

Levy: City needs community parks plan



By [Sue-Ann Levy](#), *Toronto Sun*

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Park People's Dave Harvey is so concerned about what will happen to city parks that are already "rough around the edges," he decided to do something about it.

Instead of sitting back and whining about potential budget cuts and fiscal restraint, the executive director of the fledgling advocacy group put together some "creative ideas" on how to rehabilitate Toronto's 1,600 parks and parkettes.

Unlike City Hall — where every consultation and resulting report resemble the Second Coming of Christ — the Parks People ideas are thoughtful, concise and contained in just three pages.

Harvey, who lives right beside Riverdale Park, thinks the city's parks started to go downhill after amalgamation with the demise of Metro (which had responsibility for parks) and "significant cuts" to the parks budget.

"It left the department reeling ... forever endeavouring to play catch-up," he said.

I would add that the number of unionized parks staffers has increased dramatically since amalgamation. It's never been a lack of resources, simply a lack of management will to properly harness those resources.

Harvey feels too much of the parks budget has been devoted in recent years to creating new parks and not nearly enough to maintaining those already in the city's portfolio.

"There is no point building a new park if you have no money to maintain it," Harvey said, pointing to the beautiful new parks on the waterfront like Sugar Beach.

One of Park People's ideas is to make a parks employee responsible for a particular park or set of parkettes — the go-to person who is there to "keep on top of things" like burned out lights and other issues.

Right now, the city uses "flying squads" which visit a park a few times a week to either pick up garbage or cut the grass or conduct other maintenance. No one team does everything.

The responsibilities are so divided that often the grass cutting crew will come in and run "right over" the sprinkler systems another crew has installed, not knowing where the system is located, he says.

He makes no bones about the fact that the culture of the city's parks department is to repeatedly resist community input into local parks and "creative solutions" to funding much-needed maintenance.

I'll start with his first point.

I call it the Adopt-a-Park concept. Harvey refers to it as "Friends Of" park groups.

Whatever the name, he said there are only a few in Toronto — usually in wards, I dare say, with politicians willing to ignore the union's continual and vociferous efforts to kill the Adopt-a-Park concept.

Nevertheless, he says Christie Pits, Trinity Bellwoods, Morningside and Dufferin Grove parks are examples of where "Friends Of" groups have been able to do some "really amazing things."

For example, there's an Adopt-a-Tree program in Trinity Bellwoods park. Once the city plants a new tree, someone in the Friends group signs up to take care of that tree.

"The right city staffer, the right councillor ... that can make all the difference," said Harvey, who is also putting together a "How To" kit for setting up a "Friends of" group.

As far as accessing private sector and foundation funding to repair much-needed playground equipment, that requires city officials who are nimble and willing to "embrace opportunities," he says.

Unfortunately the city's parks department has earned the reputation of putting up roadblocks and dragging their heels whenever those opportunities present themselves.

Take the situation with the Friends of Felstead Park which had obtained a \$65,000 donation from a Washington-based organization called KaBoom! this past summer. City officials and Councillor Paula Fletcher put up so many obstacles, KaBoom! went elsewhere.

"The parks department finds it all too often easier to say, 'no' rather than 'yes,'" said Harvey. "They have the reputation of closing the door on potential solutions."

Harvey emphasizes that Park People's intention was not to say "gotcha" but to put forward ideas that will "start a dialogue."

"We're not just defending the status quo," he said. "It's about coming up with creative ideas we can all work on together to improve our parks."

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