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SEARCH



In the swing of things

Playground for special-needs kids back on track after residents' concerns heard

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The wonderful idea began on a 2004 flight to New York, when Toronto defence lawyer Steven Skurka turned to Caldwell Securities chairman Thomas Caldwell and showed him an article about inclusive playgrounds in the United States.

Called Hadley's Parks, the movement was born when Shelley Kramm watched her daughter with cerebral palsy crying because she was unable to play with her big sister at the local playground. The Maryland mom became determined to create a park where all kids could play together and since then, more than 250 universally accessible playgrounds have been built throughout the U.S.

Skurka and Caldwell decided Toronto needed the same and they formed a steering committee they labelled "A Bunch of Guys" to create Neshama, Toronto's first public playground designed for children of all abilities.

GOOD START

So far, so good. Who could be opposed to a private group pledging to raise \$1 million towards making such a park a reality?

The city got on board in 2005 and agreed to put in about \$1.5 million, as well. The site chosen was Oriole Park, a centrally located small piece of neighbourhood greenspace, near the Davisville subway.

Why that particular park? A Bunch of Guys says Oriole was the parks department's decision; Councillor Michael Walker insists it was the steering committee's pick.

And here is where the problems began. Someone forgot to ask the community what they thought about it.

Elen Hanbidge first learned about Neshama when she passed her local park last June and saw Prince Edward on a grandstand and women in hats and gloves applauding a ceremonial tree planting. "It was the first the locals heard about it," she says. "People were pretty ticked off."

A community meeting was then hastily called but badly attended, she said, because residents thought it was just about renovating the existing tennis courts. Instead, Hanbidge says they learned that one third of their park was going to be turned into a destination playground for the entire city and 17 parking spaces were going to be carved out of their green space.

For a local park dead-ended by the TTC yards and accessed by only one street -- Frobisher Ave. -- the choice of location made no sense to them. "It all seemed out of proportion of our local park," argues Hanbidge, who speaks on behalf of the 300-member Friends of Oriole Park. "Oriole Park fit only one criteria -- it's on the subway line, but it's small, not enough land, no facilities, no parking."

She became suspicious that something else was at work. Was this a way of finally opening Frobisher to Yonge St. and preparing the redevelopment of the TTC yards for condos?

Walker insists there is nothing nefarious afoot, but acknowledges that communication to the residents could have been better. The local councillor says he did hold public meetings about Neshama back in 2005 but the idea seemed to fade away. It was suddenly resurrected in February of last year when the Bunch of Guys learned that Prince Edward would be available to launch Neshama during his June visit to Toronto.

The fast-tracking of the project left him no time to contact the community until after the tree-planting ceremony, he says. Big mistake. They've had to play catch up with residents ever since.

"The whole issue is that the community hasn't been consulted," complains retired teacher Carolyn Box. "Why don't they take \$2.5 million and buy playground equipment for disabled kids in various parks that need it rather than concentrate it in a small residential area?"

To get answers, Box and a friend decided to confront Neshama steering committee member Theo Caldwell at a speech he was making last week at the University of Toronto faculty club.

The affable Caldwell did his best to reassure them that there are no plans to disrupt the quiet neighbourhood and make Neshama a destination park for the whole city. "I'm as local as they are," says Caldwell, who lives in the area.

PLANNED MODEL

Instead, he says their plan is to renovate an existing playground into a model that will hopefully be emulated throughout Toronto. "They should all be accessible to kids of all abilities," argues Caldwell. "Why don't we already have fully accessible playgrounds. Why do we need private money? These are fair questions, but it still needs doing."

Hanbidge admits that since residents kicked up a fuss, the city has bowed to many of their concerns. No green space will be used to create parking, but instead it will be accommodated along Frobisher. A full-blown consultation process is set to begin this month and Brenda Patterson, general manager of Parks, Forestry and Recreation, confirmed in an e-mail that Neshama will be designed as a local park and not one to attract children from across the city.

"If we'd heard that last summer," Hanbidge says, "we wouldn't have been so alarmed."

And now a playground designed to do so much good seems to be finally back in the swing of things.

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