

Parks win with donor largesse

Corporations, individuals giving triple the amount of cash over last year

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Despite the recession, Toronto's parks, forestry and recreation division has received a record number of dollars in corporate partnerships and donations this year, including its first \$1 million gift from a private citizen.

Some \$3 million has come in, triple last year, with three months still to go.

That money will help with a near-\$1 billion backlog of repairs needed to update arenas and rinks, pools, parks, tennis and basketball courts and fountains. Like the Toronto public school board, which is struggling to keep its pools open, the division has sought donations and partnerships to pay the bills, some of which date before amalgamation.

"What this work does is ease the burden on the taxpayer," says Rob Richardson, the department's manager of partnership development. "It's just not possible ... to expect tax dollars to address all those repairs, so we have to be actively pursuing other avenues to help beautify our parks and playgrounds and sports facilities."

The city has 1,500 parks and more than 350 recreation facilities.

Richardson says the increase in donations is most likely the result of a greater corporate emphasis on social responsibility.

Goldie Feldman's \$1 million bequest will be used to build an accessible water-themed playground and sensory garden in Earl Bales Park. Feldman, 81, said she made the donation in memory of her late parents, who lived in the area. The park opens next July.

In 2010, \$750,000 in individual and corporate donations will be used to build Neshama Playground, a play area in Oriole Park, in the Yonge and Davisville area.

Construction on a new teaching kitchen beside the children's garden in High Park will begin in 2011, paid for in part by a local community college, using cabinets donated by a local firm.

Earlier this month, ING Direct put up \$300,000 to begin construction on McCleary Playground – the city's first natural-materials playground, at Queen St. E. and McGee St.

The ingenious play structures include a balance beam strung between boulders, an upside-down tree, a couch carved out of a massive tree root and a music area.

What do corporate donors get in return? The rules prohibit naming parks after corporations, but a sign is often erected to acknowledge the company's partnership with the municipality.