

Playing the 'park' game with city hall: No monkeying around! If you want new playground equipment, start fund-raising

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Mary Jacob wants to take her kids to their east-end neighborhood park before they're old enough to be asking her for the car keys.

But for now, she drives her one-, three- and five-year-old about four kilometres (2.4 miles) past Glen Echo Park to a park in a neighboring subdivision where the equipment is new and, more importantly, safe.

Glen Echo Park is just one in a burgeoning number of Hamilton's 159 city parks in need of modern playground equipment.

But Glen Echo's slide and monkey bars are made of steel so they're structurally sound, if not up to current Canadian Standards Association safety guidelines.

PEBBLE COATING

While the ground at Glen Echo isn't covered with the proper pebble coating to break a child's fall, it isn't going to be replaced any time soon.

"By today's standards, these are things that aren't considered safe," said Mrs. Jacob. "But I know as a kid I played on these structures."

So did Mike Serwatak. A father of three, he and Mrs. Jacob and other residents of their neighborhood recently decided it was time to bring their playground into the '90s.

But when they pressed city hall for help, they found that other city parks, whose wooden play equipment is in far worse shape than the steel gear in their park, are way ahead of them on the refurbishment schedule.

"We're looking at anything from three to 10 years," said Mr. Serwatak yesterday.

So, rather than wait for their number to come up at city hall, the Glen Echo Home and School Association has decided to raise \$50,000 for a new playground. It has raised \$11,540 since June and is going after corporate donations next.

"I certainly admire their pluck," said Ward 4 Alderman Dave Wilson.

"There just isn't the money available for everybody and the wooden structures will be replaced first."

Thanks to the economy, fewer people can afford to take their kids on trips, said Mr. Wilson.

So they want good, local parks to take them to instead. He said resident interest in local parks has ``exploded" in recent years.

Gage Park is one of eight city parks that will have its splintered and worn wooden play structures replaced by next spring with more durable plastic.

Nearby resident Tim Lee is a member of Friends of Gage Park, a group of 200 families intent on restoring its play area to the landmark status it deserves.

``We have assurances from the city's engineering department that the structure will hold up," said Mr. Lee yesterday.

``But it just doesn't look good and it doesn't leave any of us feeling very good. On any given day, there could be 50 kids on it."

Last December, the city's parks and recreation committee rejected a staff recommendation to rip out the wooden play structures at nine city parks immediately and replace them when the city budget permitted.

Instead, repairs were made to splintered beams and worn tires and planks were removed. But none was torn down.

``In some cases, slides were removed and in others, a tire swing was removed," said Werner Plessl, co-ordinator of park development and maintenance.

``We know there are some things that don't meet the (CSA) guidelines. But they may have been built 20 years ago. They're not dangerous."

Before new playground equipment is purchased by the city, a neighborhood association has to contribute \$5,500 to the overall \$45,000-\$50,000 price tag.

MONEY

Mr. Serwatak said he knows of some neighborhood groups that have been fundraising for three years and still don't have the money.

Regardless of where you are on the funding schedule, he urges residents to start their park funds pronto.

``Get off your backsides and start now," he said. ``In the next few years, it could be your turn."

PARK PLANS FOR 1996

City parks to be refurbished by next spring:

- Lifesaver Park

- Jackson Park
- Beulah Park
- Mapleside Park
- Carson Park
- Gage Park
- Earl Kitchener School park
- Richwill Park

Other city parks whose wooden play structures are slated for replacement:

- McCulloch Park
- Burton and Douglas
- Woodlands Park
- Parkdale School park
- Mahoney Park
- Cunningham School park
- Fairfield School park
- Fonthill Park
- Glendale Park
- Bobby Kerr Park
- Glencastle Park