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New report offers ways to give parks back to the people

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Imagine a café next to the skating rink, where kids can sip hot chocolate on a cold day. Or munch on homemade pizza baked in the outdoor oven at a city park. Or more picnic tables, benches and barbecues in city parks?

Those are the little things that could make a big difference for visitors to Toronto's parks, and with the political will, communities could become bigger players, says a new Metcalf Foundation report *Fertile Ground for New Thinking: Improving Toronto's Parks*, being released Monday.

Many of the changes would not cost much — such as assigning staff to specific parks and posting their names and contact information, so the public knows who to call and staff take greater ownership of their work.

"The easiest thing is to just say yes more often to community groups. The city has made it very hard, very frustrating," says author David Harvey. "Too often, it's the city's park and not the public's park."

Harvey points to permit requirements that have shut out seniors on a walk, or placed restrictions on any new pizza ovens, as bureaucrats study a city-wide policy. Insurance rules make it tough for groups to organize formal events.

"Make it simpler. Do you really need a permit for 25 people going on a walk through a park?" he said "We want people to come to our parks."

However, he conceded permits will still be needed to assign baseball diamonds and soccer fields.

If the city were to embrace more of each local community's ideas and energy, it could lead to improvements — from gardens to farmers' markets. While not all communities can agree on what should happen in their local parks, Harvey said officials should not focus on saying no.

Given that the municipal election is four weeks away, it's a good time to ask candidates where they stand on the city's parks, he said.

"This campaign just seems to be focused on pocketbook issues," Harvey said. "Parks really matter to the people of Toronto. We need to stir up a debate about parks and public spaces."

Other recommendations:

- Consider adopt-a-park programs; private partnerships — including possible naming rights to parks — in exchange for corporate or individual investments.
- Create an arm's-length agency to oversee parks management, as is done in Vancouver and Minneapolis. Harvey holds up the Toronto Public Library system, which is governed by such a board, as an example of driving innovation.

"Because it's separate and independent, it's got more creativity and more flexibility," he said, noting how well the library has adapted to changing technology, offering much more than just books. "They're thinking about how to make a better city and serve their customers."

Cities like Paris and New York are famous for parks that have become destinations, such as Luxembourg Gardens and Central Park — something Harvey believes is missing in Toronto.

"These parks have so many spinoff benefits," he said, noting they might draw more businesses to the area, create community cohesion and more green space in the city, where highrise living is becoming more commonplace.