

Notes for Recreation Service Plan deputation Nov.14 2012, by Jutta Mason, *Centre for Local Research into Public Space (CELOS)*

Since 2002 there has been a lot of Plan activity in the Park and Recreation Division. CELOS has a list of the different plans on our public commons website. In 2002 the plan was called: "Defining our vision, mission, and key priorities." In 2003 there was "Renewing our focus - Moving forward with Structural Change in Parks and Recreation." In March 2004, staff presented a draft Strategic Plan called "Framework for Aligning Strategic Goals and Service Levels with Organizational Review in the Parks and Recreation Division." After some commentary, that draft was rewritten as "Toward a Healthy, Active Future: Toronto Parks & Recreation Strategic Plan." Then came "ReActivate TO!" which involved a few months of intensive public consultation sessions. In July 2004, the city hired journalist Elaine Dewar to transform all those 2004 drafts into the massive "Our Common Grounds: The Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan." This document was followed in 2006 by the "Toronto Parks Renaissance Strategy."

Most of those plans seem to have fallen into the void; you can't even find them on the city website any more.

I just read the 80-page "Recreation Service Plan 2013 to 2017" last weekend, wondering as I read it, if this one would be a keeper. But I don't think so.

The plan seems, if anything, to have even more trouble than all those earlier plans, in keeping sight of the day-to-day activities and periodic celebrations that people look for in parks and recreation centres. The 27 Service Plan recommendations steer hard toward sounding scientific. Seven of the recommendations are about additional data collection, six are about more centralized and standardized training or permits or programming, four are about formulating more plans and strategic objectives, and four are about optimistic measuring of outcomes.

That all adds up to a big load of meetings. It's going to make an existing financial problem worse. An instance of the existing problem: in 2011, in Ward 18 where I live, it cost about \$1.6 million to operate the Wallace Emerson Community Recreation Centre. About \$600,000 of that went to pay the part-time recreation staff who run all the programs, and the centre took in almost exactly the same amount in fees. But then there was still almost \$1 million in additional costs, not covered by fees. Of that amount, \$473,000 went for the centre's caretakers and their supplies. The rest, I'm guessing, must have been for staff to do fee processing and data entry and compliance monitoring and making plans and carrying out management strategies.

Now the new Recreation Service Plan proposes to expand this way of proceeding. One example: the report says that youth outreach workers, called YOW's, are going to be centralized under their own supervisors, to work together on issues management, professional development, and

data collection. Then they'll bring a "core set of trainings" to local recreation centres, and they'll "test pilot" performance measuring tools on recreation centre staff. All this will take a lot of meeting time, and require an additional \$1.3 million over what is currently in the budget.

But there is no mention in the plan of addressing a current practical problem: right now there is not one hour of time available for youth to play sports in the Wallace Emerson gym for free. At any time when there is no paid permit or fee-based program in there, local staff are directed to lock the gym.

The Recreation Service Plan is silent on other practical problems as well. It doesn't mention the many public meetings about children's sports last spring, about parks and recreation fees going up while services are going down. Volunteers have had to take over almost all the children's sports programs that city recreation staff used to run (when they didn't have to go to so many meetings and move so many numbers around a computer screen) . Now volunteers not only coach the kids, they groom the fields too, mostly without any help from city staff. But the Service Plan says in a special sidebar: "Volunteers do not replace, displace, or substitute for staff, and are always supervised by a city employee." Not true.

There are too many instances of avoiding reality in this plan for it to work out well. But I am not suggesting that it should be altered. Not another version, please! The solution is to get away from these kinds of plans altogether, to find a way back into simple, day-to-day, locally grounded parks and recreation, charging fewer user-fees, using less money for central planning, and opening the door to more local ingenuity. I'm waiting for the day when the need for that simpler solution will become obvious, as it must, sooner or later. Then the conversation will become interesting.