



**United Way  
of Greater Toronto**

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# **Community Use of School & City-owned Space**

## **Summary Report of Survey Findings**

***A Joint Study by the City of Toronto  
&  
United Way of Greater Toronto***

**May 2002**

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## Why a survey on community use of space?

Public space is an important community asset that provides significant social benefits for all members of the community. Historically, community groups have used public space in order to bring people together to participate in a wide range of programs and activities – from life-long learning to sports and fitness activities to newcomer settlement and integration programs. The availability of space in which to hold meetings or to stage cultural, recreational and educational activities is key to maintaining vibrant, active communities.

With the passage of Bill 160, the provincial government changed the funding formula for schools. This change has reduced and restricted funding for schools and school facilities and many local school boards have had to make difficult choices about how funds are allocated. As a result, some school boards have considered options to generate revenues to help offset budget pressures. In 2000, the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto District Separate School Board increased permit and leasing fees, on a cost-recovery basis, for the community use of school space. The TDSB also reduced after-hours access in some schools. In March 2002, the TDSB announced the potential for further fee increases, reduced hours of access to schools and the closure of all schools during the summer, in response to deepening budget deficits.

The City of Toronto has also faced significant budget pressures since amalgamation, largely due to the financial impact of service downloading from the Province and a limited capacity to generate revenue. In addition, the City has experienced financial impacts due to provincial under funding of schools, for example, funding the use of school space for child care centres. This has prompted decisions by Toronto Council to increase user fees on a cost-recovery basis for some service areas, such as Parks and Recreation. In addition, a growing number of non-profit groups are applying for City space at below-market rents. Historically, the City has and continues to provide space to community organizations at below-market cost. In response to the need to establish clear, transparent, accountable and fair guidelines for the allocation of City space, the Chief Administrative Officer will soon be recommending to Council a policy framework for City-owned space provided at below-market rent.

Community agencies, groups and networks have strongly opposed fee increases and reduced hours of access. They have argued that the new fees are beyond the financial reach of many groups and the result will be the loss of many valuable community-based programs and activities in neighbourhoods across the city.

United Way of Greater Toronto has heard from its member agencies that access to school and City-owned space is an important issue. The City heard similar messages from community groups across the city in the consultations for the Social Development Strategy. Consistent with this, increasing the availability of community space is identified as a key strategic direction in the Social Development Strategy. United Way has also identified access to community space and advocacy with government and the business community on this issue as a key priority in its new program and funding strategy for the older suburbs of Toronto.

Within the context of the Social Development Strategy, the City has committed to making City space available for public use on reasonable terms, and both the City and the United Way have expressed an intention to advocate to the Province to acknowledge schools as a valuable community asset and to therefore recognize in its education funding formula the costs associated with community use of schools.

In January 2002, following ongoing dialogue on these issues, the City's School Advisory Committee requested that a survey on community use of space be undertaken with the results to be reported back to the committee by May 2002. Given the interest of the United Way of Greater Toronto in this issue, the survey was conducted as a joint initiative.

## **How was the survey developed?**

Staff in the City's Community and Neighbourhood Services department and the United Way of Greater Toronto collaborated on the development of the survey. In addition, the following groups were consulted for their input into the survey design:

- ◆ Interdepartmental City staff group working with the School Advisory Committee
- ◆ Early Years Action Group
- ◆ Community-City Work Group on Stable Funding

The purpose of the survey was to:

- ◆ determine the extent to which community-based agencies and groups are having difficulty securing school space and City-owned space;
- ◆ identify any barriers to securing school or City-owned space; and
- ◆ identify any impacts that an inability to secure space is having on programs and services.

The survey questions were designed to compare the experiences of community groups in securing school and City space before and after the time when many of the permit and leasing fee increases took place, to determine what, if any, impacts there were as a result.

## **How was the survey conducted?**

This survey represents a snapshot study and every attempt was made to distribute it to a diverse range of formal and informal groups across the city that use or want to use public space. Given the short timeframe in which to conduct the study, a fully rigorous sampling methodology was not possible. It should be noted that not every group is well represented in the survey sample. Child care centres, for example, that have significant space contracts with school boards were not targeted in this survey.

In April, over 2,000 surveys were mailed out to the following groups:

- ◆ Community, arts and culture groups funded by the City of Toronto
- ◆ United Way of Greater Toronto Member Agencies
- ◆ Non-profit groups on the waiting list for below-market City space
- ◆ Deputants from the Toronto District School Board Public Hearing meetings in 2000
- ◆ Parks and Recreation permit holders (using a probability sample of the entire list)

In addition, several community networks distributed the survey to members.

A total of 378 surveys were returned, representing a 20% overall response rate. Surveys continued to be returned after the closing date, however, the information from these surveys could not be included due to time constraints on tabulating the final results.

## What do the survey findings tell us?

The following narrative provides an overview of the key findings of the survey. Additional analysis on the information collected is ongoing and can be incorporated into future research. For example, the City's Community and Neighbourhood Services will be conducting a comprehensive study later in the year on the stability and capacity of the community-based service sector. Community use of space issues will be further explored in this research.

### *A wide variety of community groups rely on school and City space*

A total of 378 groups representing a wide variety of community agencies, organizations and clubs from across the city responded to the survey. The groups ranged from sports and recreation clubs to immigration and settlement programs to arts and cultural programs to family and child services. The groups provide services across the ages, from very young children to seniors.

As illustrated in the chart below, the three main categories of groups that responded to the survey were general social services, arts, cultural and social groups, and sports, hobby and recreation groups.

<b>Types of Community Groups Using Public Space</b>		
<b>Agency Type</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Social Service Agency	84	12.1%
Arts and Culture Group	82	11.8%
Information/Referral Service	70	10.1%
Multi Service	67	9.7%
Education Service	58	8.7%
Recreation/Hobby Group	51	7.4%
Immigrant and Settlement	46	6.6%
Family Resource Centre	39	5.6%
Sports Club	35	5.1%
Health Service	27	4.0%
Employment Service	22	3.2%
Community Recreation Association	20	2.9%
Community Sports Association	20	2.9%
Cultural Centre	18	2.6%
Social Club	15	2.2%
Faith/Religious Group	14	2.0%
Child Care Centre	13	1.9%
Professional Association Group	5	0.7%
Tenant Association	4	0.6%
Ratepayers Association	3	0.4%

*(Please note that survey respondents may have selected multiple responses.)*

The average age of these organizations was 27 years. This suggests that space issues are affecting well-established community groups. Fewer than 15% of the groups had been in existence for less than five years.

## ***Overall, fewer community groups are using public space***

A key trend revealed by the survey is an overall decline in the number of groups using public space, either school or City-owned. In the survey, schools include both the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto District Separate School Board. City-owned facilities include Parks and Recreation centres, civic centres, libraries, housing company buildings and other miscellaneous City-owned buildings.

Prior to the year 2000, a total of 171 groups used school space, mainly in TDSB facilities, and 187 groups used City-owned space, mostly in Parks and Recreation centres. Currently, only 98 groups are using school space and 159 groups are using space in City-owned facilities. An analysis of the types of groups that are no longer using public space indicated no real difference among the groups.

The reason for the decline in community use of public space is mainly related to fee increases. Prior to 2000, 71% of the community groups using school or City space were not charged for this space.

Only 53% (or 91) community groups that used school space prior to 2000 are still using this space now. Of these groups, 69% said that their fees had increased. Of this sixty-nine percent, 31% said they had to reduce or cancel programs to accommodate the fee increases. In addition, 18% had to increase fundraising efforts and another 18% increased user fees for their programs.

In terms of City-owned space, 75% (or 141) community groups that used City space prior to 2000 continue to use this space today. Of these groups, 41% said they had experienced a fee increase. Of this forty-one percent, 33% had to reduce or cancel programs to accommodate the fee increases. Nineteen percent needed to increase fundraising efforts and a further 25% had to either limit registration or expansion of their programs.

## ***More community groups have moved out of school space***

Although the overall number of community groups using public space has declined, more than twice as many of the community groups that responded to the survey have left school space as opposed to City space.

Prior to the year 2000, the majority of groups (52%) were using space in City-owned facilities, primarily in Parks and Recreation centres. The other 48% of community groups were using space in schools, mainly in TDSB facilities.

However, 43% fewer community groups are using school space now – a drop 73 groups. In addition, there are 28 fewer groups in City space – a drop of 15%.

## ***School space is more difficult to secure***

Further to the issue of fewer groups using public space, 70% of survey responses indicated a difficulty in securing space in schools or City facilities.

Since 2000, the majority (55%) indicated that school space was the most difficult to secure, as reflected in the chart below. This mainly refers to space in the Toronto District School Board. The remaining 45%

reported that it was difficult to secure space in City-owned facilities, primarily in Parks and Recreation centres (24%).

<b>Community Groups Having Difficulty Securing Public Space</b>		
	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Public School (TDSB)	113	42.8%
Parks and Recreation	64	24.2%
Separate School (TDSSB)	33	12.5%
Civic Centre	20	7.6%
Library	19	7.2%
Housing Corporation	9	3.4%
City-Owned	6	2.3%

*(Please note that survey respondents may have selected multiple responses.)*

### ***Permit and leasing fees are a key barrier to securing public space***

Overall, more community groups identified barriers related to securing school space than for City space. Of the groups attempting to get space in schools, the most frequently cited barrier was the cost of permit and leasing fees (42%). The next major barrier (24%) was that space was not available in the school.

<b>Barriers to Securing School Space</b>		
<b>Barrier</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Permit and Leasing Fees	162	41.3%
Space not Available	95	24.2%
Hours not Suitable	69	17.6%
Lengthy Permit Process	28	7.1%
Eligibility Criteria	14	3.6%
Lack of Parking Space	11	2.8%
Frequent Permit Cancellation	7	1.8%
Lack of Public Transit Access	4	1.0%
Must be Toronto Residents	2	0.5%

*(Please note that survey respondents may have selected multiple responses.)*

The main barrier cited in securing space in City-owned facilities was that space was not available (34%). This may be due to the fact that municipal administration and programs have priority access to this space. The next main barrier was the cost of permit and leasing fees (24%).

<b>Barriers to Securing City Space</b>		
<b>Barriers</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Space not Available	95	33.9%
Permit and Leasing Fees	71	24.3%
Hours not Suitable	58	20.7%
Lengthy Permit Process	20	7.1%
Lack of Parking Space	15	5.4%
Eligibility Criteria	10	3.6%
Lack of Public Transit Access	6	2.1%
Frequent Permit Cancellation	3	1.1%
Must be a Toronto Residents	2	0.7%

*(Please note that survey respondents may have selected multiple responses.)*

### ***Finding space for evening and summer programs is the most difficult***

The most difficult time to find space for community programming is during evening hours, according to the groups surveyed. As it relates to securing school space, this coincides with TDSB policies to limit access during evening hours to reduce utility and caretaking costs.

<b>Time Difficulties When Securing Public Space</b>		
	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Evening	133	22.7%
Weekend	70	12.0%
Daytime	69	11.8%
Weekday	53	9.1%
Before or after school	31	5.3%
<b>Seasonal Difficulties When Securing Public Space</b>		
	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Summer	71	12.1%
Winter	57	9.7%
Fall	53	9.1%
Spring	48	8.2%

*(Please note that survey respondents may have selected multiple responses.)*

In addition, there were 71 reports of difficulty securing school or City space during the summer. This difficulty likely has a greater impact on children’s programming, which is heaviest during the summer.

The main types of space that groups had troubling securing were gyms (24%), meeting rooms (23%) and auditoriums (19%). Finding alternative, affordable gym space is a challenge for community groups as this type of space is not common outside of schools. In addition, meeting rooms in City facilities are in constant demand for City business, which takes precedence over community use.

### ***Community groups are cancelling or reducing programs***

A key goal of the survey was to identify any impacts that space issues are having on community groups in terms of the programs that they provide. Thirty-one percent of responses cited the need to reduce or cancel programs due to the difficulty in securing school or City space, as shown in the chart below. The majority of these groups were charitable organizations such as social service agencies, family and child services and faith-based groups.

<b>Impacts on Community Programs &amp; Services</b>		
	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Need to increase Fundraising	83	15.8%
Reduced Programs	83	15.8%
Cancelled Programs	82	15.6%
Need to limit Program Expansion	69	13.1%
Need to limit Registration	58	11.1%
Other	57	10.9%
Increased User Fees	54	10.3%
Need to Introduce User Fees	24	4.6%
No Financial Impact	15	2.9%

*(Please note that survey respondents may have selected multiple responses.)*

Sixteen percent reported a need to increase fundraising efforts in order to compensate for fee increases for the use of space. For the most part, these groups were non-charitable organizations such as sports clubs and arts and cultural groups. Under the “other” category listed in the above chart, 32% of responses identified the need to relocate programs. Only 3% reported no financial impact.

### ***Alternative space is not adequate***

Groups were asked in the survey to indicate if they had been successful in finding space elsewhere if school or City space was not available or accessible. A total of 119 groups indicated that they had found alternative elsewhere. Of these groups, 41% found space in another community agency, 40% found space in a church and 19% found space in the private market.

However, the majority (52%) rated this space as inadequate. The reasons given ranged from insufficient space to an inconvenient location to a lack of storage space for program equipment and supplies.

## **What are the conclusions?**

This survey provides a snapshot analysis of the changes in the use of school and City space for almost 400 diverse community groups from across Toronto. The survey is not intended to be an exhaustive study of community use of public space.

The survey was designed to compare the experiences of community groups in securing public space before and after the majority of permit and leasing fee increases took place, to determine what, if any, impacts there were.

The key trends revealed by the survey related to the community use of public space include the following:

- ◆ overall, fewer groups are using space in schools and City-owned facilities
- ◆ more community groups have moved out of school space than City space
- ◆ increased permit and leasing fees are key barriers to securing space
- ◆ there is considerable “movement” in the system, as groups relocate programs, and
- ◆ community groups are reducing or cancelling programs and/or increasing user fees in response to space issues.

These results in large part reflect what the community has been saying for the last few years. Fee increases and reduced hours of access mean that fewer community groups are able to use school space. Groups are turning to the City for space but are competing with City administration and program needs for use of this space. With no other options, community groups are forced to cancel or reduce programs for people of all ages, from all walks of life. Groups that are able to find space in churches or the private sector are not finding space that is adequate for their needs.

## Where do we go from here?

The provincial decision to change the education funding formula has resulted in serious financial constraints for school boards. In order to save money and generate revenues, school boards have increased permit and leasing fees and reduced hours of access to space for community groups. The City of Toronto is also under financial pressure due to provincial downloading and a limited capacity to generate revenue. In addition, the City has experienced financial impacts as a result of the provincial under funding of schools, for example, funding the use of school space for child care centres. In order to ameliorate its budget pressures, the City has also imposed user fees for some services, such as Parks and Recreation.

The community sector, the sector with the fewest resources, is bearing the weight of these cumulative government fiscal pressures. However, they are straining under the weight. These groups do not have the capacity to generate the funding needed to keep their programs and services going. The result is lost programs, services and activities for people in communities throughout the city. So, where do we go from here?

The City of Toronto has made a commitment to increasing the availability of community space within the context of implementing the Social Development Strategy. The Chief Administrative Officer is developing a policy framework for City-owned space provided at below-market rent. The results of this survey should be considered in the development of this policy.

United Way of Greater Toronto has committed to advocate for accessible, affordable community space with both government and business as part of its new initiative in Toronto's suburban neighbourhoods. The survey results provide valuable new information to support its advocacy efforts.

The City of Toronto and the United Way of Greater Toronto must continue to work together, with the school boards and other community partners, to urge the Province to acknowledge schools as a valuable community asset and therefore to revise the education funding formula to accommodate the costs associated with community use of schools and school facilities.

## **Appendix A: Community Comments**

Most of the community groups that filled out the survey on community use of school and City space took the opportunity to tell us more about their personal experiences with securing public space. The feedback was both positive and negative. What follows is a short selection of these community comments.

*“We cannot afford to pay rents, fees and payments for space as we are a not-for-profit community group entirely composed of volunteers who work freely to provide much needed services for community development activities that enrich the lives of members of our communities. This issue constitutes a major barrier and handicap that restricts our efforts and continues to impact negatively on our work in the community.”* (cultural group)

*“We are a charity and funding is limited. We cannot afford to pay the money it costs to secure space at a school just across the street from us.”* (community centre)

*“Prices for space are way up!”* (sports club)

*“While our organisation owns facilities largely adequate for our purposes, we are aware that many community groups and services don't. They urgently require access to affordable city-owned and school facilities. We are particularly concerned for groups serving children and youth, plus non-profit community day care centres.”* (multi-service agency)

*“Non-profit organisations are facing increasing difficulties in securing space to deliver badly needed services to the community.”* (cultural group)

*“Staff at recreation centres have been very supportive and helpful in securing space for us, but they face restrictions in doing so.”* (women's centre)

*“Not a lot of comparison, support or compromise to accessing space affordably. Not a lot of flexibility for the times needed.”* (women's shelter)

*“...I can see this being a major problem to agencies that rely on free space in order to run their programs. With no funding increases since 1994. It is already difficult for some agencies to provide service and quality programs at pre-1994 levels.”* (social service agency)

*“We operate parent education programs with a focus on immigrant families. These programs are clearly beneficial to children and to child behaviour and performance in school, as well as parent-school relationships. Typically, we do them in partnership with schools. In two instances...we have been asked to pay a permit fee...This seems to us to be very poor practice.”* (multi-service agency)

*“The increase in gym fees has made it hard to run programs the way we used to. Because of the cost alone we have increased registration fees by over 50% from 2000 and we are looking at another increase next year. What has happened is that we are losing kids because of the increase in fees...”* (sports association)

*“A community association can't exist without public meeting rooms. Now that meeting rooms all cost \$75 per night, we may have to disband our community association.”*  
(community association)

*“Our community ran this program for 25 years, using the school gymnasium for 2 hours on Tuesday nights. It was a community program where people could join in on a regular basis or casual depending on their situation. We could not and did not collect user fees. The gym was free until a couple of years ago. Then suddenly they wanted \$1,300 from us. The 25-year program came to an end. We were very disappointed.”* (sports club)

*“There is a need for information about how to secure the school premises and community centres. The public needs to know what facilities are available for use. There is not enough information about these extended benefits to the public, most especially the minority groups.”* (community coalition)

*“It is going to make operating the summer camp and securing proper safe space far more difficult, expensive and stressful. Children will be in a far less adequate space.”*  
(social service agency)

*“It is very difficult for a non-profit organisation providing programs to persons with multiple disabilities to find accessible and cost free space. The limitations we face are finding a large meeting room on the ground floor for fire and safety issues, a clearly marked passenger drop off for ‘WheelTrans’ users and accessible washrooms, elevators, ramps, and automatic door openers.”*  
(community and social services group)