

A letter to the members of the Parks and Environment Committee, for their meeting of April 22, 2013.

Subject: The Parks Plan, Item 20.1

From: Jutta Mason

I had my name down to depute on the Parks Plan, but after some discussions last week I came to agree with park friends that going to City Hall is not useful at the moment. However, I want to comment in writing, at least for the record, on the particular elements in the Parks Plan related to what the Plan calls “placemaking.”

Twelve of the 49 new jobs proposed in the Parks Plan are for “park rangers,” who – according to the job outline in the Plan -- like Smokey the Bear will mainly be giving advice and cautions. They will not often (maybe never) get dirty working alongside people making gardens or cooking community dinners or running sports leagues (that’s for volunteers to do). The cost of these new “park ranger” jobs looks to be about \$110,000 per person – some of it probably for the trucks they’ll need to drive around in.

Since 2000, the Parks, Forestry and Recreation operating budget has almost doubled. This year – 2013 – the PFR budget, counting capital expenditures, stands at over half a billion dollars. The Parks Plan proposes to grow the budget some more over the next five years, adding \$5.4 million in new operating funds, 49 new staff, and \$21.6 million in new capital funds. A good portion of that cost seems to be related in various ways to the objectives of “placemaking.”

A dozen park rangers are supposed to spread out over the city’s 1600 parks and parkettes and “communicate and connect” with park users everywhere – or at least, in those parks that Parks Management decides to prioritize for community engagement. Many of the 37 other proposed new staff will spend a good deal of time planning and monitoring the “placemaking.” This will not work well. You don’t so much *make* a neighbourly place as *grow* it. It takes patience and time to attend to the details. Helpful *people* – *lots* of them – contribute more than *things* do. Trial and error, if not held back by rigid categories of “don’t touch my turf,” works infinitely better than plans hatched in downtown meeting rooms. Discovering what works is not the same from one neighbourhood to the next. And sustained hands-on work is hard. Those doing the lion’s share of the work need to be paid. That’s what taxes are for.

They don’t need to cost \$110,000 each, though.

The large net of PFR staff that’s needed here, to work with park users in neighbourhood parks, has already existed for years. Most of them are part-time staff – about a quarter of them in for the long haul, not high school students making spending-money. In addition there are the full-time former “recreationist” staff. Their jobs were converted within the last decade into scheduling, data entry, and compliance monitoring. Before being tied to meetings and Blackberrys and computer screens, these staff used to coach baseball and run hockey tourneys and set up mikes for community concerts. Those services are no longer available from staff, despite the steady budget increases.

If most of the existing staff were allowed to return to what the Plan calls “placemaking,” much less (or no) increase in the budget would be needed.

The Plan claims plentiful participation by Torontonians. But for both the Recreation and the Parks Plan, Torontonians were persuaded to answer narrowly pre-formulated questions in focus groups or frustrating online questionnaires, on a now-or-never schedule. Staff repackaged the responses and the Plan is now set to be re-administered to the citizens.

An oft-repeated theme of the Parks Plan is communication/information/education. It’s clear from the report that the communication is mostly from staff to park users. That also won’t work.

Our group, the Centre for Local Research into Public Space (CELOS) is working on keeping a record of PFR practices and the alternatives, by building an archive of “prezi” picture shows. The frame we’re using is *what works in parks as commons*, as opposed to parks as permissible real estate. We have about a dozen annotated picture shows posted on our websites. More are in the works: see [publiccommons.ca](http://publiccommons.ca).