



[Back to George Smitherman proposes 'signature parks'](#)

George Smitherman proposes 'signature parks'

March 28, 2010

David Rider

George Smitherman says that, if elected mayor, he would revitalize and beautify 15 "signature parks" across Toronto by giving citizen advisory councils a big role in running them.

In an interview with the *Star*, the former deputy premier said he would buttress the citizen involvement with an "adopt a park" drive to get philanthropists and other donors to pay for play equipment and other improvements to city green spaces.

"This is about getting more citizen involvement and investment ... for the beautification of the public realm," he said, adding he'll later unveil other policies aimed at giving Toronto a "recreation renaissance."

His initial proposal, however, was panned as "too top-down" by one of the driving forces behind communal wood-fired ovens, farmers' markets and other community events at Dufferin Grove Park, often held out as a model of citizen participation.

Smitherman said some of the Toronto's parks are "barren and underutilized" and don't stack up well compared to those he has seen in New York City and Chicago neighbourhoods.

"Who better to have greater responsibility for what happens in a park than the people prepared to nurture it?" he said, outlining his vision for the advisory councils.

Volunteers across the city would be encouraged to band together with neighbours and tell city hall what they would like to do with their local park. City council would choose 15 of them.

The advisory councils would include "local ratepayer/residents associations, recreational stakeholders and a number of members-at-large from the community," states an outline of the policy. "Local City councillors and City staff representing park operations and programs would sit as non-voting members of the Councils."

Smitherman said councils would have a fairly free hand, but within a framework of rules to prevent unacceptable initiatives such as user fees. He blamed "bureaucratic resistance and union politics at City Hall," for stifling past public participation efforts.

Smitherman said the model would be the High Park Community Advisory Council — something that came as a surprise to that council's chair.

Robin Sorys called Smitherman's proposal "an interesting model". It differs, though, in from the way the High Park council operates.

Committees of volunteers interested in such things as promoting native species or safety and transportation report once a month. Leadership of the council works with city staff on proposals and concerns but city staff have the final says, Sorys said.

The volunteers and staff generally work well finding solutions together, she said, adding her group's biggest struggle is fighting for adequate park maintenance funding.

Last fall, Toronto's auditor general warned that the \$233 million backlog in park maintenance and repairs could grow to \$600 million by 2018.

The Friends of Dufferin Grove Park group is fighting city hall, but not over funding. The group has protested the transfer of a recreation supervisor who matched local initiatives with support and what Jutta Mason, an organizer, calls "death by policy."

She sees no remedy in Smitherman's advisory councils.

"The problem is he's speaking as a bureaucrat — we need blocks to be removed, not munificent central plans," Mason said, calling the 15 signature parks "an odd formula" and "too top down" for something as individual to communities as parks.

Mason said she called Smitherman's campaign after he announced his intention to run for mayor and didn't get a call back. She said she hopes he'll call now and she'll take him to parks where he can listen to people trying to do interesting and engaging things.

At its March 10 meeting, the city's parks and environment committee asked the department's general manager "to focus on ways to engage communities in parks design, maintenance and programming."

Councillor Adam Vaughan has asked city staff to look at using the power to impose levies for Park Improvement Areas, similar to those imposed on businesses by Business Improvement Areas to beautify and improve shopping districts.

Councillor Paula Fletcher, chair of the Parks and Environment Committee, said there are several city initiatives to get citizens more involved in their parks, and donations already account for lots of good works including the new McCleary Park natural playground near Queen St. E. and Logan Ave.

"The good news is we're talking about parks during the civic election campaign," she said.