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City staff shortages threaten popular Dufferin Grove Park dinners

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If [Friends of Dufferin Grove Park](#) have their way, they won't be having their last supper anytime soon.

[Toronto Parks and Recreation](#) staff have been serving up three-course dinners in the park every Friday evening during the warmer months since 2003, when the community group worked with the city to organize the meals.

But last Friday, residents who showed up for the dinner were disappointed to learn it wasn't being served because there weren't enough city employees available to run the event. The supper is confirmed for the next two weekends, but its future remains uncertain.

Jutta Mason, who spearheaded the revitalization of Dufferin Grove, worries the recent cancellation is a sign of what's to come. She said staff have left their jobs at the park this year and have not been replaced.

"The problem is that there aren't enough staff; they go to a different job and aren't replaced," she said. "They can't run the park seven days a week because they run out of staff, so these suppers might be intermittent for the rest of the summer until it dies completely."

About 250 to 300 people attend the weekly suppers, Mason said. The meals are available by donation (\$7 is suggested for a main course, for example), and most of the ingredients are purchased from the Thursday farmers market in the park. The average proceeds from the suppers are about \$2,000, and "that money goes back to cover wages, food costs and everything," said Mason. "It's too bad. It's definitely one of the big popular attractions for families in the summer."

Kelvin Seow, acting director of Community Recreation, said last Friday's supper was cancelled because none of the roster of 30 part-time workers at the park was available to work it. Of those, 20 part-time staff are trained to do the supper, and between seven and nine are needed per supper event.

"None of them, coincidentally, were able to work (Friday)," he said.

Suppers have not previously been cancelled, he said, and the city is going to initiate a backup system to "ensure that, if the staff at Dufferin Grove are not able to work, we train some (other) staff who can step in and do that work in the future."

Seow said the city had the same problem staffing the playground café Saturday: there just happened to be no workers available for it.

"When the (city) cannot find qualified replacements, we have no choice but to cancel the program," he said, adding the park has 33 part-time workers, the same number as last year.

But Mason and others still worry about losing dedicated staff. She pointed to the 2012 city budget, which indicates a minor service level change for community recreation support at city parks that would eliminate 5.2 temporary position equivalents. The change is meant to reduce the operational budget, and to have "community event organizers rely more heavily on volunteers or collect special-event support costs."

That's why Mason and others are now trying to organize a conservancy for Ward 18, which includes the park. If approved by the city, the conservancy would be the first of its kind in Toronto, and would seek community participation in the allocation of the ward's budget for parks and recreation.

"Basically we're saying, 'Let's try something different, let's try participatory budgeting and budget transparency,'" she said. "Let's have people decide together what's better, locally, in one ward."



Sarah Cormier serves up enchiladas at Dufferin Grove Park for the weekly Friday night community dinner. Parks and recreation staff have been helping to serve three-course dinners in the park every Friday during the warmer months since 2003.
TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

City Councillor Ana Bailão (Ward 18, Davenport) said she supports the community's desire to be involved in planning and budgeting for their parks.

"The city would be better served if our citizens were more involved in running our local parks, absolutely. It's not one-size-fits-all; we need to work with the local residents, and work together on their parks so that they are more responsive to what the community wants."

In order for the conservancy to move forward, Bailão said the community must decide on its governance model and figure out how it would work together with the city.

She added she is trying to ascertain why park staff weren't able to work that Friday when the supper has been held weekly for so many years. "I'm hoping to resolve this and ... try to ensure this doesn't happen again."

With files from Wendy Gillis