



# Communicating With Our User Groups

*This article, based on the group session presented at the recent Ontario Turfgrass Symposium, provides perspective from three different municipalities.*

## **City of Mississauga Parks**

*Andy Wickens, Manager, Parks, Parks and Forestry Division*

The City of Mississauga is Canada's sixth largest city, with a population of 720,000. In the last 40 years, the City has expanded its inventory of parks and sports facilities, and the groups using those facilities have expanded in both numbers and diversity.

Mississauga Parks Operations is responsible for the maintenance of 520 parks throughout Mississauga and is a section of the Parks and Forestry Division which is part of Community Services. Other sections within the division are Forestry, Park Planning and Park Development. Parks Operations employs 126 full time staff and 315 seasonal staff and in addition to parks maintenance, carries out maintenance and operations of two marinas and 10 city cemeteries. In the winter, the primary function is snow clearing in parks along with 65 city buildings. The overall Parks Operations budget is \$23.5 million.

The City of Mississauga's sports field inventory includes:

- 243 soccer fields (8 artificial fields; 1 football) – 18 lit
- 139 ball diamonds – 45 lit
- 6 cricket pitches

The City also permits 28 school fields/diamonds.

On an annual basis, the City of Mississauga issues 1,460 outdoor field permits to 160 groups. These groups represent 24,500 registered users. The total hours fields were booked in 2013 were 129,816.

Field allocation in Mississauga is managed by the Sports Unit which is part of the Recreation Division. Parks deals directly with user groups regarding field maintenance issues. Communication in season is primarily through email (maintenance) and the City web site (field closures). Staff also meets with sports groups annually to discuss issues, and the City meets several times yearly with the "Outdoor Sports Field Network" which includes a variety of stakeholders.

The City of Mississauga is just completing an Outdoor Sports Field Management Policy, which will help to articulate our practices and policies around field allocation and use. This replaces a number of informal or ad hoc practices that have been used over the years. In addition, as part of a review of field user fees, the City has been meeting with user groups to look at field maintenance costs and capital budgets in detail. The City is looking to sports groups for any suggestions as to improvements in the efficiency or consistency of field maintenance. The City is also reviewing the quality of its sports amenities and benchmarking against other municipalities. This information will assist us in developing future capital budgets. While discussions with groups have involved a lot of effort on both sides, many longstanding issues have been resolved in a way that is mutually satisfactory and the plan is to keep building on the progress to date.

In general, the relationship the City has with its sports groups has evolved over time. The City is less of an allocator and regulator and more of a partner in delivering sports activities across the city. The Sports Unit has adopted a more community development focused approach. Parks Operations has worked to keep lines of communication open and functioning effectively so that they can ensure they are delivering the right services in the right way. While ongoing effort is required to build relationships in this way, the outcome is much more effective over the long run.

## **City of Vaughan Parks & Forestry Operations**

*Jason Inwood, Manager Parks Operations*

The City of Vaughan continues to grow at a rapid pace and has been recognized by the Conference Board of Canada as having one of the top two performing economies in the country.

In 2013, MoneySense magazine ranked Vaughan in the top ten best mid-sized cities in Canada, placing Vaughan 8 out of 46 in Canada.

In 1994 the newly formed “City” had a population of 100,000 and has continued to experience rapid growth. In 2013, Vaughan’s population grew to 315,000. Construction activity in the city has surpassed one billion dollars 9 times in the last 12 years and growth is forecasted to continue to 2031 with an anticipated population of over 415,000.

The City of Vaughan Parks & Forestry Operations Department is comprised of approximately 80 full time staff and 80 seasonal and student staffs. These staff are responsible for maintaining;

- 1,000 ha of parkland in 220 parks/facilities
- 500 floral displays and 750 hanging baskets
- Forestry - maintaining the urban tree canopy
- \$14.3 million annual operating budget
- \$2 million annual capital budget (Asset Replacement/Improvement Program)
- \$8-20 million annual park development budget

The Department maintains 184 soccer fields including 4 artificial turf (one Certified FIFA 2 Star Facility), 16 Category 1 fields, 43 Category 2 fields, and 121 Category 3 fields, 62 baseball diamonds including 28 premium hardball/softball diamonds, 25 junior diamonds and 9 T-ball diamonds.

Vaughan’s focus on communicating with user groups is one of the primary reasons for the success of the local clubs continued growth. Within the city there are 4 major soccer clubs representing 16,000 youth participants and 5 baseball clubs representing 3,500 youth participants.

The challenge of communicating with the groups has been a learning experience. Over the last 20 years, the evolution from calling the teams directly when there was a need to communicate a field closure or to discuss a concern has evolved drastically to include the use of social media and technology to support communication requirements.

A Sports Field Hotline is in place that users can call to hear a recorded message on field conditions; this is especially helpful when fields are wet and users need to know if the fields have been closed. “Email Blasts” are sent out frequently to advise user groups of upcoming events or policy changes that require their input. The use of Social Media continues to grow and is

leveraged for communicating with user groups, Twitter and Facebook have proven to be successful tools in getting messages out in a quick and effective matter.

In the spring of 2014, Vaughan launched a new feature on the city’s web site; an RSS (Rich Site Summary) Feed. The RSS feed enables the departments published web site content to syndicate to registered users automatically. When an update for field closures is published on the web site, users will automatically get a copy of the update sent to their smart phone or PC providing up to the minute updates.

Although technology has made communication much easier and more effective in getting messages out, there remains a need to have regular face to face meetings between club executives, coaches and city staff. Having personal interaction with the parties involved ensures that successful relationships are maintained and constructive dialogue continues between the City and user groups.

## City of St. Catharines

*John Bellehumeur, Parks Operations Foreman, and Kyra Allan, Acting Operations Coordinator, Recreation and Community Services*

The City of St. Catharines is situated within the Niagara Region and is home to approximately 130,000 people. It is the largest municipality in the region (*Statistics Canada, 2011 Census*).

St. Catharines contains 402 ha of greenspace and has a total of 114 parks – 29 of which are active sports parks. Some of these parks include Lester B. Pearson Park, Joe McCaffery Park, Lancaster Park, and George Taylor Field.

Both the Horticulture Foreman and Parks Operation Foreman report to the Parks Manager/Assistant Director and in turn, the Recreation and Community Services Director. There are 10 full time staff, 13 part time/casual staff (32 weeks) and 24 summer students (17 weeks) in the parks operation branch of the organizational structure.

Many athletic events have been hosted for a wide variety of user groups including high school competitions, private clubs including the Niagara Olympic Club, and national and provincial softball tournaments.

The 2013 budget for sports fields (net expenditures) was approximately \$2,977,930. Parks featuring a sports field are divided into three separate categories and classification is based primarily on field assets:

**Type A** sports fields contain lights, washrooms, bleachers, and are fenced. They are lined according to existing bookings, contracts and permits. The City of St. Catharines has and maintains one artificial turf field, eight interchangeable soccer/football fields, nine senior softball diamonds, and one senior baseball diamond.

**Type B** sports fields contain bleachers. Similar to “Type A” fields, they are lined according to existing bookings, contracts and permits. St. Catharines features 18 soccer fields, 14 mini fields, 6 softball fields, and 4 baseball fields.





**Type C** sports fields are not lined and are only suitable for practices. There are 17 of these sports fields in St. Catharines.

Field booking reports demonstrate soccer field usage increasing more than double from 2013 to 2014 – jumping from approximately 10,419 hours to 21,634 hours.

Baseball and softball usage was compared using the same type of field booking reports and the results are similar, though not as drastic. These fields were booked for approximately 5,263 hours in 2012, with a slight increase to 5,329 in 2013, and a more significant jump to 8,164 in 2014.

At the beginning of the booking process user groups will typically book fields for their maximum participant level. Once they complete their registration process, they follow up with Enterprise Services staff to amend if necessary.

Once the booking has been completed, Enterprise Services staff will forward schedules and type/level of play to the Parks Operations Foreman.

A formal closure policy has not been established, but guidelines are followed by Recreation and Community Services staff in order to communicate the event of a field closure:

- The Parks Operations Foreman will consult with Park Operators and/or upon inspection of a field, will determine if a field should be closed after a weather event
- Any closures are posted on Twitter and are recorded on the Field (telephone) Line
- Referees and umpires also have the authority to cancel a game due to unsafe field conditions or weather. The user group is then required to contact Enterprise Services with the relevant information about the cancellation.

A field allocation meeting is held each spring. Staff meets with user groups from each individual activity and discusses their needs prior to creating new bookings.

User groups are generally given first rights to their preferred usage times according to their bookings from the previous year.



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