

Downsview Park, Toronto:

A part of the natural city of the 21st century

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The author has been with Parc Downsview Park Inc. for close to five years. After only two years he has risen to lead the company as Executive Vice-President, which he has done for nearly three years through an extremely challenging period that included the change in governance and reorganization of the company and hosting two very large international events. Mr Genco has an extensive breadth of experience and skills in all facets of public affairs, communications, government relations and management. He is active in many charitable and community activities, and currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Woodbridge Agricultural Society, the Community Home Assistance for Seniors (CHATS), the Columbus Centre, Heritage Vaughan and is a member of the Canadian Sustainability Indicators Network. The text that follows is an edited and revised version of a paper presented at the international symposium on "The Natural City," Toronto, 23-25 June, 2004, sponsored by the University of Toronto's Division of the Environment, Institute for Environmental Studies, and the World Society for Ekistics.

Overview

When the Government of Canada announced the closure of Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Toronto in 1994 it stipulated, "the existing DND-owned lands associated with the Downsview site will be held in perpetuity and in trust primarily as a unique urban recreational greenspace for the enjoyment of future generations" (GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, 1994).

Overall, the Downsview Lands consist of 260 hectares (644 acres) of land. These lands are currently divided between two federal agencies: 236 hectares (583 acres) to Parc Downsview Park (PDP) Inc. (583 acres) and 24 hectares (61 acres) to the Department of National Defence (DND).

PDP's dream is to create a sustainable community, with a national purpose and identity, of great magnitude and prestige for all Canadians and to grow Downsview Park into a model for the world. The sustainable community will include traditional parkland, recreational (indoor and outdoor), cultural, residential, commercial, institutional, sports and entertainment uses all as one integrated, complete package.

Downsview Park will be a leading edge sustainable community. It will set 21st-century standards for excellence in landscape architectural design, recreation, urban planning and sustainable development. The goal is to define the leading edge of green development, to anticipate the future and bring it to the present by implementing green technologies and promoting green business to offer the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and, fundamentally, the people of Canada, a wonderful place to showcase environmental social and economic sustainability on a self-financing basis.

Sustainability

Sustainability is the one word – and a way of seeing – that best captures the essence of the vision of Downsview Park. Sustainability is implicit in the mandate given to PDP by the Government of Canada and is at the core of PDP's interpretation of the mandate. The vision states: "Downsview Park is a unique urban recreational greenspace, a safe and peaceful place, developed according to the principles of environmental, economic and social sustainability, for Canadians to enjoy in all seasons. The park reflects Canada's mosaic brilliance and celebrates its past present and future accomplishments" (PARC DOWNSVIEW PARK INC., BOARD OF DIRECTORS, 2002). The Board of Directors demands that all of our actions contribute to the ultimate success and achievement of these important statements.

Experts from many diverse disciplines recognize sustainability as the development strategy for the 21st century. A sustainable community fosters the interdependence of social, ecological, and economic well-being. A balance among the three components enables each component to achieve its maximum potential. PDP plans to create that balance through the integration of common elements among the various land uses across Downsview Park so that it will look and feel like one, complete place.

PDP's commitment to sustainability is evident in the current and planned operations and activities of Downsview Park.

Downsview Park history

The lands where Downsview Park is located have a very rich history and have experienced a number of land uses over time. These uses, which have included agricultural production as well as its most recent national purpose as a military base, have helped shape Toronto and Canada, and have made Downsview part of some of the most important moments in Canadian affairs.

Downsview is named after an 1830s farm that was called "Downs View." It was named because of its high elevation and its excellent view looking southward towards Lake Ontario. The Downsview lands were acquired from the Aboriginal peoples with the Toronto Purchase in 1787 and were not ever a settlement area for the Aboriginal Community of Toronto.

In 1851, construction of the Ontario, Simcoe and Huron Railway began and, by 1853, much of the railway had been completed, helping to unite and bind the beginnings of Canada. The railway ran north through Downsview to Lake Simcoe and Lake Huron, transporting passengers, freight and mail. It exists today as the Canadian National Railway, bisecting Downsview Park and providing suburban commuter train

access and national Via Rail access through the site.

Although Downsview was initially a small rural community considered to be very far away from the core business area of Toronto, it soon grew to become a suburban industrial center, well connected to the region by both commerce and culture. De Havilland Aircraft of Canada located in Downsview in 1929 and began assembling airframes at a small airfield in Downsview, adjacent to the railway. This caused many of the road alignments to be affected. Later, land was expropriated from the community to enlarge the airfield and permit its use by jet fighters of the Royal Canadian Air Force and buildings were expanded following the Second World War.



Figs. 1, 2, 3 and 4: Toronto – View and location of the Downsview Park site in its broader region.

After the war, the government recognized Downsview's strategic importance with its proximity to Toronto's industry, infrastructure and community development. Downsview was considered by the government to be well suited as an air station and logistical support base because of the existing airfield and hangar facilities.

The idea of transforming the Downsview Lands into an urban park was first advanced in 1994 as the closure of the military base was being contemplated. This was not an easy process. All the currents of change at the time were to sell these lands to the private sector to pay the debt. But in an interesting twist, the Government decided to keep the land and create an interesting social instrument through a sound economic model that was self-sustaining. It was, in effect, creating a Natural City out of a part of the community that had been hidden behind barbed-wire fences and "No Trespassing" signs for close to 50 years. The lands were seen as a large, under-utilized tract of land in the City of Toronto, containing valuable old assets as well as some heritage buildings which could be renaturalized and developed as a national and international showcase for environmental, social and economic sustainability. How to create a Natural City out of this starting point was a formidable challenge (figs. 1, 2, 3 and 4).

Since 1996, the site has been incrementally transformed but mostly through the invitation of people to the site's special events. Any site that is being restored to a natural state depends upon the participation and celebration of its local citizens. Transforming the area from a military base to a park required both physical changes (characterized by the replacement of the barbed wire with open, welcoming entrances) as well as attitudinal shifts (characterized by the introduction of programs and events designed to attract visitors to the site).

PDP was created in 1999 to formally assume responsibility for managing and developing Downsview Park and to harness the opportunity presented with the closure of CFB Toronto. As a Downsview boy, I could not wait to become a part of the experience. The government recognized that it had an unparalleled opportunity to make a positive impact on the City of Toronto through the retention of the former base lands under federal administration and to transform approximately 236 hectares (600 acres) of land in an urban area to improve the quality of life for the community and to create a firm, federal footprint for the people of Canada in the country's largest urban metropolis.

Since that time, great strides have been made affirming the mandate and refining the vision of Downsview Park as a sustainable community. This type of change is rare. Downsview Park represents the largest sustainable urban development opportunity in Canada. Detailed, thoughtful plans are in place to achieve the vision.

On September 29, 2003 the Government officially dedicated Downsview Park to the people of Canada and launched the public design consultation phase of the project.

In February 2004, PDP received the final design for the park plan. The exciting and dynamic plan details the park design, budget and implementation process and was the culmination of a series of informal and formal stakeholder consultations held in the summer and fall of 2003. The park was to become the driving force for the development of the rest of the site. It is the sun that will warm and provide the energy to inspire and create the sustainable community. The process originated with the International Design Competition in May 2000 that chose *Tree City* as the winning concept for Downsview Park.

From the beginning, Downsview Park has been developed through public input and ideas. During the recent phase of consultation, a number of stakeholders representing various sectors of the local community were involved in the process.

Among the issues that were considered by stakeholders were:

- the overall guiding principles upon which everything in and about the park should be measured, as well as
- the various recreational, sports and cultural uses on the lands that will contribute positively to the overall transformation of the Downsview Park property.

The consultations confirmed that the design process should be driven by a set of five core values. The five core values are:

- sustainability: design the maintenance;
- stewardship: design the educational effect;
- play: redefine leisure;
- legacy: build a living database; and.
- beauty: design the icon.

These values have evolved from PDP's five core themes:

- heritage,
- technology,
- innovation,
- community and
- environment.

In April 2004, a panel of landscape architects, architects and planners examined the plan and encouraged the board to move forward. This peer review will be a valuable benchmark for PDP management as it directs its focus on implementation of financial and technical matters of the plan (fig. 5).

The park plan envisages a seven-phase design plan, implemented over ten years at a cost of \$40 million. Each phase will have a distinct purpose, a desired effect and will yield a significant and lasting transformation to the former Canadian Forces Base Toronto.

The recreational greenspace is organized into three distinctive zones:

- The Action Zone,
- The Promenade, and
- The Cultivation Campus,

unified by a system of pathways for easy pedestrian access. While it will be a park in the city, it will be a different kind of park by the way in which we interact with the city and complement the values, vision and opportunities of the park.

● The **Action Zone**, designed with a distinctively urban feel, will include a mix of commercial and cultural facilities. People are what makes a park urban. Notably, this zone will accommodate the Downsview Park National Sports Institute for the training and mentoring of promising community athletes. The Zone will also feature a main street thoroughfare that will contain a mix of commercial and artistic opportunities.

● The **Promenade** represents a striking change of pace from the Action Zone. It will extend panoramic views, forests, meadows and wetlands. It will be a place of passive recreation and landscape regeneration. It will serve as a respite from the pressures of urban life. It will provide an urban oasis for peace and tranquility.

● The **Cultivation Campus** encompasses will extend the park beyond its borders through education and social connections with such amenities as a retail nursery, greenhouse and mosaic gardens. This will be the basis of training and educational opportunities for people to engage the landscape at a variety of levels.

Downsview Park today – Setting for the conditions for tomorrow

In its early stage of evolution, Downsview Park is a vibrant place where hundreds of thousands of Canadians are educated and entertained through a wide variety of community programs and seasonal events. These programs and events promote and broaden the awareness of the significant histori-

cal, environmental and cultural features that make Downsview Park unique. Downsview Park has already come to be established as a place for people of all ages to play, learn and enjoy in every season and ultimately to reflect the face of Canada in all that we do and all that we say (fig. 5).

In keeping with the vision of the site as a place “for Canadians to enjoy in all seasons,” a year-round roster of school and community programs has been created to show the potential of the site as a legacy for future generations. Community programs are designed to reflect such values as: culture, heritage, community, technology, innovation, environment, legacy, sustainability, stewardship, beauty and play. A representative list of titles includes: The Park in Winter, Heritage Day, National Wildlife Week, Earth Day, Doors Open Toronto, Heritage Toronto Hike, and Summer Dayz. These programs are the heart of the future because they make Downsview a Natural Park today.

Educational programs designed to support the Ontario Ministry of Education Guidelines are offered to elementary schools across the Greater Toronto Area. This becomes an incentive for teachers to fulfill the demands of the curriculum and for Downsview Park to teach our future leaders. Consistent with our mandate as a national urban park, some projects have been designed to raise awareness of the park in communities across the country. Notable among these is the Millennium Quilt. Young Canadians across the country celebrated the dawn of the new millennium with Downsview Park’s “Our Canada” Millennium Quilt Initiative. Five hundred children from every province contributed to it. The Quilt was dedicated on Canada Day 2000 and then sent back to each of the contributing communities so that participants could appreciate the completed work. We also hosted, at that same event, the largest Citizenship Court in Canadian History, with 2,103 new Canadians celebrating Canada’s mosaic brilliance.

In addition, Downsview Park hosts a roster of four, large-scale seasonal events which help to define the character of the park as a venue for the entire family. The Springfest event celebrates the fine and cultural performing arts with visual displays and performances from a broad spectrum of locally available talent with national and international purpose. Canada Day, our largest annual event, attracts approximately 100,000 people and is widely recognized as the most spectacular Canada Day celebration in the Greater Toronto Area.

The Fall Fair celebrates the Canadian harvest/Thanksgiving tradition each year with a specially designed mix of sports, music and cultural activities. Themes have included “Celebrating Canada’s rural roots” by bringing “a little bit of the Country in the Heart of the City.” The Winter Festival provides opportunities for families to appreciate and enjoy the many opportunities for sports activities and pastimes that winter creates.

Over the years, Downsview Park has also become a venue for a variety of cultural festivals that reflect the ethnic diversity of the Greater Toronto Area. These include Festival de Verano (a Latin festival), Viva Goa (a celebration of Goan culture), the South Asian Trade Show and the Downsview Park Highland Games.

Sustainability in action

It is the policy of PDP to carry on its operations in accordance with the principles of environmental, economic and social responsibility and in line with its vision statement.

Economic sustainability

One of the key foundational elements of a sustainable community is the requirement for economic sustainability. We

must also make our standard of living meet our quality of life. When the federal government created Downsview Park, it created the conditions whereby it became possible for Canada’s first national urban park to become a sustainable community.

PDP is to be self-financing. Self-financing means that PDP will create a balance of expenditures and revenues to build the sustainable community. The sale and sublease of some of the lands will be used to provide sources of funds to finance construction and development of the park property.

The following are PDP’s economic sustainability goals:

- Ensure that there is no erosion of the core land base of the Park;
- Maintain and improve those key buildings that will generate income for the future benefit of the Park;
- Establish a Foundation as a future endowment base for the Park and to help it survive and thrive;
- Develop a wide diversity of economic activities on the lands of the Park;
- Encourage reinvestment and the economic development of the surrounding community;
- Encourage excellence within the human resources of the organization at the Staff and Board level.

Social sustainability

Downsview Park focuses on people – the most important part of the Park experience. Implicit in the mandate to create a park as a legacy for future generations is the obligation to create a park that is of value to the current generation, the local community and the broader public.

This is the key to increasing the social value of the Downsview Park now and in the future. PDP has committed itself to a strategy of on-going and transparent public consultation to ensure that as Downsview Park is developed, it remains relevant to the needs of the community. Similarly as communities evolve and their needs change, the park will aim to be responsive to those changes. This is the essence of social sustainability. We are building the Park for all and so everyone should feel that they are an important part of the process.

Through innovative programming, Downsview Park embodies the values of community, heritage, environment, innovation and technology. These values transcend the entire site, across all land uses. As Downsview Park evolves, the values of stewardship, beauty, play, legacy and sustainability will come into greater prominence. Like the evolution of anything, it becomes more beautiful over time.

The following are PDP’s social sustainability goals:

- Encourage public/community participation as part of the planning and development of the Park;
- Encourage formal and informal educational opportunities geared to the Park’s themes;
- Encourage activities in the Park that allow for creative development;
- Promote heritage preservation, commemoration, celebration, education and research at the Park;
- Promote educational opportunities with respect to present-day and future innovation and technology;
- Encourage respect for cultural diversity, equality of opportunity and people living together harmoniously and in mutual support of each other;
- Provide a social and economic impetus, raising the quality of life in the surrounding community;
- Meet human needs for “re-creation,” relaxation, exercise and other aspects of healthy living.

All this means enjoying, celebrating and engaging the people naturally in every respect.

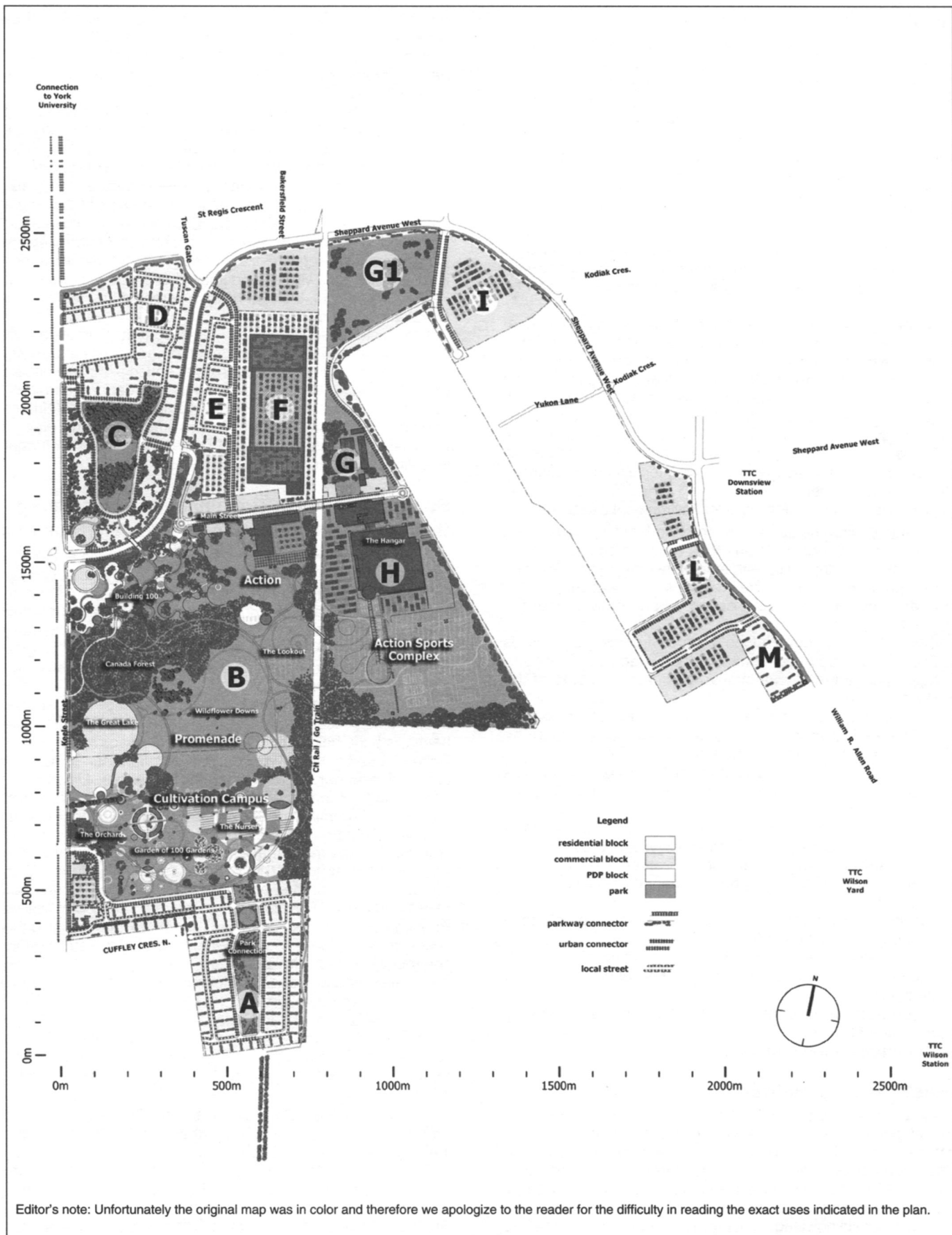


Fig. 5: Toronto – Map showing the current design of the Downview Park site.

Environmental sustainability

The environmental sustainability potential of Downsview Park is almost limitless as we renaturalize the site for future generations. PDP has inherited much of the infrastructure required for the site to sustain itself “off grid” in terms of heat and electricity production and consumption and water safety. There is a steam plant on-site to generate heat and electricity as well as underground water reservoirs. District Energy is the key to our future to making sustainability a reality.

The buildings on site are structurally sound and amenable to development and refurbishment as “green buildings” and the park plan contains a well-considered strategy for water management across the site. These are the cornerstones of environmental sustainability and provide a solid foundation on which the Downsview Park sustainable community can be built.

Stewardship is the key to a successful rebuilding of the mandate for the site. PDP has successfully partnered with Earth Day Canada over the last seven years in promoting the values of environmental sustainability to the local community and the broader public. The company has also collaborated with such organizations as the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, Evergreen Foundation, Toronto Wildlife Centre and the City of Toronto on environmental issues. Collaborative efforts will continue to be pursued and more can intensify as we continue to grow and prosper.

The following are PDP's goals for environmental sustainability:

- Provide environmental education opportunities, focusing on environmental renewal in an urban environment;
- Encourage partnerships with environmental organizations on best practices, co-operative projects and education;
- Evolve and enhance the existing urban ecosystem of the Park;
- Encourage and promote innovative environmental practices and leading-edge environmental technologies and encourage environmentally innovative business to locate at the Park;
- Promote the reduction, reuse and recycling of waste, and undertake a composting program so the compost can be used to improve the soil in the Park;
- Promote and encourage the use of public transportation as a model for all to follow and to encourage the use of bicycles and walking;
- Encourage energy conservation and the use of energy sources that will reduce greenhouse emissions, improve local air quality and encourage energy conservation;
- Manage storm water in an environmentally beneficial manner;
- Implement water and waste water conservation practices in buildings and on the lands;
- Utilize safe wastewater irrigation throughout the Park;
- Encourage the re-use and rehabilitation of viable building structures;
- Encourage the construction of buildings which are energy and water efficient;
- Encourage the use of recycled materials.

Sustainability metrics

Key to the success of PDP's sustainable community is the development of an empirical yardstick by which progress can be measured. It matters not what we say unless we can prove that we are making progress towards our key goals and priorities. PDP is challenging the conventional notion that sustainable parks in urban areas are just islands of nature. The natural city must acknowledge that there are challenges to meeting these important tests. PDP's view of sustainability requires a symbiotic relationship between business and park: the park as

a business and PDP's business as a park. Downsview Park aims to be a demonstration of economic, social and environmental sustainability objectives working together to create a new harmony, a new definition of natural and balance in an urban context.

Sustainability Community Development Guidelines are being developed and will be implemented to create the demand base for the private sector to help us create Downsview Park. This will make the entire site (the greenspace, the cultural and recreational lands, the residential lands, and the business/commercial elements) one seamless and integrated community and a showcase of urban sustainability. Commercial development is an important dimension within the context of the greenspace and the promised legacy for future generations. Wherever one is on the site, one will feel and know that one is at Downsview Park. If you do not, then we have not created the new Natural City that we intended.

The Sustainable Community Development Guidelines will contain a land use plan and development policies; streets, blocks and community plans; an open space plan; sustainable urban criteria; sustainable building standards; an energy utilization plan; a sewer and water reduction plan; a sustainable housing plan; a public participation and marketing plan; a financial needs assessment for PDP; and new ideas for further investigation and innovation.

Success stories in sustainability and building the Natural City: The Hangar and Film Studios:

● **Downsview Park's Hangar Sports Complex** is a 400,000 sq.ft (37,160 sq.m) building divided into five bays, that echoes with the history of aviation in Canada. When the Canadian Forces military base closed in 1996, two of the bays in the Hangar were subsequently converted into a rudimentary sports facility – five indoor soccer fields, a set of changing rooms, a common space and a small administrative area run by a private sector operator.

Downsview Park inherited this promising, though initially unprofitable soccer operation and nurtured it back to financial health with the help of the Ontario Soccer Association. But its limited focus on soccer was only seasonal. Later, in partnership with another sports management partner, Downsview Park added five indoor beach volleyball courts which currently serve as a training ground for Canada's Olympic Beach Volleyball team and a modernizing sports venue. Today, the Hangar attracts more than 300,000 people per year to the park. In addition to this, BMW Canada leases the surrounding tarmac and one of the hangar bays to host their highly successful Advanced Driver Training Program where Downsview Park can be more than a landlord and those that invest in the space know that we expect them to be part of the sustainable community in every way possible.

The next phase in the development of the Hangar Sports Complex is its evolution into the Downsview Park National Sports Institute – a project undertaken in partnership with the Canadian Olympic Committee and the Canadian Sports Centre (Ontario) – in which the Hangar will expand to accommodate the needs of Canada's elite, high performance athletes.

● **Downsview Park Film Studios:** The Park also inherited from the armed forces a 1,000,000 sq.ft (92,900 sq.m) building, formerly a military Supply Depot complete with a million gallon (4.5 million liters) underground reservoir of water for fire safety and indoor bays for easy transportation. Part of this building has been converted into the Downsview Park Film Studios, which, over the years, has attracted a steady stream of some of the world's best-known producers, directors and actors. The world stops at Downsview Park in many ways and

this and other important examples all contribute to the Downsview Park experience at the highest levels.

Opportunities for collaboration with stakeholders in the GTA and beyond

Downsview Park presents a wealth of opportunities for imaginative partners to collaborate in the creation of our sustainable community. These opportunities include public education initiatives, the design and retrofitting of green buildings, district energy, sustainable energy demonstrations, sustainable industry development, community involvement in horticultural/cultivation initiatives, and collaboration with other sustainable communities. We continue to “talk the talk” of becoming a component of the Natural City. It is now time to “walk that talk” at a real level.

The aim at Downsview Park is to follow a course of strategic development that will produce strategic results well beyond the borders of the park. Located in the heart of the magnitude of the enterprise, Downsview Park is expected to attract a steady stream of tourism and create new employment opportunities in the area. In addition to showcasing Canada’s heritage and cultural mosaic, Downsview Park is designed to evolve into a truly sustainable community.

Communications

One of the main challenges of building the sustainable community is simply communicating and effectively articulating the unique nature of this initiative to the public and to various potential stakeholder groups, who, once the idea is understood, could become effective champions for the cause. In all of its simplicity, it becomes very difficult to communicate what we are doing and how we are going to get there.

The idea of using a traditionally commercial instrument (a Crown Corporation) to fulfill a social policy objective (a regenerated green environment that promotes recreation and well-being in an urban environment) using a distinctively non-traditional strategy (sustainability principles and policies) is best explained to the public incrementally, and by example. But understandably, people want immediate results.

The communication challenge is to be met by having the public observe the process of actually building the park. The agenda for building the sustainable community is simple: PDP calls it the Park first philosophy. It is the Park that drives all of the development. It is the sine qua non of the mandate. Essen-

tially this means: lead by building the recreational greenspace. Then create sustainable community development guidelines to ensure that the integrity of the values is preserved. The next step is to acquire stakeholder commitments, develop a broad understanding of the ambition, gain converts willing to support the fulfilment of the mandate. Finally implement the commitments related to the guidelines that add further credibility to the vision.

To date, PDP has been successful in adopting and implementing this strategy. Examples of our collaboration with stakeholders include: a tenant relationship with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority which also offers PDP ongoing access to the expertise required to fulfill key aspects of the environmental agenda; collaboration with the Ontario Sports Alliance, Canadian Sports Centre (Ontario) and the Canadian Olympic Committee; memorandum of understanding in development with the City of Toronto regarding an operating protocol regarding how we will build Downsview Park together; improvements to surrounding streets and the possibility of a fire station in the park; discussions with the Province of Ontario regarding a GO Transit commuter train station in the park and tax incremental financing that helps the park prosper. These and other relationships are fundamental to PDP’s duty to fuse the various institutions of Canada with its commitment to sustainability in all facets of urban environmental development.

Conclusion

The past successes of PDP have been considerable and the future potential of PDP is immeasurable. However, much of the promise has yet to be fulfilled and much of the progress cannot be seen with the naked eye. Like anything natural it takes time to evolve and time to make a real impact. A great deal of progress has been made by the company to fulfill its mandate and achieve its vision for Downsview Park. PDP has created a winning formula for the creation of an urban park for the 21st century and a leading edge sustainable community to realize the potential and opportunity of building a Natural City.

References

- GOVERNMENT OF CANADA (1994), *Budget Plan*.
- PARC DOWNSVIEW PARK INC., BOARD OF DIRECTORS (2002), *Vision Statement*.