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Grove regulars have taken ownership of their park and filled it with puppets, gardens, bake sales

Photo By Laura Berman

DUFFERIN GROVE ALL FIRED UP PARKS AND REC PITCH TO SET UP PROCEDURES AND COMMITTEES GETS TOSSED BY VIBRANT ANARCHO HIVE

By MIKE SMITH

Parks Department representative Tino DeCastro must be sensing the anxiety rippling through the roughly 100 locals looking up at him from long cafeteria tables. No one seems entirely sure how to start the official agenda. Residents fill the vacuum. "Are you looking for feedback because you like the park, or are you looking for feedback because you don't?" asks one woman. It's a strange question, but it's a strange meeting.

Intended to discuss "a framework for future directions" for Dufferin Grove Park, the meeting was called by parks and rec, but the community made it theirs.

Young off-duty park staffers and volunteers greet attendees at the doors of St. Mary's Secondary School; park regulars provide childcare in the hall outside the school "cafetorium" (my new favourite assault on the English language).

The Grove serves people from all walks of life in the diverse Bloor and Dufferin area. Partly in response to low funding, partly as an expression of the regulars' values and partly as a way to give young people options besides drugs or the Dufferin Mall, residents have taken ownership. Thus, the bread oven, kitchen and community garden, loosely run coffee and baked goods cart, volunteer-built cob structure with changing table and sink, and communal toys left scattered throughout the shaded playground.

Last winter, following a visit by city authorities, rumours circulated in the community that inspectors were livid at the fact that the Zamboni shared space with papier m#226;ch#e puppets. Jokes about the Zamboni being a curmudgeonly loner abounded, and were adapted into a short ice rink performance by guilty parties Clay and Paper Theatre.

Many locals fear new city interest could be a potentially stifling influence. Their fears are stoked by copies of a report disseminated at the meeting entitled Terms Of Reference For Community Advisory Councils Within The Economic.... Well, it goes on like that for some time.

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Are feds setting up blocks they wouldn't dare impose on others?

Suffice it to say it's a proposed mechanism for setting up committees of residents and parks staff for all city parks, to "increase public input" and "increase the volunteer base."

Nice rhetoric that, but some wonder whether it's needed. "We don't have a governance structure," says Georgie Donais, who was the point person on putting up the beloved cob structure (made of a mix of straw, sand and clay).

"Everything that happens here is so unique. If I were asked to go to meetings, I wouldn't make it. It's hard to go to committees. But we're in the park all the time. If you're there, you end up doing things anyway. Ideas that might be seen as radical can be neutralized by committees," Donais muses, adding that the cob building project might never have happened if it had had to please a committee.

"No one knows anything about building with earth. It might not have happened because we'd have spent the whole summer talking about it." She points out that the community-made bake oven at Christie Pits has remained unused since city inspectors deemed it improperly located.

It's unclear to me how official committees would be a step forward. Even DeCastro seems to be getting the point. He's just as willing to go to bat for the park as for the city. "A square peg can't go into a round hole," he says affably. "Maybe you have a round hole here." That's it, Tino, come over to the dark side. You'll get more done.

Is this city-sponsored feedback session the thin edge of a new bid for control? Or does the city just want to know how much support there really is for the anarchistic model?

"After many conversations, I'm still not sure who the Friends of Dufferin Grove are," says a man introducing himself as Tom. He's referring to the nebulous non-committee that animates activity in the park. His criticism is friendly. "When was the last time they met?" he asks.

An unnamed woman responds. "There haven't been meetings, so it's not like you haven't been invited. I'm friendly, you're friendly. We're all friendly." In many ways, the boundaries of the group are the boundaries of the park. When you're there, you're a board member. There are obvious disadvantages: such structurelessness means you have to feel comfortable and on equal footing with influential members. This can sometimes prove difficult, especially in a community so diverse in terms of race and class.

But it also keeps park decisions living, breathing things. It ensures that people's involvement in governing the park is directly proportional to their use of the park. There's no real power to go to anyone's heads.

And when personal conflict intersects with park decision-making, the web of gossip that's continually vibrating like a spiderweb in a spring breeze exposes it rather than obscures it in the vagaries of officialdom.

It also means there's nothing for those, well-meaning or not, who like control to grab hold of. The selling of baked goods by the wading pool has irked city inspectors, but since it's officially done by volunteers rather than an incorporated body, not much can be done to stop it short of posting a daily guard.

This is crucial: literally tens of thousands of dollars of "cookie money" are spent each year on park upkeep. And still, the cost of running the park is far, far cheaper than that of most conventional community centres.

A petition and fact sheet on the perennial struggle to have the ice rink open earlier and longer, handed out alongside the city documents, makes it clear there's even a growing population of reluctant policy wonks. "I know more about this stuff than I ever wanted to," says park dynamo Jutta Mason of her rink advocacy, to much appreciative laughter. "I don't even skate."

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