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It's no picnic paying for parks

City officials see upkeep funding eroding year-to-year And prospects aren't any greener, *Catherine Porter finds*

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To listen to the mayor, you'd think the parks and recreation department was about to hit its golden age.

It fits the bill of David Miller's pet programs — the community safety plan that would see more recreation programs in targeted, low-income areas, and the "clean and beautiful city" program, which would, among other things, vacuum garbage from city parks that increasingly look like private dumping grounds.

But the numbers lining the city's budget chart tell a different story.

"It has been six years since amalgamation and we're being squeezed in every single program," said parks and recreation general manager Brenda Librecz. "We're trimming all services so much, I think they're ready to collapse."

Since 1999, the department's budget has increased by 30 per cent, from \$169.9 million to \$222.1 million last year. But that hasn't been enough to keep pace with the pressures of rising salaries and benefits, inflation and mounting bills, including utility fees and increasing user charges paid for recreation programs in school buildings. To make ends meet, the department has had to nip and tuck every year — shortening hours at many of its 140 community centres, trimming back ice time at its 61 arenas and 67 artificial rinks, putting off repairs on the aging vehicle fleet and doing without new hires.

Five years ago, the city's 200-odd park crews were each staffed with about five people, cutting lawns, planting gardens, picking up garbage. Now crews of three people do the same jobs, Librecz said.

At the same time, the amount of garbage being dumped in parks by homeowners and contractors has increased every year, and the city has introduced a ban on pesticides.

The cost of weeding the parks without spraying is \$2.1 million each year, a cost the department just can't afford.

And that is reflected in how the city's parks look.

At the same time, the city has resorted to increasing user fees for most of its recreation programs each year to bring in more money.

This year looked no different.

Facing a \$344 million overall budget shortfall, the city's budget chief David Soknacki advised each department to find more savings.

Librecz's staff braced themselves. Together with senior city management, they reduced their budget request by \$3.2 million to \$228.8 million, still an increase from last year's \$222.1 million. About 70 per cent of the budget pays for 3,572 employees.

To find savings, staff offered up sacrificial lambs: reducing floral displays in 741 of the city's 1,470 parks, restructuring management and not replacing retiring staff, pulling out of 11 more Toronto District School Board pools to save \$1.3 million over two years.

They also proposed to ditch new programs, including recreation for youth and children, a \$250,000 tree watering plan and the \$860,000 illegal dumping program that would see anti-dumping officers patrolling parks.

'We're trimming all services so much, I think they're ready to collapse'

City parks official Brenda Librecz

"Cutting floral displays is the lesser of two evils," said Librecz. "We'd prefer that to cutting programs for kids or shutting down community centres."

They also suggested raising user fees for the third year in a row and slapping parking charges on some parks for the first time.

Then things got interesting.

At their budget meeting three weeks ago, councillors on the city's economic development and parks committee agreed to raise fees. But, they refused to make most of the proposed cuts, voting instead to keep the floral arrangements and the tree-watering program, and a pilot project for pesticide-free turf management in four parks. They even agreed to pay another \$500,000 for a popular skateboard park that wasn't mentioned in the budget.

In the end, they put \$1.7 million back into the department's budget.

"I'm fighting for things. I'm not cutting things," said Councillor Brian Ashton (Ward 36, Scarborough Southwest), the committee's chair. "If I don't advocate for the department, who's going to?"

They also turned over the decision on moving out of school pools to council and sent the illegal dumping program to the mayor as part of his "clean and beautiful city" program, which calls for more attractive parks.

While fellow board member Councillor Case Ootes (Ward 29, Toronto-Danforth) criticized the committee's move as irresponsible, Ashton said the board was simply following the lead of the mayor. Miller's "community safety plan" recommends recreation programs as a way of preventing crime before it starts.

"There's mixed messages coming," said Ashton. "I don't know who's my boss, the budget chair or the mayor. If you cut programs in parks and recreation, it's going to please the budget chair and upset the mayor. It's a take-out restaurant without a menu."

Meanwhile, the parks and recreation department is at a crossroads. This year, Librecz plans to host public meetings to hear what people want the department to focus on. If it's parks, then it will mean fewer recreation programs, speculates Kelvin Seow, the department budget co-ordinator. If it's aquatics, something else will have to give.

"We've been all things to all people for a long, long time," says Seow. "We need to focus and decide what is it we can really be good at."

Right now, the department's services make a long list. It is in charge of 7,344 hectares of green space, including three million trees, five ferry boats to the Toronto Islands, two ski centres, four 18-hole golf courses, two full-service alpine ski facilities, 144 pools, 143 wading pools, 70 snack bars and restaurants, eight greenhouses and 140 community centres, among other facilities.

"We're a very complex division. ... We do everything — social services, food banks, recreation programs, parks, running ferries, community development, working with police on youth issues," Seow said.

So, lists of requested programs waiting for funding are mounting and, given cuts, few have enough staff to keep up with programs already running.

Unless Miller comes to the rescue during the budget debate, the department will face another year of making do with less.

"I call it erosion," said Librecz. "It sneaks up on you."