

# Dissent rains on Noah's Ark playgrounds

Biblical content deemed improper in public parks, though abrupt removal not likely to happen

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The story of Noah's Ark featured on playground equipment in two west-end Toronto parks has sparked debate over whether religious material belongs on public property.

City officials say the play structures that feature the story of 40 days and 40 nights of rain, along with pictures of animals in male-female pairings, have been in Christie Pits Park and McCormick Playground for at least 10 years, possibly 15 years.



TARA WALTON /TORONTO STAR

On a rainy day June Zhang, 4, plays at McCormick playground amid the Noah's Ark storytelling on May 27, 2009.

Last month, a resident complained about the display, and now officials say it should be removed – but only when the play equipment has worn out.

"It bothered me, this religious story in our public park," said Denny Alexander, father of 2-year-old Dominic and 1-year-old Oscar.

He wrote to city officials, but received little explanation from parks officials.

"I've noticed that people have scratched out (the word) 'God' in them. So this has probably bothered some other people as well," Alexander said.

"We're supposed to be the most multicultural city in the world and it doesn't seem terribly inclusive."

Monica Gupta, chair of the 300-member Friends of Christie Pits Park formed about 18 months ago, believes the equipment should be yanked.

However, she said, unless they have young children, park goers are unlikely to even notice it, noting the lag time between installation and the original complaint.

"We totally support the idea that it should be a secular playground with no religious inferences," Gupta said. "It's a city park."

Councillor Adam Giambrone, who represents the Dundas and Dufferin Sts. area where the McCormick playground is located, agrees displaying the Noah's Ark story – which appears in some form in both the Bible and the Qur'an – goes against the city's general policy of inclusiveness.

"Toronto's motto is Diversity our Strength. City policies across the board look to reflect our multicultural city. One way of doing that is not focusing on any specific cultural or religious tradition," Giambrone said.

But he does not want to replace the equipment until it's worn out, which could take another 10 years.

"I don't support the ripping out of playground structures, especially as we are in constrained budget times, and I don't think anybody is calling for them to be immediately ripped out," he said.

Giambrone said city policy has evolved since the playground items with biblical content were installed.

"They're something that would not be put in today," he said. "They are inappropriate."

*With files from the City Hall bureau*