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Porter: City crackdown hits park pizza nights

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Catherine Porter

Down the path north into Christie Pits Park, you stumble upon a little gnome's house.

It has wooden sides, a shingled, peaked roof, a little chimney and a window shuttered in black metal and locked tight with a padlock. It's a community bake oven.

It was built 10 years ago by park staff and volunteers. The staff did the building; the volunteers brought the architectural drawings, construction supplies and refreshments. It was an ideal collaboration – community fundraising and spirit, city land and sweat. A win for everyone. That spirit is captured by the words on the commemorative plaque that celebrates the parks worker who built the oven. It reads: "This bake oven is dedicated in loving memory of Luis Antonio Andrade." 1936 – 2002. Created with love for all to share.

Two summers ago, some parents watching their kids at the playground nearby noticed the little house. They looked at the plaque. They looked at the padlock. A great idea struck them: community pizza nights.

How could that not go off like wildfire? Just think – fresh pizzas under the trees with your neighbours after a long week of work. Moms, dads, kids all lounging on picnic blankets. Beautiful. Who needs a cottage?

It did go off beautifully. The volunteer group Friends of Christie Pits Park stretched out the dough every week, slathered on the tomato sauce and sprinkled the pies with mozzarella they'd brought. A city recreation staff member worked the oven. Some nights they baked as many as 80 pizzas. Everyone was happy. The city paid for a staff worker, true. But how can you quantify what was achieved by having up to 100 people sitting in the park together every Friday night – the reduced crime, the cigarette butts and empty pop cans removed, the sense of neighbourhood pride and park ownership.

"We've become a community," says Monica Gupta, a mother of two and the chair of Friends of Christie Pits. "It shows what passion we have for our community. We want to keep it going."

Why wouldn't they keep it going?

Well, they've fallen prey to a recent crackdown by the city on irregular recreation programming.

That means that if they want to keep running pizza nights, they will have to get a permit every Friday and pay city recreation staff to work the oven, Gupta says.

That will be expensive. A permit alone costs almost \$100, she says. And rec staff? "We can't afford it. We are all just volunteers."

This is a repeated refrain I've heard this week.

Three weeks before the ninth annual "Icicle" event at Dufferin Grove rink – which features 50 people on bikes racing across the ice before a crowd of 200 – earlier this month, organizer Derek Chadbourne was told it was no longer considered part of the recreation programming and he'd need a permit and insurance. Same thing for the family skate day at the Wallace Emerson rink. And the Women of Winter Outdoor Shiny Tournament, which has been considered the showcase event for women's pickup hockey in the city for five years now. (In the end, the city waived the fees, organizer Deirdre Norman said, but told her she would need to pay next year.) "When you add fees to volunteer events, you effectively end them," says Norman. "Why would you discourage things that cost the city nothing and bring so much to the



Monica Gupta, chair of Friends of Christie Pits Park, laments \$100 permit now needed to use community oven. (Feb. 24, 2010)

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community and facilities that are underused? We do this for the love of our community."

That's a very good question. The response is vague.

Malcolm Bromley, the city's director of recreation, said his aim was to build more programs, not destroy existing ones. But he also said programs need to be regularized.

He didn't think the Christie Pits pizza nights were delisted from the city's recreation program. I'm still waiting for him to get back to me.

The evidence shows the easy days of collaboration between people who work in the parks and people who use and love them are over and that – if not this summer, then next – the Christie Pits community pizza nights are doomed.

That padlock will rarely come off.

The irony, of course, is that the city never owned the Christie Pits bake oven.

Further down on that plaque, right after that parks worker's name, is a single line.

It reads: "Created with love for all to enjoy."

If you are as outraged as I am by this, send a protest email to Janet Davis at councillor_davis@toronto.ca.

She is the chair of the city's recreation committee.

Catherine Porter usually appears on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Email: cporter@thestar.ca