

Dufferin Grove Park Newsletter

May/early June
2024



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Newsletter May/early June



This newsletter is put out by CELOS, the Centre for Local Research into Public Space. Since 2000, when this little organization began at Dufferin Grove Park, we've been doing what we call "theoretical and practical research" into what makes public spaces – like parks – more hospitable and more lively. We've documented a lot of what we've seen and done, in this newsletter and on our four websites. The newsletter paused in February 2020 and resumes now.

Community letters to Recreation director Cathy Vincelli:

On April 29, the acting citywide recreation director came to a meeting (requested by CELOS), at the renovated park rink building, to talk about the spring and summer programs at Dufferin Grove. She brought six other city staff. We wanted to know -- after four years of suspended activities (first, lockdowns, and then, construction), what park programs will come back?

Institutional memory has been lost. All the former Dufferin Grove staff, both hands-on and management, are gone, either reassigned to other parks and community centres, or no longer with the City. That's why, before the meeting, park friends wrote letters to the director, to let her know what they loved about the park. Here are three excerpts:



Letter #1. Andrea Holtslander: Having a relationship with consistent, involved staff made a huge difference to my sense of community and security.

My kids always knew they could call on the staff if they needed to, and the staff knew them well. Children of all ages loved making rivers, hills, and dams, and shelters in projects together with other children or adults. There was always something new to do, and children in the neighbourhood made enduring friendships.

Letter #2. David Rothberg: Never have I enjoyed being in a park like Dufferin was in the early 2000s...People who worked in the park knew who you were. They said hi to you. They knew your name. Likewise you recognized them, and knew their names and talked to them and got to know them as they did you. That relationship was salient. The community was invested in the place. The staff was invested in doing a good job. That job was making the people who used the park happy....Nobody who worked at Dufferin seemed bored. They seemed engaged to me.

Letter #3. Larry Lewis: In the early 2000's, Dufferin Grove Park was flourishing. There were outdoor Theatre and Dance performances, an innovative playground was constructed, interesting food things happened; community dinners, Food Carts, community Bake ovens, the rink snack bar started serving primo locally made food, a Farmers' market, vegetable and flower gardens. People came from far and wide to witness the minor miracle of Dufferin Grove Park. It was local, universal; the Park became 'somewhere.'

The meeting with the recreation director:

When the recreation management staff came to the meeting, it turned out that there was good news and bad news. The good news is that city management is planning for "the return of the traditional programming and animation in the park" at Dufferin Grove.

They listed specifics for the spring season:

- Bike Polo
- Skateboarding
- Community Gardening (supported by Skylar and parks team)
- Ovens Open for Thursday Markets
- Vegetable Harvests
- Friday Night Suppers (may include support from Market vendor group)
- Cob Café & Snack Bar
- Adventure Playground support
- Movie nights and events
- Pop up programming
- Outreach to local schools and after school opportunities



The bad news is that management staff don't agree with the park letter-writers, nor with CELOS, about the mechanics of making this list actually happen. Some of the community letters also had specific advice for how the community and staff could resume working together. But management staff say that everything hinges on putting a person in an official staff office with a computer. The most important ingredient for their re-animation is stationing a ***community recreation programmer (CRP)*** in the renovated rink building. We'll see.

The history of the city's Dufferin Grove ACTION PLAN:

In the spring of 2011, a new recreation supervisor, **Wendy Jang**, was assigned to Dufferin Grove Park. She was to put in place a phased-in ***"Action Plan to assume operations."*** Prior to this, Wendy had spent most of her career in North York. Dufferin Grove operated in a way that was different from other city parks. So in early June, Wendy summoned the park's recreation staff to several long meetings during which she wanted them to outline exactly who does what, in fifteen-minute increments. But the park was, at that time, a very busy place, and breaking down everyone's responsibilities into finite bits with clear boundaries didn't really match reality. When the staff's answers didn't satisfy her, Wendy soldiered on by herself. She spent many hours writing lists and reallocating staff, in a way that made more sense to her than the work schedule that had been developed by trial and error at the park, worked out with the community at every step. Then she told the staff that they must follow her schedule instead.



If Dufferin Grove were to continue to operate as it had been doing for the previous fifteen years, Wendy wrote to CELOS, *"the City will be non-compliant on many approved policies, procedures, and legislative requirements... ..vulnerable and open to major risk factors."* So management wanted to go back to the *core activities* that parks and recreation has *traditionally run*.



Since that time there has been a series of different recreation supervisors working on the problem. The ninth, **Michelle Sirianni**, is just starting her stint. So we'll follow up and see how it's going. And in the next few newsletters, we'll run some stories about the different ways Parks and Recreation has traditionally run, back as far as the 1880s. It's a lively history, and bears remembering.

Tents in the Park in May:

One day in mid-May two tents appeared in the southeast corner of the playground. But the campers were told they had to move, "*playgrounds are off limits.*" So after some grumbling they relocated their tents, plus one more, inside the park fence near the entrance along Havelock Street. A new city staff report on encampments says: "*While the City continues to work towards permanent housing solutions, it is critical that we continue to support people living in encampments, who are among the most vulnerable in our city.*" So maybe it's time for park friends to get to know these new neighbours.

Two years ago, that spot was the location of a dubious "bike shop" (lots of bike parts scattered around the tents). After frequent visits from the city's encampment staff, those campers got housing.

Then last summer, a new encampment was set up across the park, by the construction fence, near the big bake oven. That one continued well into the winter. It became a support circle for many people living alone in marginal housing. They would come to the park and spend the day sitting around the encampment campfire. Park neighbours were also welcomed. Two of the campers became the settlement's unpaid *de facto* "social workers." They dealt with lots of troubles, set strict behaviour limits, and enabled mutual help in the day-to-day. But in the end they got tired of being 'on duty' all the time. They said they were glad when the city offered them housing and closed down the site.





Housing near the park:

This neighbourhood has an impressive supply of social and below-rent housing, mainly in ordinary three-story houses that look a lot like all the other houses. Recently two of the houses that back onto the Dufferin Grove playground have undertaken to make room for more people by enlarging their rear or side space. Here's a little update:

128 Havelock St., owned by the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust.

From their staff: *"We've wrapped up our 2022-2023 funding with some work on the existing house, and we're planning to start construction on the addition in the fall for completion in 2025. In the meantime, we're fundraising and finalizing the design work, permitting and contractor."*

118 Havelock St., owned by Madison Community Services:

Apparently the most recent application to add more units did not succeed because of neighbourhood objections. It sounds like an appeal is going to the Ontario Land Tribunal. More news next time.

A new group of natural building students in the park:

Elizabeth Antczak and **Julia Morrissey** are recent Masters of Architecture graduates. **Izzy Mink** has just finished her Masters of Landscape Architecture. All three are more interested in fixing the cob kitchen and the bake oven in Dufferin Grove than in making condos. Thieves stripped out all the copper in the cob kitchen plumbing last month. That needs a repair, and the walls and shingles need refreshing. The bigger bake oven needs to be rebuilt (after 28 years – that was a good run!) This energetic group of three is talking about a service contract where they work as apprentices to Parks tech staff to do the cobbing and the oven rebuild. Wouldn't that be a fine approach to the city's goal of training new talent!

Jane Jacobs on service contracts:

1. *“A city has to be responsible for keeping its own society endlessly involved with maintaining a city its own people can feel at home in and be proud of.....The more that cities can make of their own ordinary people’s capacities for economic and social invention and experiment, the more useful and valuable cities become – not only for their own people but also for their nations.”*

2. **Jacobs** wrote that “stagnation” in cities is caused by (among other things) *“unwillingness of local government to purchase experimental and innovative goods and services (e.g. for parks...)”*

Both quotes are from **Samuel Zipp** and **Nathan Storning**, ed., ***Jane Jacobs: Vital Little Plans***

Dufferin Grove park was one of the many places that interested Jane Jacobs, and she was a big help to us. Building on her advice, if the working culture of local government is too restrictive, and the wall between the staff and the parks enthusiasts needs to become more permeable, how can this be brought about?

That’s the subject of this summer’s public conversation in the park.

Join in!



The park gardens:

Skylar Hill-Jackson started helping out with the park’s community-run gardens in 2012. In March 2020, when Premier Ford ordered the parks shut down to contain COVID (even the benches were danger-taped off at first), Skylar joined with other gardening defenders citywide to lobby for access to the community gardens. At first they gardened against the law. Then the rules were changed. But somebody had to be found to do the considerable paperwork the city required to credential the volunteers at Dufferin Grove. So Skylar stepped up as the official coordinator. The loneliness of the lockdowns brought out more volunteer gardeners than ever before – people who wanted to take their eyes off Netflix and put their hands in the dirt.

And there was plenty to do. With the construction imminent, Skylar and her new crew dug up rosebushes and forsythia and perennials and herbs and spring bulbs from the community gardens that were about to be fenced off as part of the construction zone. They replanted them all over the park. The next year they filled the circle of raised planters that the Parks staff installed near the field house, with more plants, including vegetables. CELOS presented Skylar with a **“Public Space Award,”** and there was a big picnic. The following year Skylar and a garden friend applied for and got a pollinator grant from the city and filled in the extra spaces with native species that bees like. Pretty soon grad students from York University appeared with butterfly nets to count the bees. The grant paid for some park workshops, so school classes came. And so on.

The early batch of volunteers moved on, but new ones turned up. Everyone’s welcome: to get in touch, [**gardens@dufferinpark.ca**](mailto:gardens@dufferinpark.ca).

Farmers’ market: every Thursday 3 to 7 pm

The market is outside on the plaza that wraps around the renovated rink building. Market manager **Nicole Jacobs** has been pressing the city’s Capital Projects staff to open up the remaining space the market needs, now that so many of the farmers are back. Hopefully the last construction fences will be gone soon.



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