or drug dealing area, as it was in the past.”

2. Sports and recreation

Overwhelmingly, respondents expressed the importance of the park and green space for sport and recreation, and support a multi-use, multi-season facility. Respondents emphasized that the space should be versatile and able to accommodate a myriad of activities for a wide-range of age groups; however, opinions are diverse and often conflicting about what form such a facility might take.

i) Tennis

Many respondents expressed that the tennis courts are well used and support upgrading the courts for increased use. Many support a multi-use approach to the courts that changes with the seasons.

“The more green space the better, but I can see that a combined hockey rink and tennis court (if that is a feasible combination) would be attractive to the community.”

“I sincerely hope the tennis courts will be maintained and improved, perhaps with ‘club’ facilities (even if small). By this I mean some organization including a sign-up board, a bulletin board for finding partners, etc. ..There are no such community facilities in the area. The courts at College and Robert Streets have been taken over by basketball (a good thing for youth, but that makes it even more important to have the Sussex/Robert courts).”

“The tennis courts are very popular and well used and should be maintained in good working order. “

ii) Ice skating rink

Many respondents expressed that they would like to see the ice surface back in operation and recall back to the park’s “hey-day”, when the ice was a focal point for the neighbourhood.

“Our family had been using this rink for two decades until they closed it. It was sadly missed...It would be great to see families out using the rink once again. Our sense of community has been lost in this area, during the cold winter months. Bring it back and bring us out.”

“Give us back our rink! I grew up walking by the rink in the evenings and watching the ‘big kids’ play shinny. By the time I was old enough to play, the rink closed!”

Respondents expressed a variety of opinions about how they would like to see the ice used, ranging from free-skating for families to organized hockey leagues. Regardless of their interests, residents support a multi-use rink where users could influence how ice time is determined.

“My primary interest in Aura Lee is playing shinny. During its hey-day, the rink was heavily used by young children learning how to play hockey. Dozens showed up at a time. The adult age hockey hours were even more heavily used, with up to 40 players in the rink at once...The players came from the neighbourhood, the U of T and indeed from all over the city. Demand vastly exceeded the supply of ice time. In contrast, the non-hockey skating hours (which dominated the schedule) were badly under-utilized. In addition to numerous weeknight time slots, Sunday in its entirety was devoted to family or rec skating, yet in contrast to the shinny players, there were never more than a handful of rec skaters at a time. So in my opinion, the facility should be resurrected as a shinny/hockey rink, with a schedule that reflects actual use. I suppose that some people might object to the sound of the puck hitting the boards, but as city-dwellers we all have to live with sound from sirens, parades, traffic, late-night revellers and so on. After a while, you just block it out...There is enough space at the facility for multiple uses, but my main interest is that the new facility deserves a proper shinny rink.”

“As a resident of Robert St., I miss skating at the rink. We could bring the kids up here to learn to skate and feel safe doing it. And also feel like part of the community. I miss those days. Night time skating is so enjoyable. I wouldn’t mind working as a rink guard a couple nights a week.”

“I think having a rink with boards for hockey does not need to exclude other uses. Novice and learning skaters love to have boards so there is something to hold onto. I would like to see the city buy enough land from U of T for an indoor rink that could operate year round and be used by everyone including the U of T. As far as what activities should take place on the ice rink with boards I think that should be left up to the users, It could be used for men’s and women’s hockey leagues, minor hockey leagues, pleasure skating, skills training-learn to skate etc. I suggest we let demand shown by potential users determine what happens with ice time.”

But not everyone agrees. While most respondents support ice skating in some form, a number of respondents do not support a permanent ice structure, particularly one with boards that would increase local noise and require higher maintenance. Others felt that a skating rink is not environmentally sound practice and would be in direct competition with overall green space.

“My chief concern is for the noise that would be generated in a multi use sports park, noise that would negatively impact the homeowners across the street, especially from team sports such as hockey and baseball. The installation of a skating rink might also have a serious impact due to noise and night-time illumination. The increased use of the park for recreational activities might lower the value of the homes in closest proximity. The current tennis courts and a small green space area with benches, community garden, would best suit the neighbourhood. Even though we certainly do need more recreational facilities in our neighbourhoods, I don't think that this should be achieved by negatively impacting the people who live in the vicinity. Having taken this position, I must add that if the homeowners were supportive of a multi-use sports park, I would certainly support that decision.”

“I would like the people who may use the rink to understand that it is a costly amenity and uses energy and other resources in a quite un-green way. If after considering this and they still want the rink - so be it. “

3. Village Green – “A place to gather”

Many respondents supported some sort of dedicated green space for the Aura Lee Playing Field, citing that there is paucity of places to gather as a community in HVRA. These residents emphasized the importance of a “general green space” for picnics and outdoor play, as well as a space that invites community investment in care and programming, such as gardening. Some even suggested relocating (and potentially expanding) the Farmer’s Market.

“We need non-designated green space primarily for families and leisure activities, particularly as development eats up increasingly more of our precious land (and air). Sports facilities are available at schools and community centres.”

“I am very keen for this important space to be used for "family space" - children, animals, gardens and relaxing. It is a unique SUNNY spot in our area which has so few parks.”

“Green space and communal gathering space are at a premium in our community, so above all else it would be good to have a facility that is welcoming, that invites community

investment in care and programming, and that is versatile (examples of not-so-versatile use would be a baseball field or dedicated hockey rink).”

“I probably would not use this park except to sit on a bench in the summer and winter to watch the activities. I think it very important that there be a place for our young people who are increasing by the minute in HVRA to have a place to safely gather and enjoy outdoor activities. I also feel it would be very nice to have a beautiful park which would afford an opportunity for people to enjoy meeting their neighbours in the summer and winter. Thus I think some landscaping around the activity areas is very important.”

“The community is very good at donating plants and earth and seeds to spaces that have turned into gardens and a space that could be rented or used by area people to grow food would be great... Lots of young people are interested in growing their own food but have no place to do it.”

Respondents are divided on the inclusion of permanent structures, such as benches. Some feel that benches would allow for better community integration, others expressed concerns that they might increase unwanted outside traffic to the neighbourhood.

“My only concern regarding green space for leisure activities is that it encourages... outside traffic to the neighbourhood and kids hanging out late at night, increasing some of the vandalism already present in the area.”

“The space needs to be functional, but in my mind that means primarily that it needs to meet the physical education and recreation needs of the landowner, the U of Toronto. It is too close to Bloor to be treated like an idyllic park in Rosedale or some other semi-isolated residential region. There should not be facilities and benches to attract overnight sleepers and other late night activities. Our neighborhood is short on parkland, but this playing field cannot compensate for that, except that it does offer open space and sunlight where otherwise there would be a high-rise. I am glad that there is no mention of infrastructure that includes permanent bleachers, nor is there mention of increasing parking lot space. Good.”

i) Chain link fence

Whether they live in sight of the park or not, the vast majority of respondents expressed a profound dislike for the chain link fence that surrounds the park. Many feel that the fence gives, “an unfortunate impression” and strongly recommend its removal. Most, however, agreed that some sort of fence would be necessary to discourage casual crossing of the property and to maintain the safety of the playing fields.

“The removal of the chain link fence would be terrific! The existing fence is too high. Any future fencing, if necessary, should result in a park that is a visually integrated part of the community.”

“The chain link fence is really ugly and exclusionary, there has to be a more attractive alternative if there has to be fencing at all, certainly lower with more gates.”

ii) **Children's play area**

Respondents were also divided when it came to a dedicated playing area for children. On one hand, families expressed excited about the possibility of another playground in the area and several voted for the inclusion of a splash pad. On the other hand, residents with and without small children felt that there were "enough" play areas in HVRA (and environs) and supported recreational and sporting activities instead.

"We would LOVE a playground, a park green and a recreational ice skating rink! It would be AMAZING for the beauty and happiness of the neighbourhood."

"If an urbanized area like Dundas Square can have a version why not a great water park in a neighbourhood full of elementary and preschools? There may be a need for tennis courts and more ice surfaces but there are a lot more families that don't have access or are able to afford pool time or travel trips to splash parks in other parts of the city. What a great opportunity!"

"I no longer have small children so that doesn't add anything for us but a nice playground is always good, and can serve to anchor the space with families. There is a very good park literally across Spadina, though, so that isn't the primary thing the neighborhood needs."

"I don't want to seem anti-children, but there are plenty of other playground spaces in the neighbourhood. I would like to see this space developed for adult/sporting interests."

"Speaking as the father of a four year old, we probably do not need more play facilities for children in this neighborhood. We are already well-served by numerous parks and parkettes, including Margaret Fairley, Sibelius, Christie Pitts/Bickford, the excellent park on Huron just south of Bloor, and the largely unused park above the subway just north of Brunswick and Bloor. Most of these could benefit from re-investment and re-design, some of which are in progress, but they are adequate to the needs of the neighborhood's children."

4. **Dog run/Off-leash area**

Respondents expressed strong views about the potential use of the playing field for dogs. Many welcomed the idea of a dog run/off leash area citing that there are very few options for dog-owners in the HVRA. Others expressed strong concerns about cleanliness of a dedicated dog area and that off-leash dogs might dominate the field. Whether living in view of the park or not, residents have diverse and often conflicting opinions about this proposed use of the field.

"This area is in desperate need of a dedicated off-leash dog area, not only for the sake of pets but for the safety and comfort of non-pet owners and children who should be able to enjoy the other dog-free areas of the neighbourhood. Most dog owners in our area (including us) illegally use the Central Tech Playing Field because we have no other options."

“As a non-pet owner a dog run /off leash area is also a fabulous idea. There are many dog owners in the neighbourhood who currently have no choice but to take their pets to spaces shared with small children or other playing fields. I would give off leash areas priority over additional leisure (picnic/reading) areas, which - although always needed - are already significantly better served than our dog owning neighbours.”

“We are in dire need of a safe, enclosed off leash area for the many dogs in our neighbourhood. Many of us have to resort to driving our dogs by car to an off leash park, not an environmentally benign solution, so that they may get the exercise they need and deserve. ... As a property owner and long time tax payer in this community, I am puzzled by the \$100k+ spent on the Sally Bird Park on Brunswick Avenue, especially the installation of permanent exercise equipment, without any neighbourhood consultation. There are many, many parks in our area for picnics, children, reading, etc. that are off limits to dogs. As a tax payer & property owner I find this extremely punitive and discriminatory. I am as disgusted by abandoned mounds of poop as the next person and I have occasionally performed a "courtesy pickup" in a park, but the answer is not to ban dogs from all parks, but to offer solutions instead.”

Respondents who were not in favour of an off-leash dog area suggested that the area is currently unregulated and that many dog owners “have spoiled it for others”.

“Some monitoring of dogs is necessary as there are always some owners who ruin it for all the rest by not cleaning up after their animals.”

“Well I am really against the dog run or off leash area. Actually, the tennis and hockey courses are already regularly used by dog's owner for this type of activity which is very inappropriate, disturbing and dangerous. I am living right in front of these fields and some dogs owners come to do this very early in the weekends and [the] barking awakes me and my child.”

“Creating an unenclosed dog run or off leash area is a very bad idea because there may be irresponsible dog owners who will not clean up after their dogs. This was one of the main reasons why the Lord Lansdowne public school playing field was closed to the public...I cannot stomach the idea of sacrificing precious green park space for dogs.”