

Axe could fall on managers as city ponders parks shakeup

Mayor-elect unsure if he will object to plan that would eliminate nearly 30 positions

By KATHERINE HARDING; G&M< 26 Nov 03

The city's cash-strapped parks and recreation department is set to undergo a major restructuring, including the loss of 28 non-unionized positions by Jan. 1.

"We're trying to use the public dollar for the highest good," Claire Tucker-Reid, the department's manager, said yesterday about the controversial plan, which was quietly released to department employees last week.

She said the affected positions, 10 of which are already vacant, are middle management jobs and range from park supervisors to directors. The department has a management staff of 204 people.

Ms. Tucker-Reid said the job losses are necessary for the department to meet its own budget, which is around \$150-million.

Titled *Renewing Our Focus -- Moving Forward With Structural Change in Parks and Recreation*, the restructuring plan also calls for radical change at the department so that the entire operation becomes more centralized.

Critics of the proposal are already saying that the plan will drastically reduce the level of service delivered by the department.

Ms. Tucker-Reid said her staff would ensure that doesn't happen. The department is responsible for a number of services and programs, including the city's 1,500 parks, 136 community centres and 833 playgrounds.

"Nobody wants to see deterioration in services," she said.

Mayor-elect David Miller was briefed about the department's plan earlier this week and has told its senior officials to brief city councillors immediately about the proposal.

"People in the election spoke very clearly, not just to me but the council candidates, and they are very concerned about the level of services," he said in an interview.

He's not sure whether he or the council will eventually object to the plan, which is expected to be fully rolled out by March 30.

"I don't know yet whether it's going to affect services," Mr. Miller said. "But my concern is in so many areas of the city that middle management has been cut time and time again. We have seen the results on the streets."

Jutta Mason, who belongs to a volunteer park organization, was alerted to the restructuring plan recently and wants Mr. Miller to stop it immediately.

"What's already a pretty low level of functioning is about to get a lot lower," Ms. Mason said.

Her neighbourhood group, called Friends of Dufferin Grove Park, has been organizing community events in the city's west end for about 10 years.

She predicts that the department's already overworked front-line staff will have to pick up the slack left by the middle managers, and problems such as litter will increase in the city's parks.

Ms. Mason said it's outrageous that the public wasn't fully consulted on the proposed changes.

She speculated that the department is quietly rushing through these job cuts to help balance the books before the new mayor takes over.

"This may be a panic reaction to try to show the new administration that they can deal with their money problems," she said.

Ms. Tucker-Reid, however, said the department doesn't have to have such changes vetted by the public or even by the council. She added that the plan is still at the "discussion-paper" level and that her department would ensure that every park would have at least one staff member responsible for co-ordinating its operations.

"This is the critical year [financially] for parks and rec, and it will be a challenge for us to meet the level of service that residents have grown accustomed to," she said.

Ms. Tucker-Reid warned that it's becoming more and more difficult to operate the parks and recreation system under the city's current financial restraints.

She noted that in the future, services, which include swimming pools and fitness classes, could be reduced or even cut if the department doesn't receive more money.

Toronto residents also use the five golf courses, approximately 642 sports fields, 121 indoor and outdoor arenas and 756 tennis courts that are maintained by the city's parks and recreation department.