

Let local groups manage their own parks, without a tangle of bureaucracy



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The ice on the rink in the park is so perfect I never see my children any more. The shinny never stops. But it's so worth it when they finally do straggle home amid a jumble of sticks and skates. Suddenly it appears: The best of all possible worlds, just as I remember it from my own blissfully frozen youth, just as every boy who ever grew up in Toronto knew it.

And it all starts in the neighbourhood park.

Some are ample, many are no more than a speck of green (in summer) or white (in winter), but they all share the same magic power. We know it's real because it has a price, expressed in the premium fetched by properties within walking distance of a prime park. Its value is something else altogether.

In the enduring best of all possible worlds, park magic would bring pride and a sense of belonging.

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In Toronto today, though, it is stifled by worry about the decline and neglect of the parks themselves.

"After 10 years of amalgamation, I don't think any part of the city infrastructure has suffered as much as the parks," Councillor Adam Vaughan (Ward 20, Trinity-Spadina) says, echoing a view that is widely acknowledged at city hall, even within Mayor David Miller's caucus.

New money raised from nearby real-estate development is helping revive many downtown parks, but it does not spread very far.

Mayor Miller's Clean and Beautiful City secretariat has done a magnificent job with the planters on University Avenue, but the little parks that really matter are threadbare.

The administration's original attempt to address the problem was an outright disaster. As with so many large-scale bureaucratic enterprises managed by socialists, it began with a long round of tortuous policy-making designed to "harmonize" the existing, human-scale patchwork.

The result was a hideous tangle of rules and regulations encasing surprise fee hikes, whose documented existence the city's top parks official then denied.

That official has since left city hall to pursue other interests, and Councillor Joe Mihevc, chair of the committee that botched the job, lost his post as chair of the committee.

So what now? As an example of what works, many point to Dufferin Grove, across from the mall that shares the street's name, which a determined civic committee has rescued from bureaucratic control.

Other residents' groups are following the example, according to Mr. Vaughan, demanding a greater role in designing, maintaining and programming their local parks.

He said he is currently working with five different ad hoc committees, discussing improvements to individual green squares in Trinity-Spadina, using funds raised from development.

But when Mr. Vaughan first suggested allowing neighbourhoods to raise their own taxes to pay for improvements in local parks - just as Business Improvement Areas fund streetscape improvements with special levies on local merchants - the equity-seeking Milleristas freaked.

Other executive councillors such as Adam Giambrone and Paula Fletcher, parks committee chair, would have none of it. Undying socialism cannot endure the prospect of a "two-tier park system," with the rich feathering their own nests while the poor go parkless.

"I'm not saying the city should surrender its jurisdiction," Mr. Vaughan says.

"You need to make sure the process is inclusive, sensitive and safe. But if some neighbourhoods are willing to self-tax to fix their parks, that frees up resources in neighbourhoods that don't have the money."

If nothing else, such a scheme would help re-establish the human connections that have so withered in the new century. "You can't de-amalgamate the city, but you can decentralize it," Mr. Vaughan says.

"You can give neighbours something to do rather than something to fight."

Coming after last year's debacle, that message is no longer as seditious as it once was. Even Holy Joe Mihevc, whose constituents in Ward 21, St. Paul's West, are currently fundraising to supplement the budget for the renovation of one of their own parks, Glen Cedar, has softened.

There's nothing equitable about a status quo that links funding to nearby development, he notes. And there are huge benefits to letting citizens lead.

"That park is going to be so well cared for because they are working for it," Mr. Mihevc says, marvelling at the organization of the volunteers.

"It's not a city hall project. It's a neighbourhood project."

Hope springs eternal, even in February.

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