

Porter: Playground politics are unfair

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Zuhayr Siddiqui, left, plays on a log in R. V. Burgess Park, which lacks playground equipment, as his mother, Dana Tabassum, and brother, Zain, look on. TIM FRASER FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Thorncliffe Park has more little kids than any other neighbourhood in the city. Its elementary school is bursting with six times the students enrolled at most junior schools. A whole wing is dedicated to kindergarten kids — 600 in total.

So you'd think the neighbourhood's main park would be flush with jungle gyms, slides, sand pits — things little kids love to play on, while their sleep-deprived parents sip coffee on nearby benches and gaze foggily into the middle distance.

I call them mental health machines.

Not so.

The playground was ripped out in 2006 after it was deemed unsafe by city inspectors.

Its slated date for replacement?

2015.

Nine years, no playground. How can this be?

“I think no one complained. In Leaside, people are very well connected. If something is taken out, people would be on the phone,” says Amy Sutherland, pulling out pictures of new playground equipment in other parks around her ward, which includes both tony Leaside and equally rundown, but official “priority neighbourhood,” Flemington Park.

“We're like the stepson. We never feel we're part of the family,” says Asiya Sohail, one of six moms sitting with me on two benches beside a dusty patch where the R.V. Burgess playground once stood. None of them ever saw it, which means none of their children has ever played on anything but the swings here and the nearby school's playground, when they're lucky.

“It's not allowed during school hours,” says Tabassum Dana, watching her 4-year-old son pick up garbage around the grass.

These women are the members of the amazing Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee.

They all live in the surrounding towering apartment buildings that symbolize Thorncliffe. The buildings swell with underemployed newcomers from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India. All those engineers driving cabs around town? Most are from Thorncliffe.

The median income rate is 40 per cent below the city average. People here are educated, but poor.

Every room in those towers has two people in it — double the city average, according to a recent report. And none of them has a backyard. That's what R.V. Burgess Park is for them.

They're not the crowd, however, to build their own \$120,000 playground or host fundraisers for city council candidates.

But they've gotten organized. And this being an election year and all, they've figured some things out.

The Women's Committee formed two years ago to hold community events that make their little rundown park seem less forlorn.

They host plays, science experiments, magic shows, pizza nights.

They want to see some changes. Item No. 1: playground.

Earlier this year, they complained to the city's ombudsman office, asking whether a nine-year delay in playground replacement was typical in the city.

The recent response: A solution is coming soon.

I made some phone calls to the city, and got some opaque explanations.

The local parks supervisor, Roger Macklin, said he wasn't in charge in 2006, but he suspects the equipment was yanked far ahead of schedule — hence the delayed replacement date.

“Usually when they take a playground out, they have something ready to replace it with,” he said.

To move up the scheduled replacement date would be like queue-jumping in the U.S. customs line at the airport — everyone behind you gets pissed off. “It would mean someone else wouldn't be getting their new equipment,” he said.

Area city councillor John Parker said he was shocked after being elected in late 2006 to discover the situation.

“There's a remarkable number of kids in this area. That's well-documented. It's not anything that should be a surprise to anyone,” he said.

But the city just finished an \$8-million expansion of the library and community centre next to the park. He couldn't very well ask city council for more money, he said.

“Thorncliffe got its big commitment in 2006.”

The man in charge of building new playgrounds for the city said he didn't even know until recently the playground had been yanked.

So, did little R.V. Burgess just fall through the cracks?

Perhaps the only lesson here is when your park playground is suddenly yanked, shout loudly — in Urdu, Pashtun, Cantonese ...

Otherwise, your kids will play with pebbles.

The solution?

R.V. Burgess will inherit the playground from nearby Leaside Park which has landed a whopping \$200,000 in economic stimulus cash.

It should arrive in six weeks, I'm told — nicely before the election.

That makes Sutherland happy, but confused.

“It's nice,” she says, “but it doesn't make much sense. That playground is relatively new.”

The mandate of the ombudsman's office is to “investigate complaints of administrative unfairness.”

Even with their new second-hand playground, I think R.V. Burgess fits that bill. Don't you?

Catherine Porter usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

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