

## Blogs

## Preville on Politics In Toronto, users pay—but for what?

Posted on February 13, 2008 by [Philip Preville](#)

Now that the hysteria over recreation fees has subsided—a 21 per cent increase for city programs [reduced](#) to eight per cent, which is still more than quadruple the inflation rate—perhaps we can now have a sanguine discussion about the philosophical ramifications of user fees. Whether it's for recreation or trash collection or anything else, the more the city charges for individual services, the more demanding residents will become, and the less sympathetic they will be when the city cries poor, as it so often does these days.

Here's an example from personal experience. I am part of an adult shinny hockey league, and we pay for a permit to reserve one of the city's outdoor rinks. Our fees went up by six per cent in 2007 and will rise by another eight per cent in 2008. Currently we pay a little over \$100 every week for 90 minutes of ice time, which is eminently reasonable. The catch is that, in exchange for the fees we pay, we receive...nothing. No guarantee of ice maintenance, no refunds for poorly maintained ice. Zip. Nada. Bupkis.

For the first few weeks of the season, we arrived to a rink that was basically unusable: the ice was chopped up and covered in snow so thick you could not pass the puck. Now you might say, "What do you expect for such a cheap fee?" But a hundred bucks is still a hundred bucks, and if you stop to think about it for a minute, you realize that it doesn't matter how reasonable the price is. When we lace up and hit the crappy ice, the only thing that goes through our minds is, "We paid money for this?" Our league has held this permit for well over a decade, long before the city started charging for the privilege of reserving the ice. Back when the ice was free, the Zamboni reliably showed up just prior to our start time. So from our perspective, the city charges us more and more every year for service that has been consistently deteriorating.

We have raised the issue with the parks department, and I want to be unequivocal about this next point: city staff have been professional, helpful and accommodating at every turn. Most recently they rescheduled the ice maintenance so that the Zamboni comes by our rink closer to our start time; the ice, while still not perfect, is now in very good shape when we arrive to play. The issue here isn't the dedication and work ethic of city staff, which, in this case, is beyond reproach.

The issue is the city's policy, which treats residents like customers but does not treat itself like a business. Councillor Joe Mihevc, who chairs the community development and recreation committee, says this has been a constant tension since amalgamation. "In the old city of Toronto, we used to offer free programs, and the problem we had was that people would sign up and then not attend," he says. "The perception was that the programs weren't that valuable. In Scarborough, North York and Etobicoke, where they charged for programs, people always showed up—but they complained if the program didn't meet their expectations.

"At the end of the day, these things come down to dollars and cents," Mihevc says. "We simply don't have enough money in the tax base to do everything we used to do." But this is a collision course. On the one hand, the city is increasingly relying on user fees just to maintain current service levels. On the other, the more residents pay, the more they will expect better service, not more of the same. Just look at the trash removal scheme: residents—now customers—will pay a fee, and in exchange they will receive fewer options about how much they can put out and the containers they can use. No wonder people are [complaining](#). They should be.

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### Philip Preville

Veteran freelance writer [Philip Preville](#) lived much of his life in Montreal and Edmonton before he was lured, like so many Torontonians before him, by the promise of more work and a better living. A National Magazine Award winner and former Canadian Journalism Fellow at the University of Toronto's Massey College, Preville writes *Toronto Life's* politics column. He lives with his wife and one-year-old son in Riverdale, just close enough to the Don Valley Parkway that he can hear it when he steps outside his house—but just far enough away that it doesn't keep him awake at night. On his office wall hangs a 1938–39 press pass belonging to his grandfather, Elias Gannon, who wrote for the *Montreal Star*.

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