



[Back to Privatize city-owned ski hills, staff urges](#)

## Privatize city-owned ski hills, staff urges

March 02, 2010

Paul Moloney

The city should get out of the business of running ski hills and campgrounds, says a staff proposal that would cut 360 part-time jobs and shrink the city's budget by \$700,000.

The city can't afford to keep running North York's Earl Bales and Etobicoke's Centennial Park ski hills, as well as Scarborough's Glen Rouge campground – all of which lose money – and privatizing the services might be the best way to keep them open, the proposal says.

Toronto already privatizes some services, such as golf courses, but Mayor David Miller has staunchly resisted calls from right-wing councillors to outsource more of the city's labour costs and privatize assets. It's already a central issue for many candidates vying for mayor.

In an extraordinarily tough budget year, it's a question of priorities, according to Councillor Paul Ainslie, vice-chair of the budget committee.

"I know ski hills are pretty labour-intensive," he said. "Is running a ski hill a priority for us? If we're losing money at it, can we go to the taxpayers and say we have to give up children's programs because we're running a money-losing ski hill?"

Under the proposal, the city would still own and maintain the ski hills and campground, but the services would be run by a private company in a fashion similar to the city's five 18-hole golf courses.

"They manage the public use of the facility, from people booking greens, to buying things from the pro shop, to taking lessons," explained city spokesman Rob Andrusevich.

If the idea is adopted, recreational skiers and parents with children in beginner lessons probably will have to pay more to use the city's slopes, says Councillor Joe Mihevc, vice-chair of council's budget committee.

The \$25 all-day ski pass at Earl Bales and Centennial parks is a "very, very cheap price," Mihevc said.

"Under a private operator, I can't see how rates wouldn't go up."

The Canadian Union of Public Employees was told that up to 360 unionized part-time recreation jobs could be at stake if the proposals go through.

The ski hills provide opportunity for people to learn to ski at an affordable price, said Ann Dembinski, president of CUPE Local 79, which represents the ski instructors.

"A lot of school groups go there," she said, adding that the city is being overly secretive about the situation.

"Our concern is, these are programs that should continue being delivered by the City of Toronto. We also think the public is being denied an opportunity to have a say on what services should remain

public."

The city believes labour costs would drop if an outside party took over, Ainslie said. He doesn't think rates would need to go up a lot.

"They're not Blue Mountain or Mont Ste. Anne," he said.

"They're for children to learn to ski on. If you're a kid who wants to learn to ski, I don't think you'll care who runs it as long as you still get to use it."

Sitting at the base of Centennial Park's ski hill in a lawn chair, basking in sunshine Monday afternoon while her children took part in their weekly lesson, Krystyna Jakubicki said she enjoys the hill's affordability and convenience.

"When you go to Hockley Valley or Blue Mountain, (the price) is over the top, especially for the kids," she said.

"This is still affordable, but if they made it more expensive, it would be hard to keep coming."

"I'd be disappointed if the prices went up," said Christina Semler, whose 6-year-old son and 4-year-old daughter are learning to ski at Centennial Park.

"But we'd still probably come for the convenience."

Council won't decide until mid-April, when the 2010 operating budget is approved, but Ainslie predicted the ski hills "will end up getting contracted out to somebody."

Toronto is under heavy pressure to cut costs, in part because it's not receiving any special aid from the province to balance the \$9.2 billion operating budget for 2010.

Mihevc said the cost of operating the ski hills and making snow should be seen as an investment in making recreation widely available.

"The goal of recreation is not to make a profit or even break even. It is to ensure recreation is accessible," he said.

"It's a deliberate policy to subsidize the cost of these programs."