

Research Analysis Document – Alcohol in Parks

Executive Summary

Public engagement for the Parks and Facilities By-law Review featured extensive consultation with the public and stakeholder groups on the consumption of alcohol in parks.

Prior to beginning consultation, significant benchmarking and research were completed, focusing on municipalities across Canada, including Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver and Toronto, where alcohol consumption in parks without a permit is authorized. The consultation process included a public engagement survey and park ‘pop-up’ visits, which provided opportunities for residents and park users to share their perspectives. Extensive consultations were carried out with internal stakeholders within the City of Ottawa and external stakeholder groups were invited to participate in the policy development process to ensure a diverse range of feedback was gathered.

Environmental Scan – Municipalities Across Canada

Toronto conducted a jurisdictional review of recent alcohol in parks pilot programs implemented across Canada. The table below, adapted from the [City of Toronto’s report](#) includes additional information about programs in municipalities such as Toronto and Montreal.

Table 1. Alcohol in Parks Programs in Canada (Cities over 100,000)

City and Population (2021 Census)	Model	Site Selection/Exclusion Criteria	Comments
Toronto, ON 2,794,356	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot in 2023 • Pilot parks selected in three phases: 1. Technical selection criteria 2. Operational short list of parks 3. Discuss park options with Councillor • 27 parks – whole park approach • Aug.2.23 to Oct. 9.23 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Washrooms access: temporary or permanent • Drinking water access • No schools adjoining • Not situated on the waterfront • Public transit access (within 600m of TTC 10 minute network) • High visibility by first responders • Population density proximity to multi-unit homes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal alcohol consumption is allowed in 45 parks on a permanent basis with restrictions for health and safety • 1 designated park in each ward • No significant concerns

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimal impact to natural/programmable areas 	
Calgary, AB 1,306,784	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pilot in 2021 Made permanent in 2022 Designated picnic tables, picnic sites, large areas, winter fire pits in parks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 54 parks Year-round 	Exclude: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Areas with intense child focus Parks where personal alcohol may conflict with business or festivals Major natural areas Parks operated by a partner or have a significant partner operation on site Culturally significant parks Parks with current user conflicts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pilot was considered a success Sites were well-used, based on booking data Feedback on pilot: participants wanted simpler booking system Booked picnic tables were most popular in high density areas No additional resources for pilot or permanent program
Edmonton, AB 1,010,899	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pilot in 2021; 2022 Made permanent in 2023 Designated picnic areas in parks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 16 parks Year-round 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safety Accessibility Visitor experience Honouring existing park users Inclusivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pilot was considered a success During pilot, Peace Officers (existing staff positions) conducted proactive inspections to provide education Most participants were compliant with rules; violations resulted in a warning No additional resources for pilot or permanent program
Vancouver, BC 662,248	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pilot in 2021; 2022 Made permanent in 2023 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High visibility, non-remote locations Emergency vehicle access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pilot was considered a success

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entire parks, with restrictions for sensitive uses • 48 parks • Year-round or seasonal • Introduced beaches on pilot basis in 2023 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographical distribution across the city • Nearby washrooms, recycling/litter bins • Features and amenities for socializing • Pedestrian, cycling, public transit access • Nearby parking, food and beverage services • Minimal impacts to natural areas or programmable spaces • Minimal impacts/ disruptions to neighbours • Minimum distance from playgrounds • Not adjacent to schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During pilot, a designated areas model was implemented, with additional site visits by Park Rangers (existing staff positions) and additional waste bins in some areas • During pilot, Park Rangers (existing staff positions) reported mostly respectful and responsible behaviors; however designated areas were not observed • For permanent program, an 'entire parks' model was adopted due to challenges enforcing designated areas; Park Ranger visits returned to normal; increased park maintenance provided as required
<p>Coquitlam, BC 148,625</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No pilot • Implemented a permanent program in 2022 • Entire parks, with restrictions • 54 parks / year-round 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Park shared with a school • Pool facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Added waste and recycling pick-up on weekends

Delta, BC 108,455	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot in 2021 • Made permanent 2022 • Designated areas in • parks • 3 parks • Year-round 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographical distribution across the city • Popular gathering locations • Washrooms, solid waste collection • Transit/walkability access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot sites were monitored; no significant issues
Strathcona County, AB 103,186	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot in 2021 • Made permanent in 2022 • Designated picnic tables/sites in parks • 5 parks • Year-round 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proximity to existing recreation/park facilities • Parking available • Visible from street • Minimal noise for adjacent residents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing program; no significant issues
Montreal, QB 4,291,732	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing policy • Must consume with a meal • All parks, year-round 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighborhood parks or parks in close proximity to schools and playgrounds may discourage dependent on complaints • Restrictions to some large parks including Mount Royal Park, Parc Jean-Drapeau and sections of La Fontaine Park (due to environmental and safety concerns) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program runs well; no significant issues • Issues addressed through community education and situational enforcement

Participating municipalities reported that anticipated concerns regarding potential negative consequences did not materialize. Instead, the programs have been functioning smoothly, with no reported adverse impacts on the municipality or the public.

Canadian Alcohol Policy Evaluation Community of Practice (CAPE CoP)

The Canadian Alcohol Policy Evaluation (CAPE) is an ongoing research project that assesses existing alcohol policies in Canada, at the provincial, territorial and federal level, in effort to reduce harm from alcohol use. The project developed a Community of Practice (CoP) comprised of members from all 13 provinces and territories to foster networking across jurisdictions on alcohol policy. The CoP facilitates discussions,

research presentations, policy forums and resources to strengthen Canada's response to alcohol-related harm.

The General Manager of the Recreation, Cultural and Facility Services (RCFS) Department was invited to a roundtable discussion on alcohol in parks following Council direction to evaluate the possibility of allowing the personal consumption of alcohol in parks without a permit. During the meeting, a presentation summarized the evolution of allowing alcohol in parks since 2021. It included details about municipalities that conducted pilot projects and those that have implemented permanent alcohol-in-parks programs.

Participants included members working on alcohol policies and public health representatives who shared their experiences in developing alcohol policies within their municipalities. Best practices and strategies such as restricting retail sales of alcohol, engaging stakeholders (including public health) to prioritize public safety and conducting comprehensive analysis to quantify the impacts of permitting alcohol consumption in parks were highlighted. Challenges such as the disconnect between municipal, provincial and federal levels when addressing this topic were also discussed.

The discussion emphasized the importance of addressing alcohol consumption in parks through a Municipal Alcohol Policy to ensure a consistent and comprehensive approach. Participants expressed interest in advocating for collaboration across governmental levels to create uniform alcohol policies. It was noted that some municipalities lack resources or are waiting for others to act before addressing this issue. The conversation also highlighted the need for guidance documents and harm reduction tools developed with local public health units to secure support from Medical Health Officers. There was also significant discussion on the importance of conducting comprehensive evaluation of alcohol-in-parks programs to accurately understand any potential harm. Participants noted the normalization of alcohol consumption in parks, observing that many individuals already engage in this activity. Some suggested formally allowing alcohol consumption and focusing efforts on education to promote responsible use.

Following this discussion, the Parks and Facilities By-law project team remained engaged with the CAPE CoP, receiving regular updates, resources and research articles related to developing alcohol policies. These materials, including news updates and harm-reduction tools, have served as valuable resources throughout the City of Ottawa's review of the Parks and Facilities By-law. The project team remains connected with experts and stakeholders from municipalities and health units across Canada, to leverage insights and best practices to inform the approach to permitting alcohol consumption in parks.

[Internal Stakeholders](#)

Prior to the public engagement, consultations were held with key City departments and partners likely to be most impacted by potential changes to the Parks and Facilities By-

law. Discussions identified critical themes and priorities to develop a more targeted and effective public consultation strategy. The departments consulted included:

- Recreation, Cultural and Facility Services Department
- By-law Regulatory Services
- Community and Social Services Department
- Public Works Department
- Ottawa Public Health
- Ottawa Police Services

While opinions on permitting alcohol consumption in parks varied, staff from all departments agreed on the importance of collaboration to develop a safe, effective implementation strategy with minimal operational impact. Additionally, Ottawa Public Health and Ottawa Police Services provided supplementary documentation outlining specific impacts related to their departmental mandates and recommended key considerations when evaluating the allowance of alcohol consumption in parks.

Staff analysis of engagement with internal stakeholders indicated:

- Varied levels of support for permitting alcohol consumption in parks depending on departmental mandates and responsibilities.
- All impacted stakeholders expressed a willingness to contribute to a safe and effective implementation plan with minimal operational disruption.
- Operational staff reported that alcohol consumption is already occurring in parks and areas adjacent areas to facilities.
- Future resource constraints were raised about the ability to address potential issues due to limited operational staffing.
- While there are mixed levels of support internally, consultations with other municipalities indicated no significant additional pressures on park maintenance, police services, or health systems resulting from permitting alcohol consumption in parks.

External Stakeholders

To gather public input on the personal consumption of alcohol in City parks, a survey and a series of park 'pop-up' visits were conducted in June and July. The input collected insight into public support for this activity and identified key criteria for selecting parks where alcohol consumption could be allowed.

Public Engagement Survey

The first component of the survey focused on gauging the level of public support. Consultations revealed that 44% of respondents support the personal consumption of alcohol in all city parks, while 16% support alcohol consumption in some City parks and 40% do not support this activity at all. The second component of the survey was to identify and understand the perceived advantages and concerns if personal alcohol consumption in parks is permitted. Respondents who indicated they do not support

alcohol in parks still had the opportunity to identify perceived advantages, with “Do not support” being one of those options.

Perceived advantages:

- Increased options for socializing with responsible alcohol use (39%)
- Enhance enjoyment of parks (34%)
- Another option to drink outside of restaurants and bars (31%)
- Reflects current trends in park usage (27%)
- Strengthens community bonds (26%)
- Encourages people to drink responsibly (21%)

Additional advantages highlighted by respondents included the promotion of equity for those without access to private outdoor spaces, supporting residents in high-density housing, aligning with cultural practices, offering economic savings and increasing park usage.

Perceived concerns:

- Potential for conflicts, disruptive or aggressive behaviour (65%)
- Increased littering (59%)
- Underage drinking concerns (53%)
- Risk of impaired driving (51%)
- Exposure of children and youth to alcohol (46%)
- Loss of alcohol free spaces in parks (31%)
- No specific concerns (16%)
- Loss of business for restaurants and bars in the surrounding areas (10%)

Additional concerns raised included:

- Public safety
- Excessive noise
- Public nuisance
- Parks becoming less family-friendly
- Cultural and religious sensitivities
- Challenges in enforcement

Park ‘Pop-Ups’

Feedback from park users during the pop-up initiative was similar to survey results. Participants emphasized the benefits of socializing, picnicking, and relaxing after sporting events. Concerns were also raised about safety, exposure of alcohol to minors, non-compliance with responsible drinking requirements and increased risk of broken glass. Some participants suggested piloting the consumption of alcohol at designated locations to address potential challenges specific to Ottawa before wider implementation.

Criteria for Park Selection

Survey respondents identified important criteria for selecting parks where alcohol consumption could be permitted:

- Access to washrooms (1,944 respondents).
- Access to drinking water (1,591 respondents).
- Well-lit parks (1,157 respondents).
- Parks that are not located near schools (1,426 respondents).
- Access to public transportation (1,371 respondents).
- Parks not located near waterfront including beaches and rivers (1,289 respondents).
- Parks not close in proximity to residential areas (1,020 respondents).
- Parks not located near waterfront including beaches and rivers (968 respondents).
- Not located near amenities within parks (940 respondents).
- Park size (775 respondents).
- Proximity to alcohol retailers (772 respondents).
- Parks with reduced operating hours (648 respondents).

Preferred Hours for Alcohol Consumption

Respondents provided the following preferences for permitted hours:

- 34% preferred 12pm and dusk
- 31% preferred during park operating hours
- 17% preferred 12pm until 11pm
- 11% preferred 11am until 11pm
- 7% preferred 11am until dusk

Staff analysis of survey and park 'pop-up' responses determined:

- 60% of respondents support permitting the personal consumption of alcohol in City parks without a permit.
- Majority of respondents prefer allowing this activity to begin after 12 PM.
- Public safety is the primary concern associated with this activity.
- Alcohol consumption should not be permitted near amenities frequently used by children such as playgrounds, splashpads and wading pools.
- The criteria identified by respondents can serve as a framework for determining suitable parks for this activity.