

Toronto to study shade mandate

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TORONTO - City bureaucrats will fan out across Toronto this summer to analyze the angle of the sun at different times of the day, measure the amount of direct or reflected sunlight and assess the "quantity and usability" of shade in parks, playgrounds and pools.

The "shade audits" are part of a pilot project authorized by city council this week that could soon result in Toronto regulating shade.

A future policy could dictate the ratio of shade required based on the number of children that typically play in an area--and not just from trees, but from city-built special canopy structures, screens and sails.

Supporters of the initiative argue that with soaring rates of skin cancer caused by exposure to UVA and UVB rays in sunlight, the city has a duty to shield children using its parks far beyond the usual measures of sunblock and protective clothing.

But some skeptical members of city council warned the idea defies common sense.

"It's naive to think that if we put all this infrastructure in our parks they won't be impacted by the rays of the sun," said a right-of-centre critic, Councillor Karen Stintz.

"They walk outside, they walk down the street, they go up north, they go on holiday. If we're really interested in protecting children from the rays of the sun, it's an educational process, it's not about putting umbrellas in parks."

Ms. Stintz attempted at Thursday's council meeting to cancel the shade audits, saying public education could accomplish the same goal. But only one other councillor, Peter Milczyn, voted against the plan, which passed 27-2.

"You do not need staff engaged in a complicated matrix that will end up saying 'plant more trees,' " said Mr. Milczyn, who complained a shade audit is a waste of resources.

But Councillor Paul a Fletcher, chairwoman of the parks and environment committee, said statistics show one in seven children born today will develop skin cancer, so Toronto needs to get serious about shade.

"It's not just about slapping a couple of new trees into our parks and suddenly it's a shade policy," she said. "You have to know the parks. We have to think ahead."

Children are most vulnerable to the harmful effects of the sun in such city facilities as wading pools and splash pads where they tend to be wearing less clothing and which do not tend to be very shady.

While there is no cost attached to the preliminary shade audits of the pilot project, a city report states funds could be required down the road if canopies and structures must be built: "Future financial implications may result from consultant or staff resources needed to conduct shade audits and future capital work required to implement improvements to facilities."

Councillor Gloria Lindsay Luby, who represents suburban Etobicoke, said there are many children who live in high-rises in her ward and have no other places to play other than in parks. She said that makes safeguarding their future health a public health issue.

"Children have no other choice but to use it," she said. "I think it's important that we provide shade in some shape or form to these kids."

But the best way to protect people is to ensure they know how to protect themselves, Ms. Stintz said. Her suggestion -- that the city place public service announcements urging parents to slap on the sunblock in the city's guide to parks and recreation programs -- was adopted by council, but only in addition to the shade audits.

"I think we can provide information to caregivers and parents about the necessity

of protecting their children against the sun without actually creating a bureaucracy to do it," she said. "I don't think the city should be in the business of conducting shade audits."

But Councillor Gord Perks countered that even slathered in sunscreen, children can only safely spend a limited time in the sun.

"You can only do so much education," he said. "We already invest money making sure public space is safe in other ways, why wouldn't we do this? It makes no sense to me that people would object to fighting an epidemic of skin cancers among children."