

CITY HALL: City staff seeking shady spots

Audit will examine sun safety in playgrounds and water parks

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City staff will be hitting the road looking for a shady spot this summer, as the Toronto parks department moves on to the next phase of its shade audit in playgrounds and water parks.

The city decided to embark on the audit of shade in city parks at the urging of the Toronto Board of Health, over concerns that children at play in Toronto were too exposed to potentially carcinogenic sunlight.

The project kicked off in March - and heading into summer, parks staff told the city's parks and environment committee that they're ready to start the audit.

According to Alex Shevchuk, Toronto's acting supervisor of Area Landscape and Planning Initiatives, this month he and his staff are going through a long list of potential sites to find eight - four water parks and four playgrounds - that will go under the microscope to see if there's adequate shade.

"We're focussing on water play and playgrounds because they involve young children, often not wearing much clothing, so there's a higher risk of ultraviolet radiation," said Shevchuk. "So we'll go to the sites, look at them carefully and see who is using them - what time of day they're there - if there are any trees."

If there aren't trees, Shevchuk said the issue won't be solved immediately with plantings - it takes 20 to 30 years for a tree to grow into a significant source of shade.

But he said there are a variety of measures the city can take - from setting up gazebo-like structures or solid roof structures, to simply stretching a "sail" over the area to block out the more harmful rays of the sun.

"Those are more and more being used as good solutions around the world," he said. "You can really place them where you need them."

The city is looking to Australia as a model for dealing with shade issues - although Shevchuk acknowledged that Torontonians aren't facing the same degree of health risks as the sun-loving, fair-skinned Australians.

And he promised the shade solutions - which will likely be implemented in the eight parks next summer - won't be overkill.

"I don't think we can even begin to dream of covering the whole city - and why would we ever want to do that? - but there's some balance between getting your vitamin D and enjoying the sun, and then swinging over into areas where you're developing a skin cancer risk," he said.