

City adjusts as strike grinds into sixth day

Little picketing going on at city's 19 new drop-off points for garbage; warm weekend weather quells public's anger over labour dispute

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Toronto residents appear to have stepped back from the brink of panic and outrage over the six-day-old municipal workers' strike and settled in for the long haul.

Traffic and garbage flowed easily yesterday at many of the city's 19 new temporary dump sites, which were staffed by managers who helped people offload their waste. Few had pickets.

"I have heard outrage on the radio as I've been driving around. ... They should get a life," said Michael Craig, chair of the Sunnyside Community Association, a residents' group in south High Park, not far from one of the larger dumps in Sunnyside Park on the western waterfront.

"I think the kind of panic I'm hearing might be appropriate after two or three weeks," he said, adding the temporary garbage drop-offs – 11 of them located in city parks – are a "sensible solution to a messy problem."

Still, it's life interrupted for anyone with children in city-run daycares or the many camp and recreation programs that were to begin Monday. Weekend farmers' markets are cancelled at all civic centres. Parents whose children play in a soccer league at Christie Pits held a public meeting last night to fight the temporary dump in the park.

At Woodbine beach, lifeguards put up green swim flags, although no one has tested E. coli levels since June 20, two days before public health workers went on strike, along with the rest of Toronto's 24,000 indoor and outdoor employees.

"As long as people aren't coming out of the water in rashes, it's pretty safe," said Robert Cuthbert, 17, one of the nine lifeguards on the beach working for Toronto Police Lifeguard Services.

"We're taking our chances," added Matthew Brake, 31, who waded into the cold lake with his girlfriend's five-year-old daughter. "It's too hot outside to worry about."

High-school teacher Stephanie Donohue, 37, played with her three-year-old son in a playground sandbox at Ted Reeve Arena, not 10 metres from the fenced-off parking lot where a steady stream of cars pulled up to dump bags of waste.

"I'm surprised how little sympathy the public has had, and maybe that is a sign of the economic times," she said. "We seem to be real complainers and it's all very negative ... I think people need to step back and figure out what the issues are."

The issues include city demands for concessions on wages, seniority rights and a sick-leave program that allows workers to bank, carry over and cash out up to six months of sick pay upon retirement. The city wants a short-term disability plan instead with no carryover provisions.

On wages, the city has asked for restraint as the recession puts pressure on its operating budget via increased welfare cases and lower tax revenues. The unions want pay increases similar to the 3-per-cent annual hike given recently to transit, police and parking-authority employees.

Talks between the city and Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 416, representing 6,200 outdoor workers, and Local 79, representing 18,000 indoor employees, were scheduled to continue today. A city spokesman said there would be no official updates over the weekend unless something significant happened.

"There's no more indication that the city wants to get a settlement than there was yesterday," said CUPE spokeswoman Pat Daley.