NCC
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Urban Design Challenge 2027

Revitalizing Dow's Lake Pavilion and Commissioners Park

Student Ideas Competition
for the National Capital Region

Canada

ncc-ccn.gc.ca/urban-design-challenge-2027

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1.0 Challenge Overview

Students, we are eager to receive your creative ideas about waterfront enhancement in the National Capital! Uncover the potential at the Dow's Lake Pavilion and Commissioners Park by sharing your forward-thinking vision for this unique location along the Rideau Canal UNESCO World Heritage Site.

This is your chance to let your imagination lead the way and develop innovative planning and design ideas for these lands and inspire the future vision for the site. We welcome bold ideas that integrate the park with the surrounding urban fabric, respect the cultural value of the heritage landscape and transform the beloved site into an exceptional national destination.

Learn more about the 2027 NCC Design Challenge **here**.

2.0 Context

The National Capital Commission (NCC) is the steward of federal lands in the region, ensuring that Canada's Capital is a dynamic and inspiring source of pride for all Canadians, and a legacy for generations to come. The NCC is responsible for the long-term planning of the National Capital Region and has approval authority over federal lands and buildings. In addition to its planning and approval roles, the NCC is also the steward and manager of many important properties throughout the Capital, including historic buildings and places, public spaces, parks, squares, parkways, shorelines and green spaces. For over 125 years, the NCC has been committed to animating and improving access to the region's waterways and has been undertaking exciting projects across the Capital.

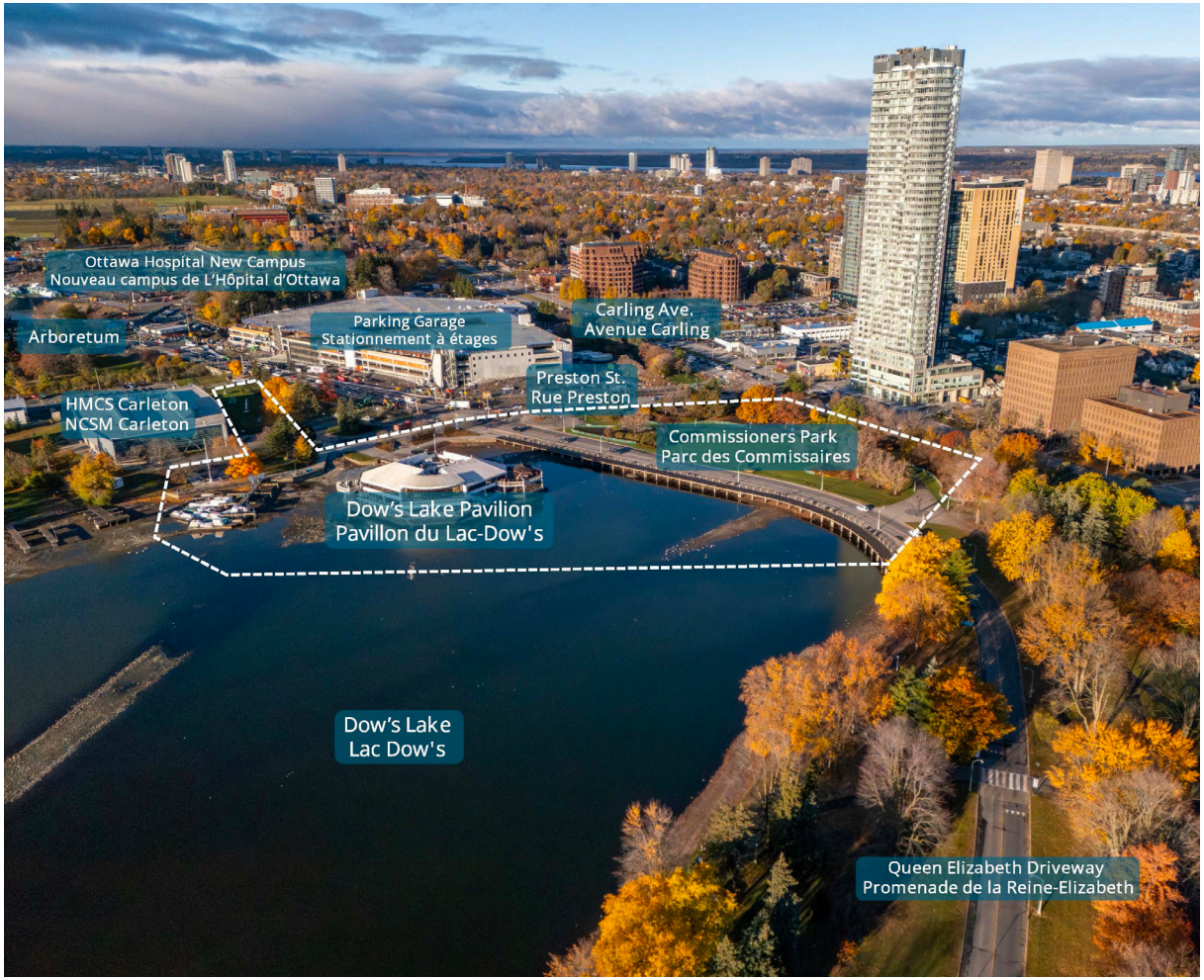
The NCC's Plan for Canada's Capital, 2017–2067 lays out a blueprint for the evolution of federal lands in the NCR over a 50-year horizon. Canada's Capital Urban Lands Plan guides decision making and informs future planning initiatives for the heart of the capital region. Currently, the NCC is reviewing the Capital Urban Lands Plan, which includes the study area. For more information on the Plan, please consult the **project web page**.

3.0 Study Site: The Dow's Lake Pavilion and Commissioners Park

Dow's Lake is a former swamp that was transformed into a lake through the construction of the Rideau Canal 200 years ago. The lake is located in the southwest corner of downtown Ottawa, in the heart of the National Capital Region. Its northeast shore is defined by Queen Elizabeth Driveway (QED), a picturesque linear park with a multi-use path and roadway running through it. The study site is located near Carling Avenue and at the terminus of Preston Street. The area is accessed by a well-used pathway network and an O-Train station, and street parking is available in nearby neighbourhoods.

The setting includes HMCS Carleton, a naval reserve division of the Canadian Armed Forces. The Dominion Arboretum, part of the Central Experimental Farm since the 19th century, includes a rich variety of tree species and recreational paths.

The primary commercial offering is the Dow's Lake Pavilion, which opened in 1984 and replaced an earlier boathouse. It currently offers equipment rentals and restaurants, and serves as an event site.



Floral display at Commissioners Park

Commissioners Park is located at the corner of Preston Street and the QED. Beginning in the 1920s, the NCC's predecessor, the Ottawa Improvement Commission, transformed the lands from a former lumber yard into a park. Today, Commissioners Park is significant for its contribution to the historic and picturesque appearance of the QED and is widely known for its mature trees and vibrant floral displays, serving as the major display site for the Canadian Tulip Festival. The planting of commemorative tulip beds in the Capital helps to mark Canada's role in the Second World War. It also contributes as a setting for the "unique cultural landscape" of the Rideau Canal National Historic Site and the visual setting of the Rideau Canal as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Intensification on Adjacent Lands

The area surrounding Dow's Lake and Commissioners Park is in the process of major transformation. The new campus of the Ottawa Hospital is under construction, which will result in thousands of additional people coming to the area every day. A new parking garage has been constructed to serve the hospital, which includes an accessible roof with visitor amenities.

Across Carling Avenue, residential towers have recently been constructed and more have been approved. This intensification will put considerable pressure on existing parkland and increase the demand for new and existing recreational amenities.

Recreational dock at Dow's Lake

New Layers of Animation

Recently, the NCC installed a new, universally accessible recreational dock and swim area nearby, as well as a temporary patio hosting a pop-up restaurant. The study site presents an opportunity to build upon the success of these recent initiatives and further support the NCC's commitment to animating and improving access to the region's shorelines and waterways. The NCC is now exploring long-term solutions to further enhance Dow's Lake and its surrounding environment as a destination of national significance.

The NCC is updating the Capital Urban Lands Plan, which will guide the development of federal lands in the area, including the subject site. The Urban Design Challenge presents an opportunity to contribute to the development of the plan.

Pop-up restaurant at Dow's Lake

4.0 The Challenge

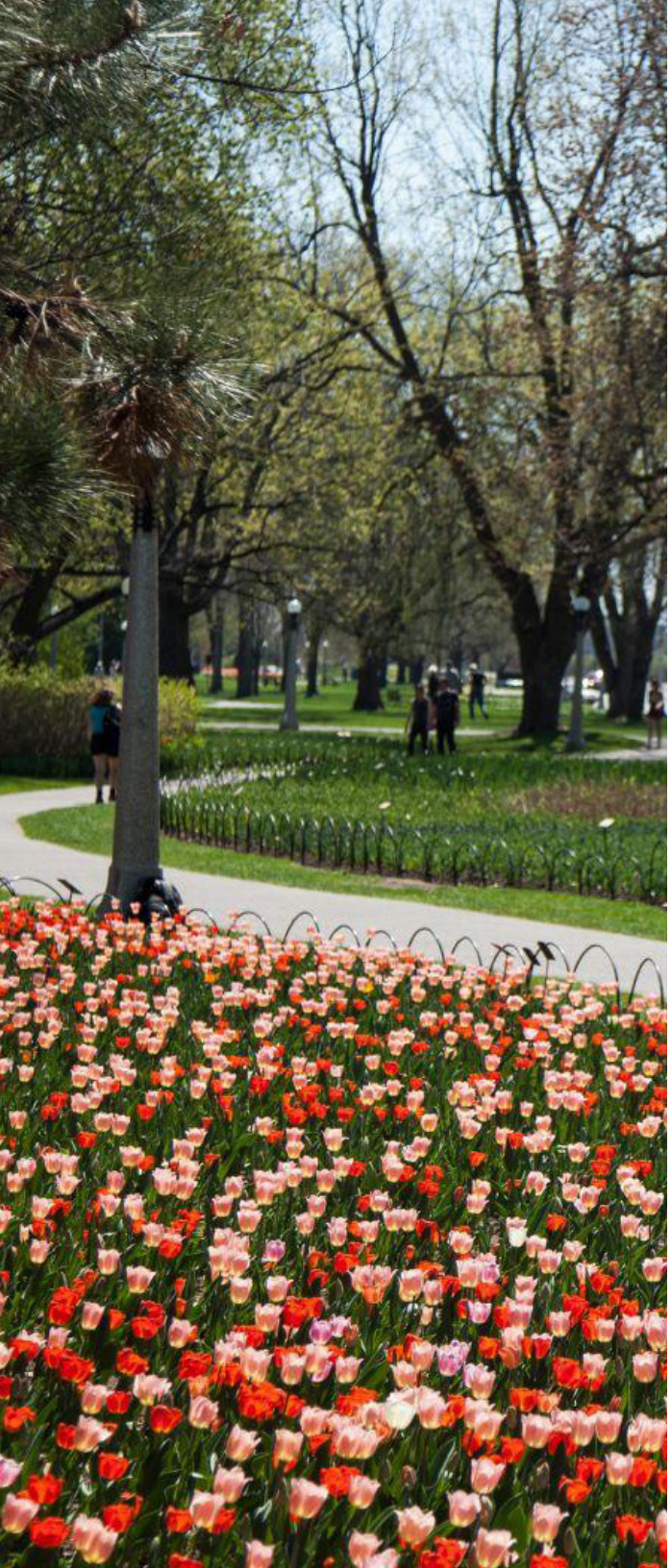
Using the Dow's Lake Pavilion and Commissioners Park site as an anchor, how might Dow's Lake be reimagined as a landmark destination of national significance, boasting a vibrant daily energy, supporting tourism and diverse users, aligning with long-term changes in the surrounding neighbourhood and maximizing public access and enjoyment of the waterfront? This challenge invites innovative proposals that help the NCC celebrate the shorelines and waterways as dynamic public spaces by exploring what is possible on this prominent site with high cultural value.

Proposals should:

- Re-imagine the Dow's Lake Pavilion and Commissioners Park shoreline as a vibrant, year-round anchor site that establishes the broader Dow's Lake area as a landmark destination of national significance.
- Introduce complementary uses that reflect the surrounding high-density urban context (restaurants, shops, hotel, rentals, etc.), while respecting the integrity of the Rideau Canal UNESCO World Heritage Site, Canadian Heritage River and National Historic Site designations of the Rideau Canal.
- Foreground waterfront experiences, creating new opportunities for people to connect with Dow's Lake and its shorelines year-round. Participants are strongly encouraged to consider reconfiguration of existing land uses, including new mixed-use buildings and pavilions that holistically support tourism and visitor experience at Dow's Lake. Retention of the existing pavilion is not required.
- Repair the separation between parkland and the waterfront created by the QED and reduce the dominance and impact of automotive traffic by redirecting it away from key pedestrian and cycling corridors, reducing conflicts, improving crossings and enhancing the public realm.
- Enhance active transportation through the site, including the separation of cyclist and pedestrian traffic.
- Include a placemaking strategy and a gateway element to the Rideau Canal, the Dominion Arboretum and Commissioners Park, while enabling continued use of the site for important capital events such as the annual Tulip Festival.
- Enhance Commissioners Park to make it a more urban and less passive park with more defined and programmable areas; improve the interface of the park with Carling Avenue.
- Consider integration with the nearby future hospital, particularly the planned rooftop park atop the adjacent parking garage and increased needs for stormwater retention due to its development.
- Enhance the streetscape along the Preston Street and Carling Avenue portions of the site.
- Consider holistic improvements to strengthen climate resilience, including:
  - riparian enhancements to improve water quality and biodiversity, address stormwater inflows and mitigate existing challenges (but do not remove any existing hard edges – some extensions of these may be acceptable as well)
  - shading, cooling and other urban, land-efficient landscape improvements to proactively address future climate change conditions in the NCR, including hotter summers, warmer winters and increased precipitation
- Consider lighting, seasonality and ground-level animation that showcase the history of the site.
- Create an inviting nighttime experience that encourages gathering, activity and enjoyment after dark.
- Consider opportunities for engagement in relation to diversity, equity and inclusion practices (i.e. universal accessibility, multiculturalism and Indigenous engagement).

Comprehensive evaluation criteria will be used as a part of the process to ensure a thorough assessment of submissions. This framework will outline key considerations, guiding the jury in their review process to uphold the objectives and vision of the challenge.

Regarding the level of detail: We want conceptual drawings, not construction drawings, for architectural elements. You may provide information in the plan, elevations, sections and pedestrian eye-level views. Refer to the FAQs for more information.



Awards

The winning project team will receive a first-place award of $3,000, and the second-place team will receive an award of $2,000. The jury may determine honourable mention awards as well.

The winning team will be invited to present their ideas at a special session of the NCC's Urbanism Lab on **May 6, 2027**. Travel and accommodation expenses for the winning team will be covered (see competition terms and conditions to learn about the rules and regulations).

Registration

There is no registration fee to participate in the NCC Design Challenge. However, participants are required to register to receive a team number that ensures anonymity of the submissions throughout the evaluation process. One registration is required per project submitted. Participants may register on the competition website.

By registering, participants agree to all competition terms and conditions.

The competition is open to students who are currently enrolled at a post-secondary educational institution in Canada. The maximum number of participants per team is four. The NCC encourages students to form interdisciplinary teams. Proposals should consider aspects of urban planning and design, architecture, landscape architecture and design, tourism and transportation planning. A diverse team of complementary skills is most likely to result in a successful submission.

Competition Details

Submissions may be prepared in either of Canada's two official languages (English or French). Competition submissions are due no later than **4 pm Eastern Daylight Time on Monday, March 8, 2027**. All submissions will be made via the NCC's SharePoint site. Further details will be provided to participants after registration. No hard copies of materials will be accepted.

The NCC Design Challenge is an anonymous competition. Do not include participant names or any identifying symbols on submitted material or in filenames.

Rules and Regulations

For complete rules and regulations, **click here**.

Questions

Questions about the competition will be accepted until **Thursday, November 12, 2026**. Questions should be emailed to challenge-defi@ncc-ccn.ca. All emails sent should include "Student Competition" in the subject line. Answers to all questions will be posted on the competition website.

Submission Requirements

1. Up to two 60.96-cm x 91.44-cm (24-in. x 36-in.) boards in PDF format. The filenames should include the registration number (e.g. "Board_12345"). All drawings and architectural scales should be expressed in metric.
2. A written statement not exceeding 500 words explaining the ideas. The file should be in .txt or Word format. The filename should include the registration number (e.g. "Written_12345").
3. A video (maximum of three minutes) that visually supports the design proposal. This can include a vlog, animations, renderings or narrated walkthroughs to communicate the concept, mood and key ideas. Submit as an MP4 file titled with the team's registration number (e.g. "Video_12345").
4. A separate document with contact information for the participating individual/team. The document should include the project title, participant name(s) and email address for primary contact. The filename should include the registration number (e.g. "ID_12345"). The sources of any third-party material incorporated in the entry must also be included.

Resources and References

National Capital Commission. The Plan for Canada's Capital, 2017–2067

National Capital Commission. Sustainable Development Strategy, 2023-2027

Capital Urban Lands Plan

Rideau Canal Cultural Landscape Study - Ottawa Reach (2026)

Capital Pathway Strategic Plan (2021)

Capital Design Guidelines

Policy on planning practice and reconciliation

Climate Change Vulnerability & Risk Assessment (2022)

Ownership and Copyright

Each participant shall retain ownership of the copyright associated with the entries submitted. By submitting an entry, each participant grants the NCC a non-exclusive perpetual licence to use, reproduce, publish, modify, incorporate into other work, distribute and promote, in whole or in part, the materials submitted by the participant for any non-commercial or commercial purpose, in any format whatsoever, including print, digital publication, audio, video and all other media (whether now known or later developed), in any form, without territorial limits and without attribution.

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