Captain Cornelius Park: Youth Engagement
The impetus for the Captain Cornelius Park development project actually stemmed from a youth-engagement ‘Photovoice’ initiative in the community designed to inform the community’s Neighbourhood Action Strategy (NAS). In 2013, Rolston neighbourhood youth, ages 4 to 14 years, walked through their neighbourhood with adult facilitators from the NAS, McMaster’s School of Nursing, and Hamilton Public Health Services, to discuss neighbourhood assets and challenges from the perspective of youth. Through the Photovoice project process participating youth generated 6 priority areas for change which they then presented to the neighbourhood planning team and local Council. One of the highlighted priority areas was neighbourhood parks; youth identified them as an important asset, but also shared that the Captain Cornelius Park forest is generally considered by neighbourhood children to be unsafe. There is a perception that ‘bad’ people hang out in there, drinking or doing drugs.

As a result of the Photovoice project with youth, the Neighbourhood Action Strategy dedicated resources to improving conditions in Captain Cornelius Park, and engaged a consulting team to create a plan for redevelopment, with a particular focus on the urban forest area. The NAS group and community stakeholders were committed to continued engagement with neighbourhood youth to help understand current barriers to use and to help envision changes that would meet the needs and interests of community children. Therefore, one component of the work of the consultant team was to develop and deliver a series of workshops to engage neighbourhood youth.
Children and youth are one of the largest user groups of community green spaces and parks. To make improvements to the forested area in Captain Cornelius Park that serves the needs of local youth it is important to first understand how and why they use (or don’t) the park forest at present, as well as the changes that would most increase their usage or improve their experience of the park.

Engaging Rolston neighbourhood youth in decisions about the future of CC park can also serve as a powerful stewardship tool; when local youth see that their wishes and opinions are important to the community, and are integrated into redevelopment plans for the park, they are more likely to care for and have a vested interest in the future of both Captain Cornelius Park and their community at large.

Youth Engagement Workshops

Over the course of 4 weeks in June 2016, 4 of the Rolston neighbourhood schools participated in youth engagement workshops: Westwood, Westview, Calvin Christian and Annunciation of Our Lord schools. More than 100 students participated in total, ranging in age from Grade 2 to Grade 8.

We began the workshop by explaining to the youth that in order to understand how we could improve the CC forest in ways that would better meet the needs of the youth community, we need to understand how it is currently being used or experienced by them – including both positive and negative experiences. The following pages outline the feedback provided by Rolston youth.
What do Rolston youth like to do in the forest?

- run, walk, and wander through the paths
- pick wild raspberries
- hang out with friends
- explore the forest
- play hide and go seek, tag, Manhunt with friends
- explore the forest
- see animals, bugs and wildlife
- experience and explore nature
- ride bikes through
- sit on the rocks or logs, talk with friends
- walking the dog
- build forts
- climb trees
How do Rolston youth feel about the forest? How do they experience it?

on the positive side …

• feels peaceful
• can feel mysterious
• great shortcut
• fun to explore
• feels closed in (a good thing)
• provides shelter & shade
• quietness
• nice place to walk through, or sit for awhile
• experience of nature

but on the negative side …

• frightened or anxious about people who are doing unpleasant things
• garbage and graffiti left behind makes us uncomfortable, feel unsafe
• older teens who are strangers make us uncomfortable
• annoyed and angry that others don't care for the forest; they are ruining the nature
• we hear rumours about bad things happening in the forest; drugs, drinking, smoking, fires
• can feel spooky
• can get lost, disoriented easily
• feels closed in (a bad thing)
• uneven, rocky, sometimes narrow paths can make it difficult to walk, bike
The workshop was in part designed to position neighbourhood youth as co-researchers, helping the consultants to understand how the forest is currently used by others in the community. We discussed 3 different strategies for understanding how the space is being used now:

1. Witnessing others using the space
2. Hearing stories of use (or abuse) from others
3. Looking for ‘traces’ of use left behind in the environment (e.g. garbage or other remnants of use, places worn down or eroded by use, evidence of deliberate changes made to the environment, etc.)

After discussing the activities of others they've seen first hand, as well as stories they've heard from others, the biggest concern arising from both was the ‘bad stuff’ happening in the forest: drinking, people doing drugs, people swearing and yelling, lighting fires, and in other ways abusing the forest. Most children admitted they hadn’t necessarily seen these activities themselves, but rather they could sometimes hear people in the distance, saw the litter left behind by these groups, or else heard rumours of other people witnessing these activities. Most of the youth also attributed these activities (or rumoured activities) to ‘older teens’.
The second part of the workshop addressed the third strategy for exploring forest use – looking for traces left behind in the environment. A mapping exercise was therefore carried out in the forest itself, where youth could investigate and record their observations of the environment. Each class was broken into smaller teams of 4 to 5 children; each group was given a topographical map of the forest on which they could record all environmental traces of use by others, as well as both the assets and barriers currently provided by the forest environment.

The mapping exercise was also designed to assist youth in investigating the possibilities for positive activities or experiences offered by the forest. A series of photographs showing a range of possible uses and affordances of a forest environment were shown to the youth prior to the exercise, to encourage them to consider a wide range of ideas.
Before the mapping exercise commenced, we also introduced the third part of the workshop – The Big Idea Blitz. While mapping out the forest environment, participating youth were also encouraged to consider how the forest could be changed or improved to support the needs and interests of children their age. After the mapping exercise, the groups were then given a short amount of time to develop, and then pitch, their best Big Idea for the forest that would appeal to community children.
This exercise, however, was also designed to encourage youth to consider the needs of other user groups in the community, whose interests and activities may differ from their own. Children often do this naturally, and are easily prompted to consider the needs of others. Therefore, each group was assigned one other user group in the community to consider; youth had to think about how others would like to use the space, or the environmental supports they might require or find helpful, and develop a second Big Idea for change for their assigned user group. The other community user groups were identified as younger children, older teens, parents or families, teachers and seniors.
After the mapping exercise was complete, youth teams were given 15-20 minutes to sketch out their 2 Big Ideas on a large poster. Groups then took turns delivering a quick 1 minute ‘blitz pitch’, explaining their ideas and reasoning to the rest of the groups.

If time permitted, we then discussed their overall findings and ideas as a large group.

All of the ideas generated by the Big Idea Blitz were then collated and sorted by the number of mentions. The following pages summarize their vision of the Captain Cornelius Park forest for themselves and for others in their community.
spaces for eating with family & friends
more places to sit
clearer, wider, smoother, safer trails
things to climb... trees, rocks, walls, logs, pyramid
natural play huts, forts, or dens
bike paths, park and ramps
garbage/recycling receptacles & signage
water features ... a pond, a stream, a waterfall
play area with a nature theme (eg jumping stumps)
swings and ladders hanging from the trees
more small, open spaces or clearings
more defined pathway
treehouses or platforms, with bridges between trees
more flower and food gardens
obstacle, ropes or parkour courses
large group seating or amphitheatre
signs to help orient to paths, exits
art and sculpture
lights along trails for night use
canopies in clearings for shade, gathering
ability to camp out
cabana, porch or gazebo
big, open entrances to paths
racks to lock up bikes
'No Smoking' signs
stage
fire pit
sand pit
washrooms
water fountains
For others in the community they wish for...

- Play forts or treehouses, with seats nearby
- Places for picnics; more places to sit
- Garbage/recycling cans; less graffiti
- Orchard or community gardens
- Smoother paths for strollers, walkers
- Birdhouses
- Washrooms
- Places to tie up dogs
- Place to watch wildlife
- Wide, clear paths for walking, biking together
- Natural climbing structures; tire swings from trees

**Families, Parents & Younger Kids**

- Smoother, wider paths for walking
- More places to sit and to rest along paths
- Less garbage & graffiti
- Navigational signs
- Signs with historical & other info about the forest
- Flowers along trail edges; gardens
- Pond or stream

**Older Adults or Seniors**

- Sitting areas just for watching, talking
- Parkour or obstacle course
- Rock climbing
- Places to eat; picnic tables
- Large group seating; auditorium
- Garbage/recycling cans
- Huts/forts for hanging out, privacy

**Older Teens**
What do neighbourhood youth envision for the Rolston Neighbourhood forest?
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