

Our parks are a mess

'A city is in trouble when it stops having pride in the way it looks': Toronto residents tell KATHERINE HARDING they are fed up with the state of the city's green spaces.

By KATHERINE HARDING
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One of the things that drew Robert Rotenberg and his family to their Logan Avenue home five years ago was the green jewel across the street.

"This used to be a bucolic park. It used to be a magnificent green park," the 50-year-old criminal lawyer sighed as he pointed to Withrow Park's trampled grass and weed-ravaged flower beds.

"A city is in trouble when it stops having pride in the way it looks."

Beside him stands a garbage can exploding with fast-food containers and other trash, including boxes and a table leaf that have been dumped illegally. "The garbage comes down [from the nearby Wendy's and Tim Hortons outlets] like rocks in a river," he said. "And the problem is: Garbage breeds more garbage."

Mr. Rotenberg and his neighbours, who live on the fringes of the 8.4-hectare, east-end park, have slowly watched the public space decline over the years, but they feel helpless because city politicians maintain that it's not their problem -- besides, the coffers are empty.

"Any time you talk to anybody at the city about anything, the first thing they throw at you is 'Well, since amalgamation.' . . . Eeshh, I don't want to hear that any more," said Debby Blyth, who lives with her family around the corner from Mr. Rotenberg. "It doesn't matter what the issue is, they blame it on amalgamation. That's getting really old."

Ms. Blyth said Withrow Park, which has a ball-hockey rink, soccer pitch and two ball diamonds, has become a free-for-all for users. "If you want to litter, you can litter. If you want to let your dog off its leash in the non-designated areas, you can," the mother of two said.

Nobody seems to respect city bylaws because the enforcement is a joke, Ms. Blyth said. "I've never seen a bylaw officer here -- ever."

The city has only 300 officers --but 180,000 bylaws to monitor -- and therefore most

investigations are made only on a complaint basis. For example, over the past five years, fewer than 600 people in Toronto have been fined for breaching animal-related bylaws, which includes leaving a pet off a leash in a non-designated area.

Mr. Rotenberg, a Toronto native who has lived in the Withrow Park area since 1986, is frustrated most by the city's seemingly hands-off approach when it comes to Withrow's basic maintenance and upkeep. This spring, his neighbours on Logan and Wolfrey Avenues sent a petition to their interim councillor, Laura Jones, just to get the garbage bins cleaned more regularly. "It's ludicrous that we have to resort to measures like that," he said.

Since amalgamation in 1997, the city's parks and recreation budget has hovered around \$150-million even though the city has grown significantly. It has been spared from being hacked and burned by the introduction of unpopular user fees.

Before amalgamation, Withrow (like most parks) had a foreperson assigned to it and other nearby parkettes. Those people knew the neighbours, when ball-hockey season started and understood exactly why a light was important in a certain dark corner of the park.

But the staffing problems first appeared in the early 1990s when a cash-strapped parks department had to start rearranging work schedules. The city started using "flying squads" to take care of the city's 1,500 parks. These are in-and-out teams of city workers, who make sure the garbage is collected, the grass is cut and there are no obvious safety hazards.

And recently, Withrow Park was included in a year-long experiment that saw those park-staff jobs contracted out. Now, the people who clean this park don't even work for the city and they have to visit it only every seven to 10 days.

During the pilot project, it's against the rules for a city worker to even go by and pick up one errant bottle or to weed a flower bed.

Mr. Rotenberg is concerned that attention to detail has been lost and that policies, including banning pesticides and promoting "nature areas" of wild plants and trees, are backfiring because the proper maintenance is not being done.

"The city's thrilled because they don't have to maintain it. It's cheap," he said of a "nature area" on the west side of the park, where a small section is overrun by giant goldenrod plants. "But what you end up with is weeds, garbage, secret corners and then crime," he said. "This area has been naturalized into non-use."

Ms. Blyth has nicknamed that now isolated area the "drug nook."

"Everybody knows this is where you buy drugs, the city and police, but nobody does anything about it," she said. "My kids never come to this side of the park."

Several city staff members who have worked at Withrow were contacted about the situation. All declined to be interviewed.

Mr. Rotenberg feels for these people, including downtown park supervisor Rusty Warkman. "They have worked hard to make these spaces great," he said. "I think they feel caught in the middle."

Herb Pirk, the former Toronto parks commissioner, is not surprised that many green spaces across the city are withering.

"They [the parks department] don't have the resources to do their jobs," said Mr. Pirk, who was commissioner from 1983 to 1996. "You can't have things like cookie-cutter maintenance.

"But it's just not the parks. I think the city's entire infrastructure is suffering. "

Mr. Pirk said that not only have services been watered down, but that people feel increasingly isolated from City Hall.

"Some of the frustration people feel out there is due to the lack of their connectiveness to the city," he said, adding that decisions by the parks and recreation department, including instituting user fees, have exacerbated the problem.

Mr. Pirk said a major mandate of his regime was to establish "connections with the communities." During his administration, community advisory boards were started to ensure that the city's parks budget was reasonable.

"People worked with us, they realized the fiscal restraints . . . They accepted change," he said.

He is skeptical about the city's pilot "Adopt-A-Park" program, which recruits citizens to get involved with their parks by collecting litter and planting flowers. "You've got to do basic things like cut the grass before people will care," he said.

Back at Withrow Park, Mr. Rotenberg doesn't want his complaints about his neighbourhood park to come off as whiny or naive. "This isn't the worst park in the city. I'd never say that," he said. "But it's not acceptable. Why are we settling?"

Claire Tucker-Reid, general manager of the city's parks and recreation department, understands the concerns of Mr. Rotenberg and his neighbours, but she said Torontonians are overwhelmingly happy with the state of the parks system. The city polls its citizens every year, and in 2002, 91 per cent of respondents said they were satisfied to very satisfied with the quality of the parks system, she said.

She does admit that it has been hard to maintain the services that people had grown accustomed to. "We've done our best," she said. "But we can't pay the same attention that we have in the past."

She said that if people have an issue with their local park, they are more than welcome to call her department or their local councillor.

For Mr. Rotenberg, the problem comes down to bad government. "We have little

government debt, minimal inflation, low interest rates. This is supposed to be the economic nirvana. And yet we can't keep weeds out of our flower beds."