

ARTICLE – Oct/Nov 2008 - Councillor Michael Walker

[Neshama – A New Playground for All Children in Oriole Park]

It is not that often that a community park gets a new playground. It is even rarer that a playground is made accessible to all children, disabled or not.

The playground in Oriole Park (Oriole Parkway at Chaplin Crescent) is getting a makeover to make it fully accessible. A group of local resident philanthropists approached the City in 2004 with an idea for the City's first fully accessible playground called "Neshama" ("soul" in Hebrew) to be built mostly with privately donated funds. Since then, we have been working to make this idea a reality.

Oriole Park is a great park. It has it all: a sheltering perimeter of large, healthy trees; a densely forested shaded area in the middle; a baseball diamond; two tennis courts; washrooms; nearby transit; parking; a children's playground including a wading pool. The thousands of residents who border this park know it's a great park and use it well. Any change to this well balanced park must respect the way it's used now and protect its natural features.

I held three public meetings – two in 2005 and one in June 2008 to consult with the residents around Oriole Park; the philanthropist group arranged for the Earl of Wessex, Prince Edward (son of Elizabeth II), to visit Oriole Park in June with the Lieutenant Governor and the Mayor to start the process toward a new fully accessible playground. A Working Group consisting of area residents, Chris Sellors from my office and Parks staff, was created at the public meeting in June 2008. This 'Oriole Park Working Group' met over the summer to evaluate the Neshama playground proposal and comment on how it could fit into Oriole Park.

Keeping the tennis courts where they are was identified as a top priority. So, next Spring 2009, both the tennis courts will be totally reconstructed where they are presently located. Also, the need to protect the trees and greenspace along the border of the park was evaluated against installing angled parking on the north side of Frobisher Ave.; all the residents involved are opposed to harming trees or removing greenspace in order to put in parking – so, other opportunities to provide disabled parking will be explored.

In addition to the new tennis courts and the larger playground for all children, the washroom facilities will be upgraded and the wading pool will be converted to a splash pad (safer than a wading pool). The pedestrian lighting will be improved and the pathways resurfaced.

The City Parks Department will soon be hiring a consultant to conduct a public process for the design for the new playground. Recommendations from the Working Group went into drafting the terms that will direct this consultant. This consultant will be holding public meetings in the community, meeting with interested parties (i.e. neighbourhood residents; disabled advocacy groups; the Oriole Park Working Group; etc.), and finalizing a detailed plan that will be considered by City Council in the Spring 2009. A billboard has been installed in Oriole Park the Frobisher/Lascelles entrance to inform everyone of the latest news on this project.

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