

City to hold off on cuts to middle-level parks jobs

By JENNIFER LEWINGTON
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The city will hold off on mid-level staff cuts threatened for its cash-poor parks and recreation service, pending public consultations demanded by city councillors.

Some members of council hope the delay in axing 28 non-union positions to Jan. 1, 10 of which are already vacant, will mean a full review of parks and recreation -- including its possible restoration as a separate department ..

After a briefing from city staff last Thursday, 12 councillors signed a letter to the city's chief executive officer, Shirley Hoy, demanding "no further action" on the managerial cuts until the impact on front-line service is discussed with the public.

The proposed cuts, part of a cost-saving measure by parks and recreation for its \$150-million budget in 2004, would not reduce service, according to city staff. Typically, mid-level staff reductions are made without consulting council.

But the deteriorating state of the city's 1,500 parks, 136 community services and 833 playgrounds became an issue in the Nov. 10 election and some councillors were adamant about any further budget cuts or loss of service.

"Our parks are a disgrace. They are not properly maintained," said Kyle Rae, councillor for Ward 27 Toronto Centre-Rosedale, and one of those who signed the letter.

He added that the city's parks and recreation programs, wrapped into the economic development and culture department, should have a separate commissioner as was the case prior to amalgamation.

"It's time we brought that position back," said Mr. Rae, a member of the new council's economic development and parks committee.

Committee chairman Brian Ashton, councillor for Ward 36 says now there will be a "full review" of the threatened cuts.

"It's clear from Mayor [David] Miller's election campaign that he wants to reconnect parks and recreation to the community," Mr. Ashton said. "Grass and splash should become the new motto for our efforts."

Mr. Miller, who was briefed on the proposed staff cuts when he took office earlier this month, said he wants the public included in discussions about the future of park and recreation services.

"If we are going to reorganize an important department like parks, people may have some good ideas about what they need on the front-lines," he said last Thursday after Ms. Hoy put the staff cuts on hold.

But Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong, Ward 34 Don Valley East, questioned the need to delay staff cuts that had been timed to capitalize on city pension provisions that expire on Jan. 1.

"There is no service impact," he said of the proposed reduction in mid-level managers.