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Defending Dufferin Grove

Families spend the night in the park to push back against cuts to rec programming

By BEN SPURR

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Families pitched tents in protest on the lawn of Dufferin Grove Friday night, to show their opposition to budget cuts and a city bureaucracy that they say is ruining unique recreation programming at the popular park.

Around 8 pm as the sun went down, dozens of parents and children came together on the grass to erect roughly 20 tents in which they planned to spend the night. A movie screen strung up between two trees played cartoons, and further afield families roasted marshmallows at Dufferin Grove's two fire pits.

As peaceful as the scene was, the sleepover is a frustrated response to what park users say is a worrying decline in cherished rec programming since 2011. A similar protest was also held last summer.

"People who use this park love the programs that are offered here," says Jonah Hindin, one of the sleep-in organizers. "Over the past two years, there've been lots of cuts that have affected the ability of staff to run the programs and the ability of those programs to continue."

In July, one of Dufferin Grove's weekly Friday night suppers had to be cancelled because there wasn't enough park staff to run it. Most weeks during the summer the event attracts hundreds of people who chow down on pay-what-you-can three-

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course meals of BBQ tofu, Cuban pulled pork sandwiches, and vegan blueberry brownies.

Families' access to the outdoor pizza oven has been cut down from two days a week to just one, and often the playground canteen doesn't open because of worker shortages. Parents complain of bare minimum staffing at Dufferin Grove's wading pool.

The understaffing problem stems from cuts to the parks department's budget this year that eliminated a handful of part-time positions. Workers who leave Dufferin Grove are reportedly no longer being replaced.

But aside from the staff cuts, the city has also moved to standardize operations in the park, which for years have been run differently than in other areas of the city.

CELOS, a community group that used to hire recreation workers at Dufferin Grove on a contract basis and then funnel them into official city positions, has seen its relationship with the city badly damaged. In accordance with official parks department policy, the group has been barred from helping recruit community-minded employees for the city, and no longer provides staff for the Friday suppers.

Staff at the wading pool now come from the city's aquatics division instead of from Dufferin Grove's roster of workers. Parents say there's been a noticeable decline in the quality of supervision their kids receive from the new employees.

"They don't care about the community as much... they don't know any of the kids. They're just kind of there, standing around and watching," says Mima Arakawa, who was camping out in the park with her young daughter Friday night. "Staff who have worked here in the past, they have more ties with the community and users."

Officials from the parks department did not return requests for comment for this story, but last month media reports indicated the city was planning to train backup workers to prevent any more programming from being cancelled. The effort likely wouldn't take effect until the summer is over however.

Meanwhile the 2013 budget process is warming up at City Hall, and Dufferin Grove supporters are hoping that instead of cutting costs trying to make their park conform to the standard model, city officials will recognize its successes and try to export them to other neighbourhoods.

"That's the reason why this park needs special care," says John Noyes, a teacher at U of T's German department, as he prepares his tent for the night. "It needs to serve as an example of what public space could be in a more functional Toronto."

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