

## Porter: Bureaucratic meddling puts park's magic at risk

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Catherine Porter



Sarah Cormier serves enchiladas at Dufferin Grove Park on Feb. 19, 2010.

TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

A battle is brewing at Dufferin Grove Park.

It's not the first thing you notice stepping into the rink house near Dufferin and Bloor Sts. There are too many other distractions: The teenage girls balancing on figure skates buying freshly baked chocolate-chip cookies from the Zamboni Café; the pregnant woman in the back kitchen cooking potato and kale enchiladas for Friday's community supper; the boys playing checkers near the wood-burning stove.

It's a lot to take in, when you are used to the wet, hollow bunkers slumped beside most city rinks.

But there are signs: A beige sheet hung up on one wall, spray-painted with the words: "Don't fix what isn't broken." And the collage of passionate letters to the city's ombud by the rink-side entrance, saying things like "Why mess with success?" and "Why ruin this wonderful atmosphere?"

At the centre of this battle is Tino DeCastro.

He is the area's beloved recreation supervisor, having worked in the area since 1987. He's the kind of guy who listens to a neighbour's crazy idea, like allowing campfires or building an outdoor oven, or

opening a skate rental service, all of which have happened under his tenure. He's a rarity in any bureaucracy. A guy who says, "Let's make it work," when others would say, "It's not permitted by city policy."

All this has made him a beloved man at Dufferin Grove Park.

So the community was shocked to find out last week that he's being reassigned to a new job. Come Monday, he'll supervise building maintenance elsewhere.

DeCastro says he's fine with it. But the folk at Dufferin Grove aren't. They see it as the parks and recreation department's latest attempt to snuff out the programs that have made their rink so special.

"They are trying to destroy Dufferin Grove and I think they will be successful," says Jutta Mason, a local grandmother with twinkling brown eyes who is the force behind much of the magic here. But, she is not alone. After she put out a call on the Dufferin Grove Park website earlier this week, more than 200 letters poured into city ombud Fiona Crean's office, asking for her help. (Crean has ruled that city staffing is not within her purview.)

The response from the city's parks and recreation department has been unwavering.

"I never want a community so dependent on one staff person that we can't deliver quality service without them," says Malcolm Bromley, director of recreation for the city. "Tino has done a great job there. But that's the case in every part of the city."

Bromley sees himself as the coach of a 700-member city-wide team. Change is good, he says. He moves people around regularly.

"The community doesn't make staffing decisions. That's my decision. We don't staff by consultation."

That makes sense, until you walk into another city rink house, like Greenwood Park's. I went there a couple of weeks ago for a rare community event that featured an outdoor fire and hot chocolate. It was wonderful. But since then, it's reverted to the damp, concrete shell it always was. You'd never catch a group of Portuguese men playing *sueca* or parents reading donated books to their kids inside. It's a place for lacing up and getting out.

So, if all staff are the same, why aren't all our rink houses like Dufferin Grove? Is it because the residents near Greenwood Park haven't pushed for changes there? Perhaps. But why should we have to push? The status quo is dismal.

Dufferin Park is exceptional. It should be the model for the rest of the city. There's a formula here – the happy combination of an involved community and a welcoming staff willing to form relationships and work together. Those things take time. They aren't measured on an accountant's spreadsheet.

Sure, move city recreation staff around. Send them into Dufferin Grove Park every couple of weeks to learn the gospel of community involvement. Local Councillor Adam Giambrone has gotten involved. His legacy is muddy enough. He doesn't want Dufferin Grove Park's death to be added to it. Let's hope he succeeds.

I've sent a letter to the city's parks and environment committee chair, Councillor Paula Fletcher, asking her to listen to the residents near Dufferin Grove park. Her email address is: [councillor\\_fletcher@toronto.ca](mailto:councillor_fletcher@toronto.ca). You should, too.

Just like the sleeping TTC token-collector, this is a symbol of a deeper issue.

Are the parks and community centres there for the community or not?

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