

# Dufferin Grove Park Newsletter

## August 2024

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# Dufferin Grove Park newsletter, August 2024



*This newsletter is put out by CELOS, the Centre for Local Research into Public Space. Since 2000, when this little organization began at Dufferin Grove Park, we've been doing what we call "theoretical and practical research" into what makes public spaces – like parks – more hospitable and more lively. We've documented a lot of what we've seen and done, in this newsletter and on our four websites. The newsletter paused in February 2020 and resumed in May 2024*

**A walk in the park:** Sometimes it's nice to get out of the virtual screen world and into the physical outdoors world where the birds are singing. If you put your phone in your pocket, and walk into the park from the south at the Gladstone end, you can have a closer look at the mosaics imbedded in the walls of the cob kitchen, community-built in 2005, then go by the wading pool (and duck from getting splashed by some kids having a water fight), then stop a while at the sandpit and watch the little engineers digging their rivers and shoring up their dams. Carrying on, you could read some inscriptions on the donated trees that are thriving with the abundant rains of this summer. The last big summer/fall drought was in 2013. At that time almost all the young trees were saved by the watering efforts of the part-time city rec staff who were then working at Dufferin Grove. They connected hoses to every water outlet in the park and moved them around all day. Some of those trees are now very big and making shade for the new benches along the diagonal unpaved park path. One of those benches is a good place to have a rest and watch a game in the soccer field. Resist plugging in your headphones for your music list, and listen to the shouts of the sand volleyball players instead.

When you get going again, you can walk over to the two circle gardens at the centre of the park. They are community garden projects spearheaded by park neighbour **Skylar Hill-Jackson**. One is a former "tree nursery," now surrounded by a border of many different plants that Skylar and park friends rescued from the former gardens within the rink construction site in 2021. The biggest rose bush was dug up and brought over in a wheelbarrow by one of the Pellegrino Company construction staff at the end of his shift. Those workers were plant lovers too.

The other circle garden consists of raised planters that have a mix of native species and vegetables. Postings of gardening hours are chalked on a blackboard on the front of the garden sheds. Maybe you want to come out sometime and try out your green thumb? (Email [gardens@dufferinpark.ca](mailto:gardens@dufferinpark.ca) when you get home.)



The circle gardens are very near the 1913 field house where the Clay and Paper Theatre Company is building giant papier-mâché puppets for various events all over the city. After a chat with their lively summer crew, and a look at what they're doing, your walk can loop over to the basketball court. You could watch (or even try to get in on) a 3-on-3 game. Or you could carry on to the picnic table area next to the orphan bake oven. On a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, there might be Cuban music on a little sound system, and a big group playing dominoes and grilling meat. If you say hi and wave, you'll likely be invited to try a piece of steak. This group adopted the spot during the years of the covid restrictions. They even used the front outside shelf of the locked bake oven for setting up their grill, to divert the smoke, since a bake oven has its chimney forward of its oven doors. People found a way to be sociable, even during those days.

Beside the picnic tables there's a pollinator garden that includes some sculptural stone heads saved from demolished buildings in the older parts of the city. Park friend **Gene Threndyle** persuaded Parks staff to place them in this native-species garden (after he saw the sculptures through the fence in the High Park service yard storage area) when he and others built it many years ago. During the rink construction time, there were various encampments in the shelter of the bushes here, as well as a big "anyone welcome" campfire circle. Now that campfire circle is gone. Instead, the garden is a host to the bees and butterflies attracted by two years of new plantings that community gardeners put in with the help of Skylar's city "pollinator grant."

From the pollinator garden vantage point, you can look south and see the many recent tents, interspersed with dog walkers and Frisbee players and families picnicking. Or you can look north and see the renovated rink building and its ample central patio, and skateboarders risking their lives and limbs on the summertime "dry pad" of the pleasure-skating rink. Maybe going over there is part of a walk the next time, though. There are so many stories in a city park.

**Playground renovation update: A comment from Jacob Larsen:** *"You may have heard about the planned 'improvements' by the City to the Dufferin Grove playground. This is a concern to many parents who visit other playgrounds in the City and who recognize the uniqueness of this hardwood structure. The Dufferin Grove playground structure, thoughtfully-designed and loved by kids big and small, risks being replaced by a generic structure typical in other City parks. This would be a sad loss to the neighbourhood and our kids -- and is completely unnecessary. The structure is solid and can easily be refurbished.*

*If you share this concern, you can email me at [larsen.jacob@gmail.com](mailto:larsen.jacob@gmail.com) or DM me via the Dufferin Grove Facebook group. To ensure that parents' voices are heard beyond the limited consultation the City has planned, we will be encouraging the Councillor to hold a public meeting and ask City Parks, Forestry & Recreation to develop a plan to refurbish and enhance the structure."*



**New neighbours in tents at the park:** At the beginning of June two tents appeared in the park. By the beginning of July there were 8. At the end of July there were more than 20. -- Who are these new residents of the neighbourhood?

A few of us recently walked around to some of the different tents, to say hello and ask them. Most people were willing to tell us a little. Some are internal refugees, coming from another part of Canada (Alberta seems common). They were unsuccessful finding jobs in their home province, and the jobs didn't turn out to be here either. Some are near-neighbours who formerly lived on Gladstone or Havelock and lost their housing. Some are clearly in trouble with some kind of drugs (but were courteous and careful in their responses). Every person in every tent we visited was different.

We asked these temporary park residents two questions: 1. if you had access to the washer and dryer that currently sit unused at the park building, at scheduled times when the day campers are not there, would that help? And 2. If you had access to the new kitchen in the building at scheduled times, would you want to cook there, just for yourselves or to share?

The answers were mixed but mostly yes. One woman said she is currently throwing out clothes when they get too dirty, and she hates doing that but has no way to get to a laundromat. Several campers were worried that the kitchen would be a messy chaos if just any campers could use it. But they were reassured to hear that the building is already staffed by two city staff from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. every day, who could be in charge of making it work.

In the June newsletter we reported that city staff currently recommend *“relationship-building with people in encampments, and expediting access to housing and other supports, without the use of enforcement.”* That approach was developed after a damning report by the city ombudsman (and by international media) about what happened when police were sent into some parks with horses in Toronto in 2020.

The covid lockdown times that drove people out of the crowded shelters ended a few years ago, but the low-rent housing situation has gotten worse. The official new approach to encampments is called *“the Dufferin Grove Park model.”* So, your newsletter editor emailed the city's **Shelter and Support Division** and asked if access to the currently unused new washer/dryer and the still rarely-used state-of-the-art kitchen could be made available, at scheduled times, to the people currently living there in tents.



The question was passed to a **Media Relations and Issues Management Senior Communications Advisor**, whose name is **Elise von Scheel**. She wrote:

*“City of Toronto staff have assessed the amenities you mentioned at Dufferin Grove Park and determined it’s not possible to offer them for public use. The building in question is programmed throughout the year, with many recreation programs operating daily. The facility itself does not have the capacity or provisions to offer the added services you noted in addition to the current demands without affecting the ability to continue to program for the broader community.”*

The communications advisor wrote that people can instead go to *“Drop-in centres, respite sites and other shelter system facilities [which] offer showers, washrooms, laundry and other services.”* But when we asked about available shelters, another communications colleague had to respond that *“Currently, the daily average of callers left unmatched to a shelter bed after calling Central Intake is 236 people.”*

So that won't work. On top of that, the official information about the Dufferin Grove building is wrong. Apart from the registered weekday 9 to 4 kids' day camp, there are actually very few recreation programs operating out of the building at this point. On Sundays and most weekday evenings, no programs are happening. The building staff mostly sit in their office with the shades drawn down over the big new windows, so people can't see them.

The recent city staff report on encampments seems to mean that scheduled times of access to the washer and dryer and the kitchen, with staff supervision, could be part of the *“outreach and support model”* -- supporting people who want to take steps to resume taking care of themselves again. Supervising and helping with that access is something the staff could do.

### ***But wouldn't that kind of help encourage more people to camp in the park this summer?***

Since the middle of July, your editor has been asking park users what they think. The subject makes for lively conversations – everybody seems to be worried about it.

So far, about a third of the people I talked with at the park said firmly that the tents ought to be removed: *parks are supposed to be green spaces, and nothing extra should be provided to campers in parks.* About another third firmly said the opposite -- *if the facility for laundry and cooking is right there, open it up.* And the rest were unsure. Some said they have family members or friends who have lost or are about to lose their housing. Some said the issue is still the mental health fallout from the covid lockdowns. Others said the arrivals of refugees seeking safety from wars is making the problems grow so fast.

According to city staff, *“The City is sheltering more than 12,000 people in the shelter system and outside the shelter system in bridging hotels.”*

### **What can be done?**

Maybe – 1. For a one-month trial period starting in the second week of August, at designated times, let people in tents or sleeping on park benches, at this park, come and do their laundry and cook and if possible, find friends. This needs staff in the building who are older than 18, and can see the point.

- 2. Keep the park conversations going. Keep talking, not in meetings, but at the playground, around the tents, at the picnic tables, around the big stainless steel kitchen prep table, inside the rink building -- and raise the blinds that currently cover all the big new kitchen windows, so people can see each other!

Conversations with strangers, including those who don't agree with one another, may lead to finding out things – about people's stories, and about what people need to make the city work better. **Is it worth a shot at Dufferin Grove?**



**City Councillors talking:** All committees of city council, plus the Council meetings, can be watched in real time (and forever after) on the city’s Youtube channel. The agenda for each meeting is posted a week beforehand, and it has the links to all the staff reports that will be discussed. Reading the reports can be quite revealing, but it’s seldom fun. The discussions during the meetings, though, can be occasionally candid and (sometimes) quite engaging.

That was the case at the July 4 meeting of the Economic and Community Development Committee (ECDC for short). Three of the five councillors on the committee, including our local Councillor Bravo (who is the chair) are in their first terms. But the other two, Councillor Paula Fletcher and Councillor Shelley Carroll have both been on city council since 2003. That means they carry a fair bit of institutional memory, and can sometimes hold city staff to account. One item being discussed on July 4 was a three-times deferred “Inclusive Economic Development Framework” (IED for short) that’s the product of many “working group” meetings between the management staff of four different city divisions. The two councillors wanted to talk about *locally-based* recreation staffing. Here’s an excerpt:

**Councillor Fletcher:** I’m looking at parks forestry and recreation where local community hiring should be a focus....I’m just going to ask Mr. Dayton about the hiring policy for recreation. And what it currently is, and the percentage of local hires and local deployment for those areas. Do you have those numbers?

**Howie Dayton, general manager of Parks, Forestry and Recreation:** We don’t have those numbers currently, that would be something that we would follow up with. Certainly we have local hiring initiatives...

**Counc. Fletcher:** But you don’t track it.

**Howie Dayton:** That hasn’t been ...

**Counc. Fletcher:** You don’t track it.

**Howie Dayton:** We are going to implement a methodology to understand what our sort of local hiring impact is.

**Counc. Fletcher:** I’m going to ask you to prepare that, and *not only going forward* – let’s look at *your history in hiring*. Maybe it’s great. Unfortunately we have no idea.

Howie Dayton: we’re happy to do that.

Parks, Forestry and Recreation (PFR) part-time jobs (currently 11,355 people are listed as part-timers) are the issue here. These PFR (for short) jobs are often but not only for students. These jobs are described in City news releases as “*important employment opportunities connect[ing] people to a pathway to success.*” However, many of the jobs end up being limited to security-guard-type tasks (three current examples at Dufferin Grove are wading pool jobs, building attendants, and outdoor rinks jobs). Such jobs are therefore not a prize for equity-seeking groups or anybody else. That is a situation that needs addressing. The question is: can people outside of city hall get into the “inclusive economic development” conversation? CELOS is trying -- we’ll report back next month.



**Community letters to Recreation director Cathy Vincelli:** On April 29, the acting citywide recreation director came to a meeting (requested by CELOS), at the renovated park rink building, to talk about the spring and summer programs at Dufferin Grove. She brought six other city staff. We wanted to know -- after four years of suspended activities (first, covid restrictions, and then, construction), what park programs will come back?

Institutional memory has been lost. All the former Dufferin Grove staff, both hands-on and management, are gone, either reassigned to other parks and community centres, or no longer with the City. That's why, before the meeting, park friends wrote letters to the director, to let her know what they loved about the park in earlier days. They're all posted on the *dufferinpark.ca* website.

From a letter written by park friend **Andrea Holtslander**: *"Having a relationship with consistent, involved staff made a huge difference to my sense of community and security. My kids always knew they could call on the staff if they needed to, and the staff knew them well. Children of all ages loved making rivers, hills, and dams, and shelters in projects together with other children or adults. There was always something new to do, and children in the neighbourhood made enduring friendships."*

**The recreation director wrote after the meeting:** *"We look forward to getting the park and the new clubhouse back up and running this summer as well as working with your community stakeholders to ensure a collaborative approach.....Next Steps: Dufferin Grove Park staff plan to roll out traditional and other programming starting after the May long weekend. Examples of programming include Friday night Supper, Pizza Days at the smaller oven, and the cob kitchen snack bar."*

It's mid-summer now but we're not there yet. Staff-run **Friday Night Suppers** took place twice in July, with all the food prepared elsewhere by market vendor Magic Oven. That was brokered by **Nicole Jacobs**, manager of the park's farmers' market. On those occasions there were four part-time rec staff plus two full-time staff to do the set-up, serving, and cleanup. Only about 10 people bought dinner the first time, 19 people the second. (Some others brought their own.) August Friday Night suppers are still in doubt.



**Public pizza days** have taken place three times, on Sundays, at the playground oven, again with four rec staff. But anyone who wants to make a pizza must first make the hot trek up to the rink house and pay \$4 through the new electronic payment system there. So the last pizza day only had 11 customers. The pizza days would work better at the bigger oven near the building, but that oven is still awaiting repairs. There's no cob kitchen snack bar, either, and even if rec staff made a move to restart it, the repairs needed at the cob kitchen have not begun either.

**Collaboration:** Not there yet. A detailed proposal for repairing the cob kitchen was sent to the Parks manager on May 30, but there was no response. Also, we contacted the original oven-builder from 1995 and he said he would rebuild the dome of the original, bigger oven, even agreeing to train two local apprentices. But there's been no uptake on that either. **Yet.**

## James Scott: an inspiration in understanding the PFR bureaucracy

James Scott, “one of the world’s most widely-read social scientists” according to his July 31 obituary in The Globe, was an inspiration to CELOS and to some park friends. Scott’s 1998 book *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* helped us understand aspects of how parks are now run. For example, this summer none of the different categories of city staff who are assigned to Dufferin Grove Park are meant to work together. Most have actually never met. The wading pool staff don’t relate to the park building staff (most have never yet been inside the building), the park maintenance staff don’t know the technical staff or the capital projects staff or the forestry staff. This is a result of a radical transformation of the PFR staff structure that began in 2003. It was not completed until general manager **Brenda Patterson** (from 2008 to 2014) eliminated the last vestiges of local staffing during her tenure. Central management is now the rule in Toronto government, as in many other places where upper-level staff have gone to management school.

**Jane Jacobs** was and continues to be another inspiration, of course. Dufferin Grove Park was one of the many places that interested her, and she was a big help to us. Building on her advice, and that of James Scott, here’s the question: if the working culture of city government is too restrictive, and also the wall between the staff and the parks enthusiasts needs to become more permeable, how can this be brought about? That’s the subject of this summer’s public conversation in the park. Join in!

## The Dufferin Grove Farmers’ market, every Thursday from 3 to 7 pm:

Now that the market is back at the northwest corner of the rink building, it’s once again filled with farmers and other local vendors. **Nicole Jacobs** took over from long-time market manager **Anne Freeman** after Anne retired two years ago. In her August 1 market newsletter, Nicole lists 13 food growers (vegetables, dairy, meat), 14 prepared-food vendors including two bakers and two brewers, and 6 “pop-ups” ranging from face painting to music to poetry to “community fridges” (and more). Congratulations to Nicole for doing the complicated and sometimes painful choreography to bring the market back to full operation. To get her weekly newsletter: [nicole@dufferingrovetmarket.ca](mailto:nicole@dufferingrovetmarket.ca)



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