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RECREATION

## **New metal ramps not a big hit with the city's BMXers**

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The Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Jun. 15 2012, 7:14 PM EDT

Last updated Friday, Jun. 15 2012, 8:17 PM EDT

The BMX bike looks like a toy beneath the six-foot frame of Isaiah Marshall. The 15-year-old throws the bike around as he takes air off the BMX ramps at Wallace Emerson Park at Dupont and Dufferin.

Off one lip, Isaiah spins the handlebars 360 degrees before landing. Off the next, the handlebars stay put while he kicks the bike around under his body. When it swings around, he drops his feet on the pedals, lands the bike and casually rolls to a stop.

Last weekend, the city's parks, forestry and recreation department unveiled new metal ramps worth more than \$140,000, at Wallace Emerson, replacing the wooden ones that have been there for six years.

The new ramps ride well, says Isaiah. Still, his name is one of 200 on a petition to bring some wooden ramps back to Wallace. The riders could move the old wooden ramps around to make their own sequences, says Isaiah. The metal ramps are too heavy for that, and they are only for intermediates, not beginners or the very advanced.

It's important to get Wallace right, say the riders here, because it's the only show in town. Apart from some rarely maintained dirt jumps at Bayview and Finch, the city's involvement with BMX riding in Toronto starts and stops here. It's the only place in Toronto where the city provides ramps and instructional programs (for more than 700 kids a summer), regardless of the fact that there are enough ramps, currently in storage and on offer for free to the city, to create four or five similar parks.

Mike Heaton, a 62-year-old retired teacher and born-again BMXer, has spearheaded the program at Wallace Emerson, on a largely volunteer basis. For the past six years, he's been building wooden ramps for the Toronto International Bicycle Show. The collection now fills six tractor-trailers. He's donated many of those ramps to the city. Some he still owns, but he's made it clear to the city that they are welcome to as many as they want. He'll even deliver them and set them up. Richard Ubbens, director of parks, says the wooden ramps were inspected and deemed to be unsafe, with repairs being prohibitively expensive.

"There were safety concerns with the wooden ramps, issues with their integrity. Hence, the metal ramps," says Mr. Ubbens. "The ramps that are there now is what we were able to do within our budget at this time."

The budget rationale doesn't hold up for Mr. Heaton, who says repairing wooden ramps is only a matter of re-sheeting the ramp surface. Even if there was structural work that needed to be done, building entirely new wooden ramps costs about a tenth of the metal ramps, which are from Missouri.

If the concern is about ongoing maintenance and liability, Mr. Heaton points out that there had never been a case of a wooden ramp failing, thanks to simple upkeep and inspection done by part-time city

staff who run the programs, with help from the riders themselves.

“Not only were the kids learning to bike, and how to fix their bikes, they were learning carpentry as well,” says the soft-spoken Mr. Heaton.

For its part, the city has to rely on “expert advice” and not amateur carpenters to ensure the safety of its equipment, according to Garth Armour, a supervisor of community programs for parks, forestry and recreation.

“We have to go through due diligence for the development of any facility in the city,” says Mr. Armour.

Mr. Ubbens says there are no plans to use wooden ramps at Wallace Emerson or anywhere else and that Mr. Heaton would have the chance to reassume ownership, or the city would dispose of them.

The idea of providing BMX ramps as constructive recreation is not entirely novel. Toronto Community Housing Corporation has had four of Mr. Heaton’s ramps in an apartment building parking lot on Tandridge Crescent in north Etobicoke for four years.

While on site inspecting the ramps Tuesday, Mr. Heaton conceded that the plywood sheeting had deteriorated on the five-year-old ramps that had been left out all winter, but insisted the frames were solid and that all four ramps could be refurbished for \$200 worth of plywood.

Charmaine Roye is a tenant representative for the community housing property. She says there are often eight or nine kids from the area riding there.

“Instead of hanging out at the front of the building, they can come here and have something positive for themselves to do, where they are practising and learning something,” says Ms. Roye.

Constable Scott Mills of the Toronto Police runs social media and youth outreach programs for the police and Crimestoppers. He’s been working with Mr. Heaton for five years and says BMX parks help kids to find a focus and a group of friends with a common, constructive interest.

“It’s a huge magnet for kids, but it’s much bigger than just BMX ramps, it’s about engaging kids, giving them something to do,” says Constable Mills.

Constable Mills points out that each year it is a scramble to find funding for the instructional program at Tandridge. He says it costs about \$12,000 to hire three or four kids from the area to run a summer program. So far, there’s no money for 2012.

“This is an activity that’s challenging and aimed at success. We need to run these in every neighbourhood we can,” says Constable Mills.

But before the programs can run, there need to be ramps. In 2009, a parks, forestry and recreation BMX Go Forward report recommended establishing additional BMX facilities.

The same report requested and received \$200,000 for the metal ramps at Wallace Emerson. That money has now been spent.

Local councillor Ana Bailao has received the petition asking for wooden beginner ramps at Wallace and has asked the parks department to supply them. It could be a defining moment for BMX in Toronto if the parks department maintains that the wooden ramps need to stay locked up for the riders' safety.

As long as the more expensive metal ramps are the only sanctioned style, it seems unlikely the city will soon see any more BMX parks to send kids skyward.

*Special to The Globe and Mail*