

City's Moves May Threaten Dufferin Grove Park

By [Suzannah Showler](#) on February 22, 2010 10:00 AM



Dufferin Grove Park is home to a bonfire pit, wood-burning ovens where residents can bake pizza and bread, an adobe courtyard, a weekly farmers' market, dozens of year-round art festivals, two skating rinks, a cheap and healthy cafe, and regular pay-what-you-can community meals.

It's a chaotic, eclectic, and fairly idyllic public space, but what makes Dufferin Grove Park truly unique is not what they do but how they do it. Members of the community are more-than-usually involved in working to maintain the park, while city staff are more-than-usually integrated into the community. According to community leader Jutta Mason, this simpatico relationship is about to change, and with it all of the features of the park that neighbourhood residents have come to cherish.

The park's many programs are staffed by part-time workers for the city's Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division. Earlier this year, the Parks and Rec supervisor for Dufferin Grove's Ward 18, Tino DeCastro, was moved to a position at Metro Hall that Jutta Mason describes as "a non-job supervising cleaners." Mason, who has been a leading figure in community involvement in Dufferin Grove Park since 1993, believes that DeCastro's move is intended as a punishment for fraternizing with [Friends of Dufferin Grove Park](#)—an informal community group whose ad hoc, non-hierarchical structure clashes with the top-down workings of the City. "I think from the perspective of downtown we're like a weed," she says. "We're like a noxious weed growing way out of control, and somebody's got to cut us back. But I don't agree."

Mason claims that lower-level employees, too, are regularly accused of having conflicts of interest based on their community involvement.

"The people who work here actually want to be here, and when they have ideas they actually carry them out. They're not always waiting for someone to order them to do this or that, and that's pretty unusual," Mason says. "That's the work culture that's grown up around here. It's been very, very much backed by the community and very, very much ignored by the powers that be."



Brenda Patterson, the general manager of Parks, Forestry and Recreation, describes the relationship between the Dufferin Grove Park community and the City as "an incredible and unique long-standing partnership"—one that she says will in no way be affected by Tino DeCastro's move. "People are concerned that programming at Dufferin Grove Park is going to change, and I'm not sure why. The change in supervisors is in no way intended to change those programs." Patterson maintains that the moving of supervisors from one portfolio to another is commonplace. Re-assignments are intended to help employees acquire a variety of skills. "When you work for the City of Toronto, you should expect to work anywhere in the City of Toronto," she says.

Evidently, the Dufferin Grove Community doesn't agree. The [Facebook group](#) created in response to DeCastro's move is 1,500 members strong, and hundreds of citizens have sent emails to both the Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division and to City of Toronto Ombudsman Fiona Crean. Patterson says that every email has been given a response: nothing is changing at Dufferin Grove Park. From the City's perspective, community members have misunderstood a simple job re-assignment to mean the death knell to their vibrant community programming. According to Jutta Mason, "This is not about us. This is about what seems to me to be a completely unworkable idea of moving everybody to somewhere else. What does building relationships mean if not that you can rely on it?"

Photos from 2009's Night of Dread by Nick Kozak/Torontoist.

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[1] | [Facebook User](#)

"Friends of Dufferin Grove Park—an informal community group whose ad hoc, non-hierarchical structure clashes with the top-down workings of the City."

A big issue is that the "Friends" are running businesses at DGP in City facilities without a memorandum of understanding. City staff answer to members of this group that on their own web site claim "The friends of Dufferin Grove Park are not an organization. There is no executive, no annual meetings, no formal status. There is no written agreement anywhere between the friends and the city."

This non-organization has revenue of over \$100k per year derived from their operations on City property. They have keys to the facilities. They "top-up" unionized city staff with stipends. They have torn down intr walls in the rink house without permission. They tried to install an illegal toilet without permission (digging a massive hole that is a serious safety hazard).

No bad for a group that does not exist.

There is way more going on here than meets they eye. Perhaps it is time for someone to do a little journalism on this story.

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[2] | [falldowngoboom](#)

This background piece on the Parks and Rec power grab is enlightening:

THE RECREATION SERVICE PLAN: THE MOST GRANDIOSE SCHEME OF ALL
<http://dufferinpark.ca/newsletter/wiki/wiki.php/#tino>

Why is Toronto is burdened by these unelected and incompetent bureaucrats?

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[3] | [Corey](#)

In response to the first comment, perhaps you should drop by the park, go for a skate, have a hot dog and observe how people of all ages and nationalities are having a good time there.

There is nothing insidious happening as you are implying.

What you see is what you get: a community taking ownership and involvement of something they already own.

What is insidious is the power grab from city hall.

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[Facebook User](#) replied to [comment from Corey](#)

I have been there, Corey. My issue is one of governance. Can I go and start a business on City

property? Should unions accept that their members are being topped up to do work that is not part of their collective agreement? Who benefits from the hundreds of thousands of dollars that are generated by the businesses run at DGP? Where is the oversight?

You say that there is nothing insidious. Then let's have a look at where the money goes. Where it comes from. Who is in charge? Is it all cash? If there is nothing untoward going on, then there is no reason not to have a look at the operation. An operation that is, by any measure, illegally carrying on business in city facilities and using the proceeds for their own purposes.

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[5] | [Corey](#)

First of all, it is not a for-profit business that is happening on city property.

Whatever money that is being raised there goes back to the community.

If you want to know where it goes, just ask the people there.

Also, if you want to see for yourself, go to parks in other parts of the city and then go back to Dufferin Grove and compare.

If you have a problem with governance, why aren't you complaining about the f*ck ups going on at City Hall??

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[Facebook User](#) replied to [comment from Corey](#)

Apparently, it is not a business at all. There is not agreement between the "friends" and the city. In the last "Friends" newsletter, it states that there is \$50k "left over" from the "cookie money" that is used for "contracts". What does that mean, exactly? do they pay rent for the space? Who gets these "contracts".

And I complain plenty about the goings on at City Hall. Letting this illegal operation continue is on of my complaints.

And a final thought. You mention above that I should ask people at the park where the money goes. That is not h things are supposed to work, my friend. Don't you believe that governments should be run transparently with proper oversight of common resources? Can I go to DGP and set up a rival Friday night supper? Why not?

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[7] | [John](#)

Um, all this governance stuff is fascinating, but what does this have to do with the average person's enjoyment of the park? Bottom line: Dufferin Grove is a special place, and the people who helped make it special are being sidelined by a bureaucracy that believes city staffers are interchangeable like spark plugs.

Unless Mr. Governance really wants to take over the Friday night suppers, he should save this Dilbertesque crap for his civil service exams. And until the Parks bureaucracy can replicate the clear success of Dufferin Grove at its other centrally-managed parks, it should stop trying to fix what ain't

broke.

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[Facebook User](#) replied to [comment from John](#)

Bottom line: Dufferin Grove is a special place. Agreed.

"The people who helped make it special are being sidelined by a bureaucracy." Really? What has changed? How can they be sidelined when the "Friends" has no structure, agreement with the City, or anything else. Don't they just show up and do stuff? How will that change?

Do you think it is a viable model for citizen groups to have unmonitored control over city resources (including keys), to act as managers for unionized staff, to take in revenue and make a profit without oversight and without any accountability? Don't you believe in democratic control over public space?

I would say that it IS broken. Public resources are being managed by private interests and used to generate profits that are spent without any form of oversight. By their own admission, the "friends" don't really exist. How can this be a good way to run things? Perhaps I can go to another park and set up a pizza store and see what the city thinks of that. I will have the same transparency with governance and finances that exists at DGP. I would expect your full support in my new venture, of course. I'll let you know when we open so you can drop by and contribute to the "cookie money".

[Reply](#) | [February 22, 2010 1:15 PM](#)
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[\[9\]](#) | [John](#)

The managers of Dufferin Grove are park staff, not the Friends of Dufferin Grove. The workers are also park staff, not FDG volunteers. The FDG do not have control, monitored or otherwise, over the park resources. They do cajole, agitate, mobilize and push hard to make things happen, just like any other citizens' group. Any unofficial authority or key privileges they may have is a function of the credibility and trust they have built through successful programming. And if this experiment hadn't succeeded so well, no one would care what the FDG had to say (and no one would give Jutta Mason a key to the water hose). But nothing happens in the park without City authority, and your "illegal operation" comments are just plain wrong.

You say you agree Dufferin Grove is a special place. I don't believe you. The success of Dufferin Grove cannot be separated from the City/FDG partnership that helped create it, and which is indeed being sidelined with the reassignment of Tino DeCastro. If you would replace that partnership with further bureaucratization (which is the only issue here, not FDG governance structure), that outcome is not only *less* democratic, it would destroy everything that helped make the park a success.

And for all that, FDG happens to be one of the [most transparent groups out there](#), something that [cannot be said](#) about the Parks, Forestry and Recreation department.

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[Facebook User](#) replied to [comment from John](#)

Into which bank account does the money collected from ongoing operations at DGP flow? Who has signing authority over those accounts? How is that money disbursed?

What are the parameters of the Memorandum of Understanding that allows these enterprises to exist using City resources? Do City Staff do any work in the furtherance of these enterprises? If yes, is such work within the parameters of the Collective Agreement and their job descriptions? Does the Union approve of its members receiving additional compensation from whoever has signing authority of the accounts that collect the money?

Transparent, indeed. Don't tell me. Show me.

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[\[11\]](#) | [John](#)

I wrote to Jutta Mason to get her response to Mr. Governance's first post above. It seems like they have a bit of a history. He has apparently been twice invited to inspect CELOS's books, but has so far declined. Anyway, she writes (with permission to post here):

The fact is, the cash that park users hand over is not handled informally by friends of the park -- it's handled by [CELOS](#), the little research organization that started at the park but whose activities extend citywide. The acronym stands for The Centre for Local Research into Public Space, and we're a non-profit with charitable status. (This means that our financial statements are public, and also sent in to the tax people every year.)

However, running Dufferin Grove Park is not part of our long-term mandate. Dufferin Grove has been a kind of workshop where various people can try things (lots of things don't work -- learn by experience!). We document them and then put them out there for others who want to try things in parks, rinks etc. We try pretty hard to interest city staff, too. But that's not so easy.

So in the case of park or rink snack bars ("cookie money") -- two seasons ago the part-time recreation staff, with Tino's and the councillor's support, set up some simpler snacks and skate rental at Wallace Rink. They wanted to see if the Dufferin Grove experience could be applied more simply at another rink. The result was as anticipated -- much higher attendance and more fun for skaters. Since the beginning of this rink season we've been asking the city to try taking it over. No luck yet -- we haven't even been able to get the meeting we asked for.

We want to see if the city could gain revenue at some of the outdoor rinks and playgrounds, and at the same time use their own staff in a more imaginative way -- i.e. no Second Cup! But the folks downtown seem to be too worried about the grand plans to be distracted by such local details. Which loops us back around to the question of how "local" can meet "central." Stay tuned -- I think this discussion is going somewhere. You might want to visit the [CELOS website](#) too -- messy but lots of public space content.

And yes, Mr. Governance, if you were to set up a Dufferin Grove-style pizza oven at say, Christie Pits, with the proceeds going to charity, you would have my support. When does it open?

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[Facebook User](#) replied to [comment from John](#)

First of all, "John", you know my name because I use it when I comment on websites. Perhaps you could use it instead of the pejorative you insist on using. It is odd that you don't like proper governance over public resources. It makes me wonder why. Any particular reason that you are resisting proper oversight, "John".

Ms. Mason's reply does not, in the least, address the issues that I detailed. I am well aware of CELOS. Having CELOS handle the money was instituted a few years ago after some people asked the same questions I am asking now. That being said, even if I take what Ms. Mason says at face value, then why is a private operation running in a public space being used to fund a private charity?

As for the pizza oven and other operations being duplicated a Christie Pits... Why would the proceeds go to charity? You are insinuating that the proceeds from DGP go to charity. They do not. They go to groceries, band aids and little contracts for people around the park. Apparently. Hard to tell. Nobody has seen any audited numbers. Nobody has seen a daily cash-flow statement. Nobody knows. Not even you. If you do, please share your knowledge.

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[\[13\]](#) | [Jutta Mason](#)

For the record, re the accusations made by "Facebook User":

- (1) I do not manage the part-time city staff who work at the Ward 18 parks. We talk a lot (which is not against any by-law, as far as I know). They like some of my ideas, and try them, and they think others of my ideas are silly. They tell me that, and they don't carry out the ideas they don't like. Free country.
- (2) City staff do not get "topped up."
- (3) What they do in Ward 18 parks is not outside of their collective agreement.
- (4) CELOS started in 2000, long before you began telling people what you think of us.
- (5) CELOS does not collect cookie money to give to charity. We collect it to pay contracts for people who want to try out special projects at the Ward 18 parks. Full disclosure: we also use a bit of it to try things at other parks, if asked by other park friends. And we sometimes use it to do research (although that mostly comes from grants). Examples of research: we used it to pay a McGill biology grad to find out the relation between the angle of the sun and energy use at city outdoor rinks. We used it to produce a great booklet on how to make Toronto's outdoor rinks, citywide, work better. Etc.

And since you first began making your complaints and accusations against what we do, Bryan LeBlanc, you never once took me up on the offer to have a conversation, and to show you how the money is spent here. You seem to like to stay hidden.

[Reply | February 23, 2010 12:30 AM](#)
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[\[14\]](#) | [nd lax](#)

You guys need to cool your jets! the guy in the first picture had a dirty beard..... props, and the guy beside him had greasy flow. The broad needs to give her head a shake because shes not wearing distasteful clothes. Now, the second picture. What is on the girls face, and why is the guy wearing a mask? The guy in the middle is a skinny twig, and the guy has a nice hat. Overall solid pictures, classic. That is all

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