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Catherine Porter

As Dawn Vrablic sprinkles corn meal on her board and begins to roll the dough, people are wandering down the path into the heart of Christie Pits park. Pushing strollers, stepping off bicycles, unfolding their blankets, settling down.

That's what happens when you stoke up a community bake oven. Ask anyone who runs them. Clockwork.

"It's pizza in the park," Vrablic says. "Simple formula."

Tonight is this year's second Friday pizza night in Christie Pits park. Organizers thought they wouldn't take place this year because of the city's new permit requirements. Parks staff say it was a misunderstanding and no one ever told organizers they'd have to pay. Hmmmm . . . Anyway, who cares as long as the wood is burning, the bricks are hot and the crowds are descending to share neighbourly gossip and sprinkle cheese over dough together. Hooray for bake ovens!

This is what Julia Graham envisioned for her South Etobicoke neighbourhood of Stonegate. There's a little park called Bell Manor that's at the centre of dozens of low-rise apartment buildings. Many people living inside them are poor and lonely. A bake oven would bring them out of their apartments and get them cooking and eating together, the community health worker figured.

Good thought. She took action: finding volunteers who loved to bake in wood ovens; surveying residents who were keen; getting the local church group on board; writing a formal proposal; lining up a private funder who would pay for the whole thing. Together with staff, she even dragged bricks and iron rods to a spot in the park, and built a temporary oven to bake pizzas, to much fanfare.

"We had 50 to 75 people come out to eat," she says. "It's true — if you build it, they will come."

All she needed now was the city's approval.

Parks staff told her to wait a few months. They were on the verge of finishing a bake oven policy.

That was 2½ years ago, and there is still no policy.

What's the holdup?

"Bake ovens are a little more complex than a community garden," says Diane Stevenson, manager of the newly created policy and strategic planning branch of Parks, Forestry and Recreation.

There's a reason there are less than a half-dozen bake ovens in parks around the city. They're like rose gardens — finicky and demanding. They hours to heat up and have to be constantly fed with expensive wood. They require love and patience from both the community and city recreation staff.

But if a park community like Bell Manor's is keen, why won't city join them?

"It seems crazy," says Ayal Dinner, a baker who approached the city two years ago about building an oven in Sorauren Park, alongside the new farmers' market he helped start.

"What's the point of parks and recreation spaces? To get people using them and enjoying each other. Bake ovens are part of that."

I got my hands on the city's draft bake oven policy, dated February 2009. It reads like a prisoner's manual — don't do this, pay for that, get insurance, and we can take away all privileges at any time.

The parks department's new policy branch has scrapped that. That's the good news. It's taking a "fresh approach" to urban agriculture,

Stevenson says.

Does that mean the people of Stonegate will be eating pizzas on Friday nights, just like the happy folk in Christie Pits?

Not any time soon. Her department is just starting consultations about bake ovens. And then it has to do consultations around farmers' markets and community gardens and allotment gardens too. They'll all go into one giant urban agriculture policy document in . . . spring 2011 maybe.

It makes you shake your head, doesn't it?

All this, for something as simple as a warm, gooey pizza.

"They should just do it under the radar," says Monica Gupta, cutting a hot pizza into slices beside the smoking oven in Christie Pits. "Until they figure all this out, we're going to miss out on so many community events."

I couldn't agree more.

Catherine Porter usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Email: cporter@thestar.ca