City of Grande Prairie
Playground Strategy

THE CITY OF
GRANDE prairie CANADA

Executive Summary

The Playground Strategy is a comprehensive approach to prioritize the replacement and renewal of playgrounds along with alternative amenities within local parks. With over 100 playgrounds in the city, this data-driven strategy aims to make informed decisions by considering neighbourhood-level factors. It addresses playground replacement and renewal by incorporating geospatial analysis and demographic insights to tailor amenities to each neighbourhood's unique characteristics. The Strategy's development involved an analysis of existing playgrounds, compliance with relevant municipal plans, and consideration of the existing school landscape.

This initiative aligns with the City's 2022-2025 Strategic Plan, focusing on quality of life, innovation, inclusivity, and community wellness. It is also informed by the Parks and Open Space Master Plan and the City of Grande Prairie Design Manual, which emphasize accessibility and diversification of recreational options.

Implementation involves annual evaluations to identify playgrounds for replacement or alternative amenities, considering factors like condition, proximity to schools, demographics, costs, planned growth, and site-specific considerations. Stakeholder engagement ensures community input when playgrounds are not recommended to be replaced like-for-like, and ongoing evaluations guarantee the Strategy's adaptability and effectiveness.

The Playground Strategy is a forward-looking, data-driven approach aimed at enhancing community well-being, aligning with the City's strategic priorities, and ensuring optimal utilization of resources.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The Playground Strategy is the City of Grande Prairie's approach to prioritizing the renewal of existing playgrounds and the development of alternative amenities within parks. The Strategy is a tool that ensures playground renewal decisions are made using neighbourhood-level considerations. As of 2023, there are 130 playgrounds within the City of Grande Prairie, of which 104 are City owned and 26 are located on school sites. Most City playgrounds are located within residential neighbourhoods, although a few are centrally located and serve as regional playgrounds.

City playgrounds undergo regular inspections and maintenance; however, like any asset, they eventually reach a point where replacement becomes inevitable. Considering the rising costs of replacements, it becomes crucial to establish a methodology that determines which playgrounds should be replaced and identifies the suitable amenities to replace them with.

The Strategy adopts a data-driven approach, harnessing geospatial analysis and neighbourhood demographics to foster consistent decision-making. This methodology facilitates the development of playgrounds and amenities that harmonize with the distinctive characteristics of each neighbourhood within the municipality.

The Strategy deals with the replacement and renewal of City playgrounds only. However, because most school playgrounds are large, on City owned land, and often centrally located within neighbourhoods, the locations of school playgrounds and amenities are considered within the analysis of this Strategy.

Playground Quick Facts:

There are 130 playgrounds in the City of Grande Prairie	The average age of playgrounds in the City's inventory is 15 years	The average replacement cost of a City playground is $180K	96% of residential parcels in the city have a playground within 500m

Definitions

Alternative Amenities: are alternative recreational options that could be constructed within a park in place of a traditional playground. While not an exhaustive list, alternative amenities could include: a small toboggan hill, a small bike park (or pump track), a playable surface or court (i.e. basketball, pickleball, etc.), a tree orchard or other edible landscaping, etc.

Event: is an element of a playground. For example, a swing set with three swings contains three events. Each swing is an event.

Parks: are public spaces owned by the City of Grande Prairie.

Playgrounds: are play structures and play events, including climbing structures, swing sets and the like.

SCORES Agreement: An agreement between the City; Public, Catholic, and Francophone school districts; and Northwestern Polytechnic.

School Sites: are open spaces containing, or planned to contain, public schools. School sites can be owned by the City, a school district, or jointly owned by the City and a school district.

Developing the Playground Strategy

The Playground Strategy was developed through analysis and review including:

- Current state analysis of existing playgrounds across the city including the quantity, distribution, and age assessment.

- Municipal scanning to gain insight on how other municipalities build and renew playgrounds and park amenities.

- Review of pertinent documents such as the Municipal Government Act and the Municipal Development Plan to ensure alignment.

- Preliminary financial comparison of various amenity options for playground areas.

- Engagement with internal stakeholders involved in park development such as Engineering Services and Planning & Development.

- Evaluation of the local school landscape including the current SCORES Agreement.

Alignment with City Strategic Priorities

Council approved the 2022-2025 Strategic Plan with the overarching priority of quality of life. The Strategic Plan focuses on ensuring Grande Prairie remains a place where all current and future residents want to live, learn, work and play. To achieve these initiatives, the Strategic Plan is built on the following pillars:

- Innovative Efficiencies and Economic Readiness

- Inclusive Caring Community

- Engaging Relationships

The Playground Strategy strives to improve personal and community wellness through access to quality park amenities. By taking a city-wide, strategic approach to prioritization of playground renewal and development of park amenities, equity will be improved, contributing to the Strategic Priority of an Inclusive Caring Community.

Parks and Open Space Master Plan

The Parks and Open Space Master Plan guides the improvement and development of parks and open space facilities and the delivery of services that meet the needs of the community.

Within the Master Plan, several recommendations are listed that are pertinent to playgrounds and playground locations. They include:

- Residents should have at least one park within walking distance of their home.

- Locations should be balanced throughout a neighbourhood with an acceptable walking distance between 400 – 600 metres.

- Neighbourhood Parks should have traditional as well as innovative play equipment.

City of Grande Prairie Design Manual

The City of Grande Prairie Design Manual contains detailed requirements for park design including requirements for park improvements such as:

- Play structures

- Benches, picnic tables, and trash receptacles

- Landscaping and berms

- Rinks and park barriers (e.g. fencing, bollards, rocks, etc.)

While playgrounds have an important function for the community, there are other amenities like small toboggan hills, natural play events, miniature bike pump tracks, etc., that can add recreational value for potentially less initial cost and lower overall life cycle cost while diversifying recreation options within the municipality.

Implementing the Playground Strategy

Each year the City is tasked with evaluating which playgrounds should be replaced based on factors including age of the asset and maintenance requirements. These evaluations inform submissions of capital requests for funding to execute required replacements. The Strategy presents a data-driven approach to identify which playgrounds may be suitable for replacement with a new playground, while considering which playgrounds may be suitable for replacement

with an alternative amenity. The approach used in the Strategy focuses on several variables, but two key indicators guide the evaluation process:

- Walking distance to each playground
- Census data on number of children within each neighbourhood

The Geographic Information System (GIS) Department uses ArcGIS software to create 5-minute walking distance polygons for each playground. The analysis identifies where overlap exists between current playgrounds and helps Administration identify playgrounds for a potential alternative amenity once their asset life cycle is reached.
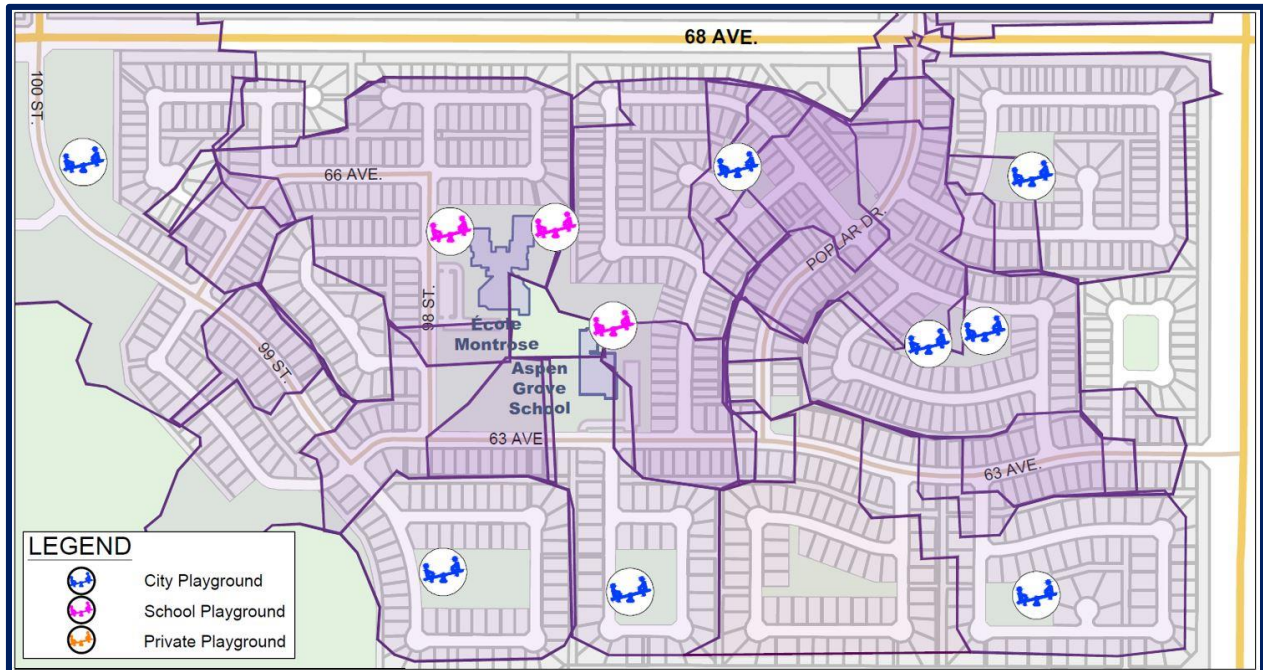
GIS also supplies census data for the number of children aged 0-14 living within each neighbourhood to form part of the analysis. In this manner, spatial data is complimented with census data to highlight polygons that overlap and enables evaluation of the number of children within each neighbourhood.

School playgrounds are included in the analysis even though they are not owned by the City for the following reasons:

- They are publicly accessible much of the time.
- Most are on City-owned land.
- They are often large and therefore able to accommodate many users.
- Their locations are likely to be familiar to most school-aged children.

Areas where there are overlap between existing playgrounds in relation to walking times will be investigated as opportunities for the City to effectively plan and deliver needed infrastructure. In addition to spatial overlap and demographics, Administration considers many other local factors in each playground replacement decision. Items like a park's proximity to a school or other existing amenities will be used to identify the which playgrounds should be replaced with new

playgrounds, and which should be replaced with alternative amenities. Table 1 highlights considerations required for decision making:

Table 1 - Considerations for Playground Replacement Decision Making

Consideration	Description
Overall Condition	Condition of the playground based on age, maintenance, and inspections
Spatial Analysis	Evaluation of the 5-minute walking distance to determine if other playgrounds overlap nearby
Neighbourhood Demographics	Primary age groups of the population living in the area served by the amenity
School Proximity	The co-location of amenities with nearby schools
Access to Similar Amenities	The ease or difficulty of accessing a similar amenity that meets the needs of the neighbourhood
Cost	Evaluation of maintenance and replacement costs compared with alternative amenities for the location in question
Planned Growth	Assessment of additional approved growth in a neighbourhood identified through adopted plans or similar documents
Site Specific Considerations	Existing site requirements, constraints, or opportunities (e.g. slopes, natural treed areas, etc.)
Destination Playgrounds	Exploration of if the playground serves a large population who commute to the location in addition to local neighbourhood residents
Relative Size	Assessment of the playground size relative to the available greenspace and the population served by the asset

Example Scenario: Countryside South

To illustrate the application of the strategy, consider the Countryside South neighbourhood as a case study. A demographic analysis of this neighbourhood reveals that it is home to 473 children aged 0-14 years, ranking it 13th out of 43 neighbourhoods in terms of the total number of children. This places Countryside South ahead of others in terms of child population, supporting overall investment for playground infrastructure. This insight also helps narrow down alternative amenities that are more suitable for younger children.

Currently, Countryside South includes eight individual playgrounds, each with unique asset numbers and associated walking distance polygons, as depicted in the image below.
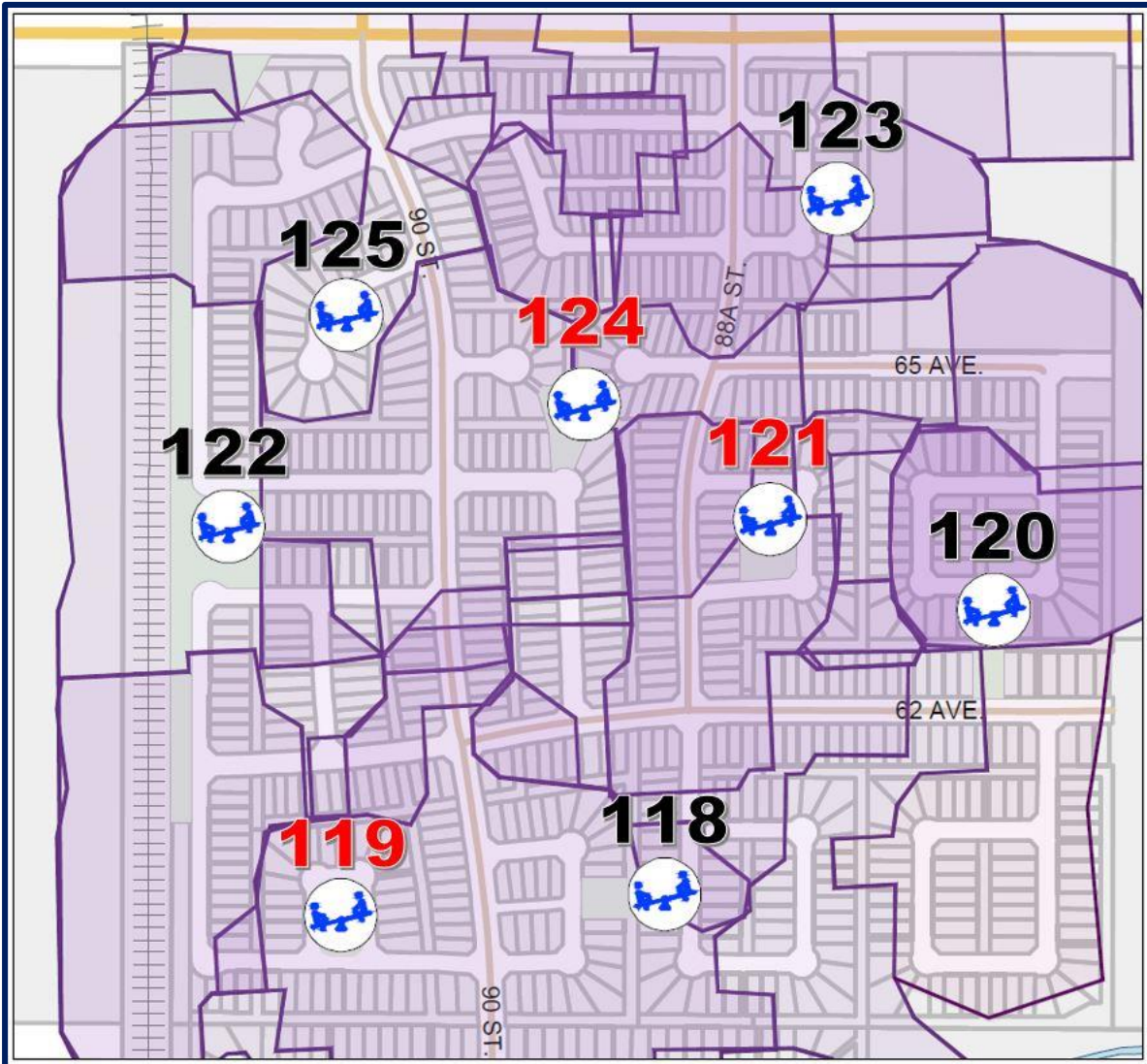
Upon evaluation of the walking distance coverage of each playground, the following data were observed:

1. Playground 118 serves the southeast portion of the neighbourhood.
2. Playground 119 covers the southwest area, but its coverage overlaps with 118 and is complemented by the linear north-south coverage of Playground 122. Thus, it might be considered for an alternative amenity.
3. Playground 120 caters to the far east side of the neighbourhood.
4. Playground 121 provides coverage in the center, but its service area also overlaps with 118 from the south and 123 from the north, making it a candidate for an alternative amenity.
5. Playground 122 serves the western part of the neighbourhood.
6. Playground 123 covers the northeast portion of the neighbourhood.
7. Playground 124 caters to the central area, yet it is well-served by 123, and 125. Thus, it could be considered for an alternative amenity.
8. Playground 125 serves the northwest portion of the neighbourhood.

Based on these observations, the potential sites for alternative amenities in the future include: 119, 121, and 124. Administration would further evaluate these parks, considering additional variables from Table 1. For instance, 119's proximity to the west paved trail system suggests it would work well to feature a small bike pump track. 121, with its existing grade and ample space, could accommodate a small sledding hill and a playable court. Lastly, 124, centrally located with large shade trees and greenspace connectivity, is a suitable candidate for a small gathering area like a gazebo or covered structure.

While this evaluation serves as an example of the strategy's application, it illustrates how a neighbourhood with eight playgrounds can transform into one with five playgrounds, a gazebo, a bike pump track, a playable court, and a small sledding hill.

Annual Application

The analysis of which playgrounds should be replaced, and which should be renewed with an alternative amenity will take place annually based on the playgrounds that are up-for-renewal given their life cycle condition. Project prioritization will be completed by the City each year prior to budget review. When determining how resources will be allocated, consideration will be given to the initial financial investment, ongoing maintenance costs, and the cost to renew the amenity at the end of its lifecycle. Cost-saving efficiencies will be explored, such as grouping projects together where feasible. Once annual priorities have been identified and funding has been secured, projects will proceed by following City processes for design and construction.

Stakeholder Engagement

Administration recognizes that Playground projects and decisions pertaining to playgrounds (removals, replacements, etc.) are important to residents. Ensuring that the public is informed and consulted with will provide clarity on actions taken by the City. Where possible, public input is taken into consideration for proposed implementation of playground replacements. A menu of available amenity options will be provided to neighbourhoods and/or neighbourhood associations for consideration in cases where a playground is not likely to be replaced like-for-like.

Playground Strategy Evaluation

Following its implementation, the Playground Strategy will be extended to projects in the forthcoming capital years. Continuous evaluations of the Strategy and its approach will be conducted to align the outcomes with the intended goals. Factors influencing decision-making, such as the walking distance criteria, will undergo regular assessments to guide future adjustments as needed. This evaluation approach ensures the City is following an adaptive management process for optimal effectiveness of the Playground Strategy.