

March 19, 2012

Office of the Mayor
Toronto City Hall
2nd Floor
100 Queen Street West
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

Dear Mayor Ford;

Re: Neshama Playground, Oriole Park

It has recently come to our attention that City Hall is seeking to install a sign at our new playground, and to hold an official opening ceremony in May of this year. We understand that this initiative is being pursued because someone believes that not to recognize the private donor involved in the playground could reflect poorly on the City's attempt to raise private funds for other initiatives. Initially we thought that the Toronto Office of Partnerships was the lead on this, but they say "No" and have told us that they believe that Parks, Forestry and Recreation are the lead. We contacted Jim Hart the General Manager of P,F & R about our concerns but have not heard back.

The official Resolution that kicked off the private-public partnership for the Neshama playground in Oriole Park was approved in July 2005 (City Clerk Report 49). Since then this has been a difficult and at times divisive and highly acrimonious file which in our opinion should not be held up as a suitable model for any City private-public partnerships. Now that we have had one summer with the new playground behind us, it is our firm conviction that nothing more should be done to bring up all the extensive negativity which has surrounded this matter for the past 7 years. There are still today very strong feelings about the travesty, after travesty with which this matter is associated in our community all of which will most likely be raised again if you persist with the installation of a sign and with the holding of a second official opening ceremony.

I will only list a few of these travesties:

- Prior to July 2005 no report exists at City Hall which methodically reviewed which of Toronto's parks is most suitable to host the Neshama playground. When the City finally ordered such an analysis three years later it came up with a short list of suitable parks which they reviewed with the private donor. We have a signed memo from Parks Division dated July 15, 2008 about this meeting at which the donor basically told the City that if they don't select Oriole Park the donor would not give the City any funds.
- None of the members of the private donor group actually lived in the Oriole Park/Deer Park community. This is reflected by the fact that the initial design for a mega-playground in Oriole Park attached to the July 2005 Resolution was produced by the donor and his consultant without any community consultation. This initial design called for among other things the elimination of many trees, the elimination of our popular tennis courts and reduction in the area of Oriole Park green space to accommodate 17 new parking places.

- Even more disturbing, the initial design by the donor did not receive any input from the many groups that assist disabled children that are active in our neighborhood. In fact, it was the community which first brought these groups into the planning activity for a new playground more suitable for disabled children.
- The Mayor's Office and the donor group held an official opening ceremony for the Neshama playground at Oriole Park on June 8, 2008 with Lieutenant Governor David Onley and Prince Edward among attending dignitaries. This was two years before the community finally agreed to a scaled-down playground design, and before there was any formal City budget for the playground.
- The opening ceremony with Prince Edward came at the request of the donor group as they had told the Mayor that they were having trouble raising the money they had promised and that they needed something to draw attention to the proposed playground. The community was never consulted about the ceremony with the Prince.
- A public consultation initiative for a more appropriate playground design was only launched by the City in March 2009 almost four years after City Council approved the private public partnership and the mega-design "destination playground" at Oriole Park.
- Prior to the beginning of the public consultation the head of the donor group mounted a media campaign in which he, among other things called local residents "bigots" (see Globe and Mail article March 20, 2009).
- At the start of four public consultation meetings about the design of the playground (as demanded by the community) we were told the budget for the playground would be \$2.5 million; of which \$1.0 million came from the donor group; \$1.0 million to be matched by the City and \$500,000 from Section 37 funds as specified in the July 2005 Resolution. By the third meeting we were told that the budget might be \$1.7 million because the donor was still having trouble raising the promised funds.
- In an official letter from the Parks Division dated September 30, 2010 we were told that the actual construction budget for the playground was only \$1.35 million and that this was due to the fact that only \$572,000 towards construction came from the donor group at the end of the fund raising period. Furthermore, we were also told that the City had ignored the matching formula approved by the 2005 Resolution and had gone ahead and approved additional un-matched funds in December of 2009.
- Because of the smaller construction budget many items for the playground previously approved by the community during the four public meetings held in 2009 were removed. This was done despite the request by the community that we keep some almost new play equipment from the previous playground for incorporation into the new Neshama playground.

I could, of course, go on and list more issues surrounding the evolution and final resolution of how we came to have a new playground in Oriole Park. I hope that the issues I have listed will convince you that the private-public partnership behind this was flawed from the start, and that it is not a suitable model to hold up on how to get the best efforts from all concerned, especially the local community.

I therefore formally request that you help us to stop the installation of a new sign, and that you help us not to hold an official opening ceremony at our playground in Oriole Park. If you would like more information on this please don't hesitate to contact me. Thank you for your kind consideration and assistance on this matter.

Kindest regards.

Ulli Rath
Acting President
Friends of Oriole Park
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