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Volunteers cry foul over fees for community ovens

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Paul Moloney

Toronto is poised to start charging a permit fee for neighbourhood groups to use outdoor ovens in city parks that were built and operate with volunteer labour and cash.

In recommending fees be charged, council's parks and environment committee tried to soften the blow by noting that groups can seek to have the tab either reduced or forgiven altogether.

The proposed fee for a group up to 25 people to use the baking oven for a day is modest at \$53, of which \$27 is for insurance. But the premise is flawed, said Jutta Mason, who spearheaded the development of Dufferin Grove Park's oven.

"It's an insult," Mason said after the meeting. "The problem is not whether we're in dire economic straits, the problem is why would we pay to give our labour to the city?"

"The fact is, if I am a person of any income, if I put my labour into my community and they tell me I have to pay, I will stop," she said.

If city council adopts the recommended permit fee later this month, Mason fears it will discourage communities from building new ovens in addition to the current nine, of which four are in city parks: Dufferin Grove; Riverdale Farm; Alexandra Park; and Christie Pits.

"Most of the time it won't happen; it's too much work."

Some councillors spoke against the fee, or tried to reduce it to \$1, but the committee sided with a staff report that said the city needs to recover its costs for factors such as cleanup.

Councillor Mike Layton, whose ward includes Christie Pits, said the city could end up the loser if it charges fees.

"We'd be losing the thousands of hours of volunteer labour these groups put in and the priceless programming they provide our neighbourhoods," Layton said.

"It's not easy creating linkages between some of the different groups in our neighbourhood. It's not easy work. Bake ovens help serve that purpose ... through their sheer existence and use in the community. We want that to continue."



Mike Layton, now councillor for Ward 19, Trinity-Spadina, rolls pizza dough beside the Christie Pits bake oven at a community pizza night last year.

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