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Is the city using Park Ambassadors to end encampments?

Emma Johnston-Wheeler

A City of Toronto news release published March 16 announced a new public program, Pathway Inside, to expedite moving people into shelters from four priority encampments: Alexandra Park, Trinity Bellwoods, Lamport Stadium and Moss Park.

The release states that city staff have spent the last few months “engaged daily with people living outside, listening to, and understanding their needs.” But the Encampment Support Network (ESN) is adamant that the Pathway Inside program is an empty promise based on false statistics.

ESN is a volunteer-led ad hoc group supporting homeless individuals living in encampments. Split into six neighbourhood committees, ESN provides citywide support, seven days a week, primarily between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m.

Two days after the city’s announcement, bylaw enforcement officers in groups as large as 15 entered the four priority parks to post trespass notices on trees and shelters. The notices informed encampment residents of anticipated evictions on April 6 at 8 a.m. Residents who decline the city’s offer to move inside via

the Pathway Inside program will be criminalized under the Trespass to Property Act.

In recent months, the city’s Park Ambassadors have conducted “clearings” in which tents and shelters are deemed abandoned or labelled garbage, and removed. The Park Ambassador program is the brainchild of the city councilor for Moss Park (Ward 13), Kristyn Wong-Tam. A city document signed by Wong-Tam in 2017 says the program was established in 2003 “to provide a proactive response to concerns relating to homelessness and safety in Toronto parks”.

ESN representatives say they were not familiar with Park Ambassadors until interacting with them this year while advocating for encampment residents. The volunteers say many Torontonians don’t know what park ambassadors are or what they do, although the city’s 2018 operating budget costed the program at \$500,000.

ESN volunteer Ginger Dean says she’s been working recently to understand who is in charge of the park spaces that encampments occupy. “It’s been remarkably difficult to determine,” she says.

Encampments continued p8

Major changes to administrative justice coming

Andre Bermon, Publisher

The Ford government is well on its way to amalgamating five provincial tribunals into a new Ontario Land Tribunal (OLT). The Ontario Land Tribunal Act, tabled in Bill 245, will merge the Board of Negotiation, the Conservation Review Board, the Mining and Lands Tribunal, the Environmental Review Tribunal and the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal.

A Feb. 16 provincial media release stated the unitary tribunal will make “the land dispute resolution process more efficient by creating a single forum to resolve disputes faster by

eliminating unnecessary overlap between cases.”

However, two independent oversight groups, Tribunal Watch Ontario and the Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA), say the bill has serious implications for Ontario’s administrative justice system. The result will likely be loss of specialized subject-matter expertise in tribunal hearings as well as less public participation, they say. Ramani Nadarajah, a senior counsellor for CELA, told *the bridge* the bill means “major change.”

Tribunals continued p4

Small businesses spring into action



(From left) Gwen, Robert and Wolf (owner) pose in front of Ginkgo Floral Design. Businesses in lockdown hope to capitalize on the warming weather.

Waterfront Toronto looks for new partner to develop Quayside after Sidewalk Labs debacle

Donald Higney

Tri-government organization Waterfront Toronto has issued a request for qualifications (RFQ) to secure a new international development partner for the unused Quayside lands.

Sidewalk Labs, a subsidiary of Google parent-company Alphabet, decided last May to cancel its plan to transform the Quayside site into a technologically advanced neighbourhood, complete with heated and illuminated sidewalks and public WiFi. The company cited “unprecedented economic uncertainty” brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The RFQ is designed to filter out candidates that don’t have the necessary experience, financial resources and vision to develop the Quayside land.

The announcement says the area will provide affordable housing as well as support for seniors living independently. The desired project would be a “sustainable community for people of all ages, backgrounds, abilities and incomes.”

A statement from Waterfront Toronto says much was learned from the urban design and sustainable planning work done with Sidewalk Labs. It says

public realms, parks, streetscapes, and open community spaces will be important in the Quayside development.

The Quayside site, at the foot of Parliament Street at Queens Quay East, is one of the undeveloped areas downtown. It amasses 4.9 hectares (12 acres), including 3.2 hectares (8 acres) of developable land across five development blocks. The site is near award-winning public places such as Sugar Beach, Sherbourne Common and the Water’s Edge Promenade.

Chosen to develop the vision for Quayside in October 2017, Sidewalk Labs released a 1500-page proposal almost two years later. \$1.3 billion was committed to be invested by the company with hopes of spurring more investment from the private sector.

Although some praised the Sidewalk Labs plan as ambitious and forward-thinking, local residents and others opposed its private use of private data on people’s behaviour. Sidewalk Labs countered that an independent third party would collect and protect data from the smart city test site but the #BlockSidewalk movement still called for the Google com-

pany to pull out of the project. In a blog post about Sidewalk Labs’s withdrawal, CEO Dan Doctoroff said, “As unprecedented economic uncertainty has set in around the world and in the Toronto real estate market, it has become too difficult to make the 12-acre project financially viable without sacrificing core parts of the plan.”

Sidewalk Labs had previously retreated from its plan to expand the project to 190 acres of the Port Lands from the 12 unused at Quayside.

Waterfront Toronto’s vision includes overhauling the Parliament Slip, with the potential addition of a “water amphitheatre, a floating restaurant, a canoe/kayak launch, a water transportation hub and a floating dock with concessions.”

It also wants to mimic the waterside wave decks at the ends of Spadina Avenue, Rees and Simcoe Streets to create a “continuous waterfront loop” from Ontario Place in the west to the Port Lands in the east. No timeline has been set yet.

RFQ submissions are due on May 12. A winner will be selected before the end of the year.

Huge Esplanade revitalization project will alter movement patterns

Kayla Higgins

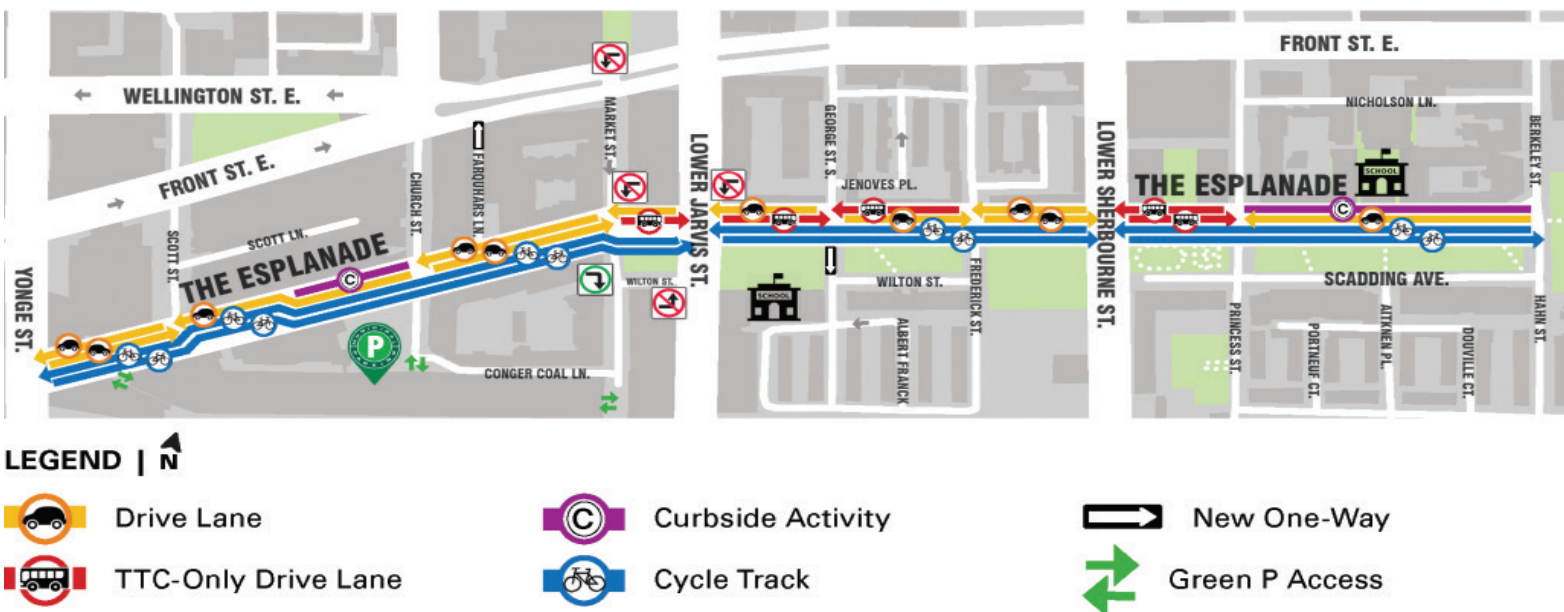
Two of Toronto’s most historic streets may soon be getting a major renovation — if everything being proposed for the area is approved.

Mill Street and The Esplanade, established alongside Toronto’s waterfront over 170 years ago, will have bi-directional bicycle tracks on one side of the road.

The City aims to promote usage of public cycling on the road, instead of the pedestrian promenade. Linking The Esplanade with Mill Street via the north side of Parliament Square Park, the protected bike lane would connect existing bikeways on Bayview Avenue, Cherry Street, Lower Sherbourne and Yonge Street.

At a virtual public meeting in February, the city said project goals are to improve safety for everyone, to make walking, cycling and taking transit more attractive, and to maintain access to local and citywide destinations.

Adam Popper, a Project Manager in the city’s Transportation Services Division, said changes to intersections would include renewed pavement markings, prohibited vehicle turns, and signal timing to separate vulnerable road users from vehicles.”



From 2015 to 2019 there were 342 collisions on The Esplanade and Mill Street, 10 percent of them involving walking or cycling. Three led to serious injury or death.

David Crombie Park, beside The Esplanade on the west side of Sherbourne, is also facing a substantial revitalization. According to the city’s website, the park’s promenade “is imprinted with cultural and historic references that reflect the diversity of the community” and would be prioritized for pedestrians.

TTC bus routes serving thousands of passengers daily would adapt to fit the changing

landscape. From Fort York-Esplanade to Parliament, the design would restrict traffic to certain blocks while preserving bus access, “reducing non-local motor vehicle traffic and congestion that slows the bus.”

One major concern addressed during the virtual meeting was the city’s plan to reduce parking on The Esplanade and Mill Street from 523 spaces to 60, with 10 spaces on The Esplanade and 50 on Mill Street.

The proposal is “not all about lifestyle. Some of it is about getting to work, getting out of the neighbourhood, or parking in the neighbourhood,” said Judith Campbell, longtime

Toronto resident and member of the Longboat Avenue Residents Association.

Consisting of over 140 households, the community group is located in the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood and encompasses Longboat Avenue, Princess Street, Portneuf Crescent, Aitken Place and Douville Crescent.

“We can be circling for a couple hours trying to find a parking spot in our own neighbourhood. I hope [the project] reflects the big vision of the city, but acknowledges some of the very real day-to-day chal-

lenges that it imposes.”

Campbell underlined complications in traffic patterns, saying the changes could confuse pedestrians, cyclists and drivers. “You can go here, you can’t go there, transit is happening here, cyclists ride here – it’s very, very complicated.”

Implementation is to begin this year and extend towards the end of 2023. The new bike-way and associated changes along The Esplanade and Mill Street between Lower Sherbourne and Bayview will kick off the project.

Photo: Courtesy of City of Toronto

CORRECTION

In the March 2021 issue of *the bridge*, the article “Misstep in outreach leaves out Moss Park community” misstated the name of the Neighbourhood Community Officer/Program (NCO/NCOP). *the bridge* regrets the error.

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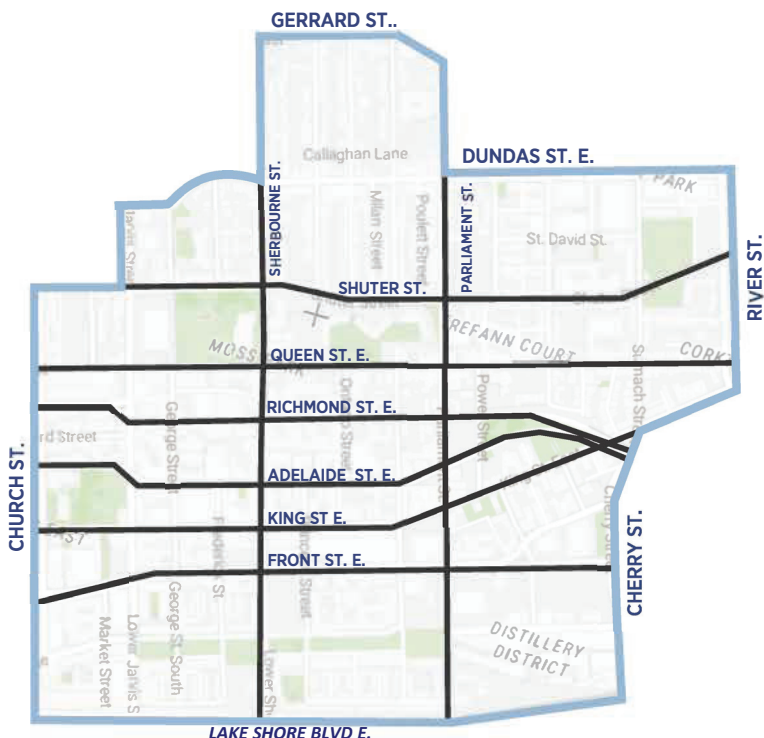
is an independent, nonpartisan newspaper published monthly and distributed by a mix of delivery services to varying readership. 6,000 copies are circulated throughout the Downtown East - Moss Park, Corktown, Garden District, Cabbagetown South, St. Lawrence Neighbourhood, Distillery District - and to community hubs that extend across Toronto.

the bridge strives to source up-to-date activity and diverse interests from heritage, planning, and development, to culture, arts and opinions.

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First electric lights in Toronto



Bruce Bell, Senior Columnist

Something wondrous happened on December 28, 1841 on the corner of Front and Church Streets where the Flatiron Building now stands. It was on that spot that Toronto emerged from its dark ages and lit its first gas streetlamp. A few decades later just as gas lamps were in full force brightening our city, something else, more luminous, had people flocking to a famous eatery on Yonge Street and it wasn't just for the food.

In September 1879 the first two permanent electric lights in Toronto were demonstrated in McConkey's Restaurant that stood at 145 Yonge Street just south of Richmond Street. Light bulbs had been in the works since 1801 when England's Sir Humphry Davy made platinum strips glow by passing an electric current through them. However ingenious light bulbs may have been, they were never seen as anything more than a passing fad.

That was all to change on July 24, 1874 when a Canadian patent was filed by Toronto electricians Henry Woodward and Mathew Evans. Their bulbs, made of carbon filaments, held electrodes in glass globes filled with nitrogen. These became the most brilliant and long lasting bulbs to date. That same year Woodward and Evans lit up Morrison's Brass Foundry on Adelaide St. W for a full hour but were ultimately unsuccessful in selling their new light bulb. People saw it as ridiculous, and began to say, "Who wants

to look at a burning piece of metal?"

Enter American super inventor Thomas Edison, who realizing their technique was just the breakthrough he was searching for. Edison bought the rights from Woodward and Evans and ultimately lit up lower Manhattan with 3,000 incandescent carbon filaments lamps on Sept. 4, 1882. Even though the two Torontonians held the first patent for the modern light bulb, it was the American born Edison who all too often was given the credit.

In 1884, the newly formed Toronto Electric Light Company (funded among others by a 24 year old Henry Pellatt of Casa Loma fame) won a contract to put 50 electric lights along King, Queen, and Yonge Streets. When Pellatt finished building his castle in 1914, he reportedly installed 5,000 electric lights throughout his new home.

Nevertheless, by the late 19th century not all of Toronto's streets were illuminated as



electricity was still a monopoly and only certain sections of the city that could afford this luxury were able to have electric lights.

It would be Adam Beck, a member of the provincial le-

gisature and simultaneously mayor of London (today his statue graces University Avenue in front of the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts) who demanded that hydro electric power from Niagara Falls should be available at cost to all Ontario municipalities. On May 2, 1911 with the power stations built and the lines strung, it was now time to flick a ceremonial switch on the steps of City Hall and bring power for the first time from Niagara Falls to Toronto.

As the City Hall clock struck 9 p.m. in front of a crowd of 30,000 people, Adam Beck, Ontario Premier James Whitney and Toronto Mayor Reginald Geary placed their hands

on the switch and at the count of three, the city was lit up with economical electric light the likes of which no one had ever seen before. With that the Toronto Hydro-Electric System was born.

In the beginning, most people had just one electric lightbulb in their homes, usually placed in the front hall where a blazing 300 watt bulb would light the entire first floor of a home. However, it wasn't long before the entire home was converted from gas to electricity.

Just like with the coming of the internet, soon electricity was everywhere, in hotels, stores, restaurants and factories and our once darkened world would never be the same again.



The inauguration of Ontario Hydro, May 2, 1911. Photo: Courtesy of City of Toronto Archives

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Springtime in the city

Ben Bull, Columnist

It's springtime in the city and, even though we are still in a lockdown (sort of – where are we now? the grey zone? the red zone? the end zone?) it's wonderful to stroll around in the cool air and pop into a shop or grab a drink on a patio.

I took a ferry to Ward's Island this past weekend and was reminded of why I love this city so much. Looking back at the skyline it's incredible to see the scale of development and the gleam of the new towers.

So much is changing. You can barely see the SkyDome anymore. And the Royal York Hotel is like your drunk uncle peeping his head out at the at the back of a wedding photograph.

Toronto is an outdoor city – we love the sun. It's cruel to lock us up inside. There are so many places to venture, especially downtown with the world right outside our door.

But in Covid-19 times, our outdoor anxiety can be a problem. The streets were teeming on my weekend excursion. As I shuffled onto the island ferry, I could barely keep the regulation six feet apart. My daughter wanted to head over to Kensington Market but then she saw the photos on social media: throngs of fresh-air fanatics

roaming the streets, shoulder to shoulder, laughing, smiling – and not a mask in sight.

We are not an irresponsible citizenry. None of us were hobnobbing on the White House lawn earlier this year, and I don't know anyone planning to hop on a plane to Miami to go skinny dipping with the spring breakers.

But the sunshine does make us crazy.

As I cowered near the capstan on my trip across the lake, it was hard not to imagine this first balmy weekend of spring wasn't going to lead to a spike in infection numbers a few weeks down the road.

We are either in the third wave of Covid infections or else the second wave never stopped. Either way, the numbers are riding high and the lockdown is dragging on. More worrying, perhaps, is that people seem to be growing weary of these arbitrary rules.

We can read the data. We know that the largest number of infections is among essential workers, and that the highest rates are in the city's northwest. We know where these outbreaks take hold and fester – in healthcare facilities and factories, where social distancing is impractical and hard to police.

So why don't our public health measures target these

hot spots directly?

As for the immunization drive, it's clear this is a long, slow roll. The sluggish uptake by people over 80 has been attributed in part to confusion over how to book a shot.

And so, we get antsy. "Why must I stay inside?" we ask. "I am not the problem."

As we peek through our curtains at the clear blue sky, we ask ourselves: "Is it really so dangerous out there?"

The new variants are hitting the younger demographics hard, according to the initial evidence. Reports are mostly anecdotal now, but there are clear indications that the new strains travel faster and may be more potent in younger bodies.

But still, some of us look the other way. My neighbour just came back from the States. He skirted the crowds, ate too many tacos and took a hat-full of tests. Then he hailed a cab at the border and quarantined at home. He didn't break any rules. He doesn't want to get sick. He just needed to get out.

It's been a long lockdown. We need to hurry up and give the high-risk folks their shots and let the essential workers get in line next. And then it's my turn.

The sun is shining. The temperature is rising. It's time to head outside.

Combining different tribunals may impede access to justice

Tribunals from p1

Asked if amendments to tribunals are common, Nadarajah said provinces do make adjustments to the decades-old bodies, but an overhaul like the one proposed is "rare."

Since the Ford government was elected in 2018, the judicial administrative system has seen marked changes.

Starting last February, the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal (LPAT), formerly known as the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), no longer accepts oral submissions from persons with mere participant status. Only written statements can be received as evidence for adjudicators to review.

More than half of LPAT's 31 adjudicators were appointed since the Conservatives won the 2018 provincial election, a shift Tribunal Watch Ontario claims removed some of the most experienced adjudicators. A similar loss of expertise seems likely if the five tribunals are amalgamated.

Tribunal cases "tend to involve highly technical and scientific evidence with numerous experts involved, like hydrogeologist engineers," said Nadarajah. "Someone who has previously been only

dealing with, for example, expropriation matters under the board of negotiations will now be hearing these highly technical and scientific cases."

A 2011 paper by Michael Gottheil and Doug Ewart on "the potential of Ontario's clustering model to advance administrative justice" said many of the specialized tribunals were created to focus subject matter expertise.

The report argued that a judicial administrative system with a broad range of knowledge, experience and perspectives instills public confidence, while facilitating improvements in serving the public.

CELA's analysis of Bill 245 concludes that combining different tribunals into one, "transforming specialists into generalists," damages the credibility of the tribunal's decisions and may impede access to justice.

Bill 245 may also reduce participation rights. Extending the rules that govern LPAT to the amalgamated tribunal will similarly rule out oral submissions from 'participants,' said Nadarajah.

"If you're a party, you have full rights to make all submissions and cross-examine. Participant status is more limited."

Ruling out oral submissions "restricts quite significantly public participation before each tribunal. You don't get the full nuance about a case if [interventions are] reduced to in writing."

"From the community's perspective there is really no insurance that those submissions are going to be read," she added. "And if a tribunal member [wants] to ask questions, there isn't opportunity to do that."

At the time of publishing, Bill 245 was at the third (final) reading stage, likely to be passed without assuaging the fears of CELA and Tribunal Watch Ontario.

Many communities across Ontario, particularly in Toronto, have already come under the government's narrow interpretation of planning laws, which now permit more lenient use of Minister's Zoning Orders (MZOs). Overhauling the administrative justice system even more may further constrain public stakeholders' relationships with the province.

"It's part of that overall trend of simply ignoring the current planning rules," Nadarajah said, "and effectively shutting out any opportunity for citizens to participate and engage in Ontario's land use planning."



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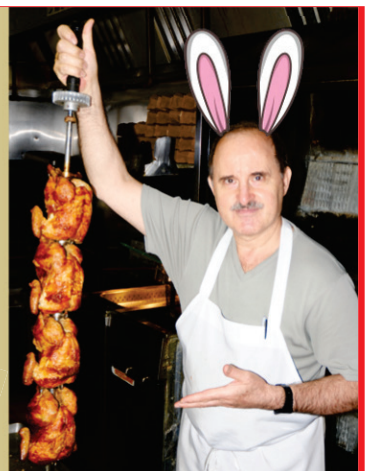


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New mid-rise proposed at Parliament and Shuter

Jayne Kitchen

Near the northwest corner of Parliament and Shuter, Core Development Group Ltd. has proposed to build a nine-storey mixed-use residential building. It would replace a single-storey commercial building, a former Salvation Army Thrift store that has been vacant since 2018.

The majority of the 71 all-rental dwellings at 252 Parliament Street would be bachelor units. The remainder would have three or four bedrooms designed as co-living spaces, with a single resident to each bedroom.

The planning rationale from the developer's consultant, Bousfields Inc., emphasizes the site's proximity to upscale Cabbagetown and the redeveloped Regent Park. Moss Park, its actual neighbourhood, is mentioned only in noting that the city plans to upgrade an arena and a community recreation centre.

Since 2017, the site has been



Looking southeast to 252 Parliament Street.

owned by asset-holding company Downing Street. Downing Street has spurred development of several recognizable Toronto buildings, including the former Marty Millionaire building purchased by a subsidiary of ME to WE, the social enterprise of the Kielburger family.

Records at the Ontario Land Registry reveal that the 252 Parliament property was sold

Photo: Designed by Studio ICJ for Core Development by Downing Street to Core Developments for \$10.35 million.

Elsewhere downtown, Core Development Group has proposed, in partnership with Menkes Developments, a 46-storey condominium building over Filmores strip club on Dundas Street east of Jarvis. Core Development is also planning a 37-storey building at Sherbourne and Front Streets, currently an Esso gas station.

What is art worth?

Carol Mark, Columnist

As a former gallery owner, I find it remarkable how emotionally attached artists are to their work. Artists often ask an unrealistic price, not because they feel the art is worth the amount listed but to scare off interested buyers.

Art is a personal extension of oneself and as with the birthing of a child, the idea of separation is too much for many artists. Viewers want to know if the price is realistic – why is it worth this much? Unless the artist has a record of securing exorbitant amounts, the inflated price takes away from the authentic character of the piece. Both art and artist lose credibility.

What is value in relation to art? Does it lie in the money spent studying art? (Classroom art education is a recent practice. In past, artists were apprentices or self-taught.)

Is it years spent perfecting a style? We have images of starving artists, but that romantic

notion doesn't last long, not in these times. Add up the cost of living and it's pretty difficult to remain on high moral ground of any kind.

In my opinion, none of these factors should determine the "value" of a work of art. Emily Dickinson was once asked how she knew when a poem was good. Her answer was, "It gives me goosebumps."

I think that is the most important thing about any work of art. Does it evoke a strong, meaningful response in the person viewing or experiencing it? Does it move you deeply?

Then it has value for you and perhaps others.

Market value is something else. Market value is influenced by so many chances, coincidences and accidents that it cannot be predicted. Would you pay \$91 million (if you had it) for "Rabbit" by Jeff Koons, a three-foot tall metal figure of a bunny that looks as if it's made of balloons? "Rabbit" set a world price record for the

work of a living artist.

NFTs – "non-fungible tokens" – are now the hottest commodity in the art world. Though NFTs exist only in the digital multiverse, not the physical world, they are being sold for millions. Their skyrocketing prices and recent celebrity come from a \$69 million bid in a Sotheby's auction on a work by a South Carolina artist known to his devotees as "Beeple." NFTs are sold and resold online – they have no physical existence. Is this real value? Or has the Emperor found a way to sell his fabled clothes?

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the bridge: Book Review

Glenda MacFarlane, Columnist

Willie: The Game-Changing Story of the NHL's First Black Player
Willie O'Ree with Michael McKinley; Viking 2020

Willie O'Ree's engaging autobiography, *Willie*, is a treat for hockey fans. As the first Black player in the NHL, Willie provides us with a unique perspective.

O'Ree was born in Fredericton in 1935, the youngest of the nine children of Harry and Rosebud O'Ree. Even though his was one of only two Black families in town, Willie paints his childhood in idyllic terms: movies with friends, church with family, camping and fishing. But the book really comes alive when O'Ree describes his time playing hockey. He began skating at age three and skated every day there was ice, even skating to and from school on Fredericton's frozen streets! Saturday mornings meant games at an outdoor rink, and Saturday nights were spent huddling around the family's radio, listening to Hockey Night in Canada. O'Ree says that the fact that he couldn't see the players may have allowed him to imagine a place for himself in that all-white game. "Hockey was my life and 'Black' meant the puck and 'white' meant the ice," he says.

O'Ree joined the Fredericton Falcons of the NBAHA, where he moved up through the ranks quickly. At age 19, he was invited to play with the Quebec Frontenacs, where his coach told him that he could become the "Jackie Robinson of hockey." But during the 1955/56 season O'Ree was hit by a puck, with devastating consequences. A doctor informed

him that his hockey career was over; the sight in his right eye was almost completely gone. O'Ree decided on the spot to keep that fact a secret. For decades, the only person who knew that he was blind in one eye was his sister.

Over the next several years, O'Ree bounced between the minor leagues and NHL farm teams, but his moment in the sun arrived on January 18, 1958, when the Boston Bruins called him to come to Montreal to take the place of an injured player. The Bruins won against the nigh-unbeatable Canadiens, and although in that moment O'Ree was only thinking about how he had achieved his own dream, he later realized that he had changed the face of professional hockey forever.

Willie is filled with entertaining descriptions of players from hockey's golden age; Gordie Howe has "windshield wiper elbows that he used like an artist," and "most nights the puck looked like a beach ball to [Terry] Sawchuk." It is also a rich source of information about the Black presence in hockey stretching back to the 19th century. Willie encountered racism throughout his career, ranging from the "unspoken rules" he grew up with to vile name-calling and physical altercations while playing. In 1996, when O'Ree began working with the NHL to increase diversity, he was overjoyed to be able to help bring change to the game he loves. More than 50,000 kids have now taken part in programs such as the Willie O'Ree All-Star hockey tournament.

O'Ree is a living legend, and this book is a welcome addition to Canadian sports history.

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Best-laid plans: one year later

Shelley Lepp, TWC

I am a planner. Years as a single mother of three busy kids, and pursuing full-time grad school while working, required operating on a meticulous schedule. To this day, our dining room walls are covered in chalkboard so I can keep an eye on the weekly rhythms. I “rainbowtize” (organize by rainbow colour) my bookshelves. I adore lists. I own a label maker. Now imagine my compatibility with the disruption of a global pandemic.

As co-executive director of the Toronto Writers Collective, my days unfold through story. Over the past year, I have been gifted intimate portraits of the pandemic’s effects on daily life across the country and prompted to reflect on how my life has been affected. As what was initially surreal transitioned to commonplace, I have been writing and rewriting my pandemic story, recording reflections and lessons learned along the way. This is the short version. In list form, naturally.

1. Yes, Elsa, I have ‘let it go’

I did not plan for a six-month March break, homeschooling in a language I do not speak nor taking questions on the new math curriculum between

meetings. I did not plan for my husband to lose his job three days after we moved out of our house on the first day of a lockdown to renovate a house for which permits would be delayed by months. I flew without a parachute and I survived. Surrender is beautiful.

2. “This is my first pandemic; I have no idea what I’m doing”

Parenting through a pandemic is like fumbling through an unsolvable word problem. The isolation of the past year has forced parents to be teachers and therapists, caregivers and coaches, best friends and bearers of bad news. Getting comfortable with not knowing, with ambiguity and vulnerability – this is a journey we have navigated together. As a wise woman once told me, there is deep bonding in the trenches. My family is stronger than we knew.

3. “We were supposed to be at Disney World”

Alongside the loss of life, income and innocence throughout the world came the small (to us) losses of childhood. Birthday parties, sports seasons, sleepovers, vacations. Do children lose a tooth if they don’t get to show-and-tell it? Celebration and marking milestones (including

all seven lost teeth) – especially in hard times – matters.

4. “Criticism doesn’t belong here – I’m a beginner!”

While much of the world took to baking sourdough, our household found alternative versions of fun. Scootering laneways in the early morning, trampoline in the afternoon, driveway basketball after dinner. We learned how to play tennis and embroider, and tackled paint by numbers. The void left by crossed-out calendar plans left a place for creativity – endlessly therapeutic at a time when much seems to be dissolving.

5. “Caterpillars are emerging from my bathroom!”

Over the past year I have watched these things grow: 1 bean pod, 1 cucumber plant and 1 pot of strawberries (until we drowned them). 11 caterpillars that began in tiny cups on our bathroom floor and were later released as butterflies. Three children eagerly anticipating the arrival of a fourth. My marriage. Myself.

As we look back on the past year, may you too see glimmers of growth in your reflection and in your story.

Shelley Lepp, a writing coach and sometimes editor, is co-executive director of the Toronto Writers Collective.

Corktown and Regent Park community clean-ups

John Guido & Sean Brathwaite

Spring is in the air! Even though the city-sponsored Clean Toronto Together has been postponed until September, the Friends of Corktown Common and the Friends of Regent Park, in partnership with the Corktown Residents and Business Association (CRBA), will host community clean-ups on Saturday April 24 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Both events will respect Covid-19 guidelines. Volunteers are asked to bring face masks, water bottles, and gloves if they have them. There will be no large group gatherings.

Volunteers can pick up garbage bags, gloves, hand sanitizer and directions at the starting points: in Corktown the Common Pavilion or Underpass Park, the Sackville Playground, or the Sumach-Shuter Parkette, and in Regent Park at the bake oven/greenhouse. The Friends of Regent Park clean-up will incorporate a Butt Blitz, collecting cigarette butts as part of A Greener Future’s program.

For more information, email friendsofcorktowncommon@gmail.com, friendsofregentpark.to@gmail.com or info@corktown.ca.

Relaunching the Friends of Corktown Common

With the support of the Friends of Regent Park and the CRBA, the spring clean-up



Regent Park residents gather at a September 2020 clean-up event.

Photo: Leonard Swartz

marks the first event organized by the relaunched Friends of Corktown Common.

When the Common opened in 2013, an enthusiastic Friends committee organized neighbourhood activities such as park clean-ups. But when the 2015 Pan/Parapan Am Games & Canary district construction closed the park for two summers, the committee lost momentum.

In 2020, a dedicated group of past and new volunteers came together to relaunch.

The group established a social media presence at [cork-](https://www.facebook.com/towncommon)

[towncommon](https://www.facebook.com/towncommon) on Facebook, [@towncommon](https://twitter.com/towncommon) on Twitter, and [@friendsofcorktowncommon](https://www.instagram.com/friendsofcorktowncommon) on Instagram. This February they published the first edition of the Friends of Corktown Common Newsletter to share information and invite participants. To receive the newsletter or join the Friends, email friendsofcorktowncommon@gmail.com.

Friends of Corktown Commons want input to help shape the group’s priorities. Contribute your thoughts and ideas in a short survey on our social media pages.

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'It's a mode to clear parks, not a mode to properly support people'

Encampments from p1

When asked directly, the ambassadors often redirect her to a colleague who may claim to not have that information in front of them, and direct her once again. Otherwise, they decline to comment.

According to the city website, "Parks Ambassadors are a responsive, mobile crew whose day-to-day work involves ensuring that parks remain welcoming for passive and recreational use and work to resolve conflicts between patrons of the park system. Parks Ambassadors work to ensure the city's parks are accessible, equitable and safe places for all." No information regarding protocol has been published.

In response to an email inquiry, Jaclyn Carlisle, Parks and Rec's senior communications coordinator, confirmed that the ambassadors visit parks with encampments daily "and engage with people temporarily sleeping in encampments by referring them to programs and services available through Toronto's Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) and other partners, conducting safety and wellness checks and distributing water, socks and other goods as well as tallying the number of structures within an encampment."

Ginger Dean and her colleagues who visit the encampments every day say they rarely witness ambassadors handing out resources. She

said they showed up at parks during summer heat waves without water, and only recently have come with socks. "It's very clear that they use wellness checks as excuses to surveil encampments," says ESN volunteer Nathan Doucet.

ESN started last May when the pandemic pushed people out of homeless shelters and drew fresh attention to the city's housing crisis. "All summer and all winter long," says Dean, "we barely saw Park Ambassadors or Streets to Home [staff]. They turned up every couple of weeks."

Not until January did ESN notice the Park Ambassadors more. Every day, "they come in sort of anonymously and just take photos of every single structure in the encampment," says Dean. "They won't approach the structures, or call out to see if anybody is home." Dean believes these visits are the daily engagements the city press release refers to.

On Feb. 16, Park Ambassadors removed three tiny homes – insulated wooden shelters built for encampment residents to live in during winter – from Alexandra Park after deeming them abandoned. Dean says she witnessed the removal and called 311 after head Park Ambassador Tory Ford, ignored her questions and walked away. Doucet says Ford is known amongst the community for having slashed the tents of encampment residents in the past.



City Park Ambassadors seen removing a tiny shelter from Alexandra Park Photo Credit: ESN

In audio of the phone call published to ESN's Instagram account, Dean told Parks Supervisor Grant Drygas that the tiny shelters were not abandoned. She said she knew whose they were, and that some contained the owners' possessions.

Drygas told Dean that his co-workers have assured him otherwise. He said he was uncertain, but believed that the protocol was a three-day observation period, after which the Park Ambassador team could determine that a structure was abandoned. Drygas also told Dean that he was unsure who authorized that removal, and promised to get back to her.

Dean called Drygas twice in subsequent weeks and reached out to other Park Ambassador staff, but no one returned her calls to clarify the protocol.

According to Parks communications coordinator Jaclyn Carlisle, "structures are only considered abandoned if they

remain unoccupied after several visits from city staff or the people using them have voluntarily chosen to accept referrals for safer inside spaces and have confirmed that they've collected their belongings. After an encampment is visited at least twice over a period of more than 48 hours without a change in inactive/abandoned status of a structure, the structure identified is deemed abandoned and the area will be cleaned up. This includes the removal of the structure."

According to ESN volunteers who spend entire days on site, these visits likely occurred at distance, for no more than a couple of hours. While it remains illegal to inhabit, place or build a structure on city property, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends allowing people living unsheltered or in encampments to remain there during the Covid-19 pandemic

if individual housing options are not available.

Regarding the removal south of Scadding Court on Feb. 26, Carlisle said, "City staff visited this location several times and confirmed that these three structures were inactive and not in use from February 22 to 26, a total of five days."

Carlisle says Park Ambassadors undergo ongoing training on topics such as occupational health and safety, the city's human rights and anti-harassment policy, privilege awareness and sensitivity, working with people experiencing homelessness and/or living in poverty, as well as on first aid and narcotic safety.

In a public online event March 1, a coordinated email zap to address concerns to the city, an ESN representative shared his experience with Park Ambassadors in Moss Park. A few hours after the tragic death of a tiny shelter resident, he said, the Park ambassadors entered the space to photograph and remove the structure deemed abandoned. They did not speak to Moss Park residents, bring supplies, or offer mental health support to those grieving the loss of their neighbour.

ESN volunteer Nathan Doucet doesn't believe the ambassadors or the Pathway Inside program are positioned to help encampment residents. "It's a mode to clear parks, not a mode to properly support people," he says.

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