

North York swings into action on issue of playground safety; [ZONE Edition]

by Peter Krivel

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North York wants the Ontario government to make the province's playgrounds the safest in North America.

Management committee has asked North York council to pass a motion instructing the province to change the Ontario Building Code so that all playgrounds - public and private - conform to Canadian Standards Association guidelines.

Until that happens, North York's parks and recreation department and board of education will be encouraged to comply voluntarily with the CSA standards.

"I want to have the safest playgrounds in the world and I find that playgrounds are not safe right now," said North York Mayor Mel Lastman.

Lastman claims he doesn't use playgrounds, but he takes his grandchildren to them.

"And I never realized the accidents that are happening," he said. "I never knew they were so unsafe until I started looking into them."

North York building commissioner Yaman Uzumeri says if the building code is changed by the NDP government, the province's playgrounds would be the safest on the continent.

"In doing my report, I tried to take a global perspective and to my complete surprise I found a complete vacuum in North America," he said. "The only place I know that was trying (to deal with playgrounds) was California, which introduced a bill year and a half ago to deal with this subject. And about six months ago, it (the bill) was just sitting there."

Few statistics are available on playground injuries, but a 1988 edition of Pediatric Emergency Care magazine in the U.S. reported "playground equipment is the sixth of the top 100 hazardous consumer products."

According to the building commissioner's report, the major causes of accidents include:

- * Children being pushed from unprotected open decks or down slides.
- * Children becoming trapped in parts of the equipment.
- * Children being struck by swings or other moving objects.
- * Children getting cuts from splinters, worn parts, sharp edges, glass in the playing field or getting pinched by moving parts.
- * Equipment parts failing through normal wear.

In 1990, Canada's first guideline on children's playgrounds and equipment was published by the Canadian Standards Association (CSA).

The CSA standards include:

- * Selecting proper energy absorbing surface material under and around the equipment.
- * Eliminating any possibility of a child becoming trapped.
- * Installing guardrails on platforms.
- * Inspection and maintenance of equipment at least semi- annually.

* Erecting signs recommending equipment for different age groups.

The parks department will also establish a test playground that will fully conform with CSA standards.

The guidelines will also be made available to private owners of playgrounds.

David Percival, assistant supervisor of sight design for the board of education doesn't see any problems complying with the guidelines.

"All our units are set on a resilient or forgiving base. We're in fairly good shape with that aspect," he said.

"Since the CSA guideline came out in 1990, we have been replacing the units according to the need. We have been replacing approximately seven units each year and that program has been going for three years now."

And according to Percival, maintenance workers for a number have been locating and removing entrapment points as they find them.