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City needs to chill out

Peter Kuitenbrouwer, National Post

Toronto's biggest skating rink is now (unofficially) open for your winter pleasure.

Please ignore the City of Toronto's yellow plastic signs, fastened to trees and posts around Grenadier Pond in High Park, which read, "Danger. Ice unsafe. Keep off. Municipal Code #608."

The affirmation on these signs is false, as hundreds proved this past weekend when we piled onto the city's largest pond. Some cross-country skied. Some walked dogs. A photographer from a community newspaper got on to take pictures. One young man who had a thick Russian accent brought an ice drill and bored eight holes (the ice is about 25 cm thick) and sat down on his cooler to fish.

Mostly, we skated: people shovelled off five beautiful hockey rinks along the 1.2 kmlong expanse of ice, linked by ice lanes. Shiny was never so glorious. Yesterday I skated again, joined once more by skaters, skiers and walkers.

Flaunting the municipal signs doesn't bother me; I explained to my son (who is seven) that, "you should not obey every sign you see."

But, for every person who had a ball on the ice, 10 others obeyed the signs and stayed off, thanks to the deterrent effect of this draconian city policy.

In January 2007, Councillor Paula Fletcher (Toronto-Danforth), chair of the city's parks committee, promised me she would return pleasure skating (scrapped in 1999) to Grenadier Pond: "In our quest for hockey arenas, I don't want to miss out on the ecstasy of pleasure skating," she said. "If there can be miles of skating on the Rideau Canal, then surely we can bring back Grenadier Pond."

In fact, the opposite took place. On Nov. 21, 2007, without public hearings, the city's Parks, Forestry and Recreation directors agreed on a new "Activities on Frozen Open Bodies of Water Policy," which city council never saw. (Ms. Fletcher was at a parks conference yesterday and unavailable for comment.)

The Frozen Open Bodies of Water Policy is one of the silliest I have ever read. Here are highlights:

"It is the policy of the City of Toronto, Parks, Forestry and Recreation to prohibit skating and other recreation activities on frozen open water, including storm water management ponds (SWMP's) located on public parkland."

Under "Environmental Factors," the policy states: "Open water ... pond ice is unpredictable and never truly safe, due to the following: Ice forms at 0 degrees Celsius and is always close to its melting point."

No kidding. But not, I should note, when the ambient temperature is -10C, as it has been for a week or more.

"After falling through the ice," the document continues, "the danger of drowning increases because the victim may be far from shore, in deep water, the water is extremely cold and rescue is made difficult by the intervening weak ice cover."

The document notes "Optional opportunities: artificial indoor and outdoor ice rinks are provided for residents."

Time for a historical digression: Canadians love to debate the precise spot where hockey, our national pastime, began. One detail is not in dispute: hockey began on a pond. In Canada, we skate because water freezes. We bundle up and we enjoy winter. If City of Toronto bureaucrats had been around to write stupid policy documents at the founding of our nation, our athletes today wouldn't even qualify for the Winter Olympics.

Toronto just went through a bruising, divisive debate about access for girls to city ice, to play hockey. We spend millions each year maintaining artificial ice, but Toronto still does not have enough. And then when the ponds freeze, we declare them off-limits? What is wrong with this town? Mayor David Miller goes to Copenhagen, pleading with the world to stop climate change. But when we try to celebrate winter, the city says no. (I don't blame the Mayor; he lives near High Park and has skated on the pond himself.)

On Saturday, a group carrying skates came up to me as I knelt in a snowbank knotting my children's laces in the middle of the pond.

"Excuse me, who does this rink belong to?" one of them asked.

"It belongs," I replied, "to the people of Toronto." (I should have added, "God made it, and didn't charge taxpayers a penny.")

They sat down and laced up.

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