

The defriending of Dufferin Grove Park

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Toronto's most people-powered park is still struggling to make nice with the city

Pretty soon, someone is going to have to start an activist group called Parks Are For People — after all, there's already a group called [Streets Are For People](#).

Admittedly, this sounds like a bizarre idea, considering that parks

are, by definition, for people. After nearly a decade of Torontopian discourse — where public spaces are seen as both symbolic and vital to city living — you might assume that parks would be the most obvious places for cooperation between the city as an institution and its citizens. But that doesn't seem to be the case with Dufferin Grove Park, where the city parks and recreation department's move towards a stricter, more centralized bureaucracy is threatening to destroy a long-established tradition of citizen participation.

This impending situation became a distressing reality for Dufferin Grove as the park's long-serving and renowned recreation supervisor **Tino DeCastro** was transferred to an office downtown effective at the beginning of February. The move is part of a mandate to reassign all recreation supervisors, which is explained in an email to residents from parks department general manager **Brenda Patterson** as a way to “address a number of management issues, which include core competencies, training and skills development.” The email goes on to insist that such moves can be beneficial to all parties.

But **Jutta Mason**, who heads up the loosely organized [Friends of Dufferin Grove Park](#), sees DeCastro's reassignment as punishment for his “let's make it work” attitude, and considers this a direct attack on the culture of open communication that he'd developed with local residents. Mason says that taking



Friends of Dufferin Grove Park ringleader Jutta Mason

someone whose talents lie in his community involvement out of the community is counter-intuitive, especially considering the essential role parks play as public spaces and community hubs. But more importantly, this whole situation makes it seem that the city is working against the very people who use the park.

Dufferin Grove Park, as you may or may not know, is something of an anomaly for Toronto parks. Located directly across from the sketch-tastic [Dufferin Mall](#), the park was at one time considered the least-friendly part of the Bloor-Dufferin area. But in the 1990s, residents helped turn it into what some call a “community centre without walls,” reopening the rink, installing a bake oven and a wetland garden and holding events like community bonfires, a farmer’s market and suppers.

As Mason explains, it went from “a scary space to a social space.” To those of us familiar with the [Toronto Public Space Committee](#), [Streets Are For People](#) and [PS Kensington](#), Dufferin Grove is an early prototype for a successful form of more directly engaging with the services and social infrastructure that our taxes fund.

This is not to say that these activities haven’t met with resistance. In 2003, the city tried to shut down the park’s kitchen and prevent “friends” from using the rink house garage (where the Zamboni is stored) for community purposes. Cavan Young’s short NFB doc [Citizen Z](#) gives a humorous account of this confrontation — which the “friends” eventually won. In 2007, after 13 years of regularly holding permitted bonfires and cookouts, the city announced that campfires would no longer be allowed. Much letter-writing and community outrage ensued, and eventually the fires resumed.

These conflicts are similar to recently attempted parks and recreation initiatives like banning skating on natural open-ice rinks or controlling ice-time scheduling in community-run indoor rinks. In both of those cases, the department attempted to improve situations with universal solutions, rather than understand and accommodate the needs of individual circumstances. City hall has yet to consider the pond-skating ban — though they’ve already requested that popular (and historic) locations Grenadier Pond in High Park be excepted from the policy. As for ice time, it’s interesting to note that the community-run rinks are exponentially busier than city-run ones — both a testament to community inclusiveness and a decisive reason for letting them manage their own affairs — which prompted city hall to eventually vote down the motion for centralized control.

So what do these examples have to do with Dufferin Grove? Mason says, “Before amalgamation, there was a solid agreement between us and the city about broadening what can happen at Dufferin Grove... but for the past four to five years there has been a decisive move from city hall to close the door on citizen involvement.”

Toronto’s director of recreation **Malcolm Bromley** is trying to assuage these fears by setting up meetings between Mason, DeCastro and the incoming supervisor. He says he wants things to continue as they are, but asserts that they also want to strike a balance between the roles and responsibilities of

everyone involved.

It's no secret that few parks in the city have this kind of citizen-led activity, and it seems that things were supposed to stay that way. "The idea was, as long as there was a firewall around Dufferin Grove, it would be regarded as a localized annoyance," says Mason. She says that when they received a Trillium grant in 2007 to help other communities do things like community campfires, the city moved to implement an outright campfire ban. Seeing cause and effect here might sound a bit paranoid, but then again, the city hasn't yet bothered to try and emulate the kind of community-based success that Mason has experienced.

Bromley admits that moving supervisors around isn't in the interest of spreading the Dufferin Grove model, but he maintains that they are receptive to creative alternatives and spreading the philosophy of public access. "We've only just begun the conversation of what elements can be shared," he says.

When citizens take an active interest in their community services and try to develop programs and initiatives and solutions that speak directly to the neighbourhood, the ideas are clearly not going to mesh with the single-minded bureaucracy that comes from a top-down model. Time and again, the city's one-size-fits-all solutions — from pond skating to transit tickets to garbage bins (OK, that's last one is four-sizes-fits-all) — eschew reality for some abstract concept of efficiency. And time and again we see more proof that working with the community is the only way to work out what's best residents, rather than best for the guideline writers at City Hall.

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