

FRIENDS OF SAM SMITH DEPUTATION TO SKATEBOARD FACILITY SELECTION COMMITTEE, AUGUST 24TH, 2006

Delivered by Terry Smith, spokesperson

Friends of Sam Smith are

- Many and we have a supporter distribution list of nearly five hundred. All of us have family, friends and neighbors, so we are in fact more than that.
- We are the many folks who wrote the hundreds of, sincere and heartfelt, mostly unanswered, e-mails and letters to our councilor, our mayor, our MPP, our Minister of the Environment that were available but were not and should have been included in this large but incomplete background package
- Friends of Sam Smith are local residents and park users who have enjoyed the quiet, the solitude and natural beauty of our park for years and who want it left undisturbed to mature into its full potential.
- We walk, jog, bike, fish, bird, photograph, sketch, watch wildlife, daydream, do tai chi, think, picnic, read, write poetry, introduce our children to nature, sunbathe, and snooze in the park. Passive, therapeutic, recreational use of the park as was intended in the original plan.
- Friends of Sam Smith are families who care for the Lakeshore community, especially the Lakeshore waterfront. We get in the mud on park clean up days and lovingly remove the litter, the bottles and the rusted shopping carts.
- We are emotionally attached to the park in a deep way. We are in awe of its breathtaking beauty and get busy and heated when our sacred place is threatened.
- We are folks who, when most of us belatedly and unexpectedly find out that a half million dollar, huge, regional skateboard facility might be plopped right next to our beloved woods, wetlands and creeks, respond with bewilderment and anger that such an obvious lack of fit would even be considered. Many of us have seen large skateboard facilities on our travels and, while marveling at the goings-on, know they are never ever, never ever built in places like this. We cannot for the life of us understand why fifteen hundred square meters of concrete, with its urban/industrial, high decibel, high-energy, high intensity activity might end up here!
- Friends of Sam Smith worry that, because of the noise, the clattering and the banging from a well used district skatepark, the wild things that make our park their home will have to move over yet again and to where? as green space ever diminishes, replaced by cement.
- We anxiously wait for spring to see if our swans will raise a brood again and marvel that southern egrets and mocking birds are tentatively making a foothold in our northern sanctuary. We eagerly anticipate the magic of the incoming and outgoing migratory invasion of woodland warblers along North Creek, many threatened because of habitat loss. They are like jewels in the trees and shrubs, trees and shrubs that are literally just meters away from the proposed skateboard site, the same spot where monarch butterflies gather in large numbers on the spruce boughs before their flight south over the lake. We

watch the evening activity of the beavers in the wetland pond and some of us have even surprised a deer in the woods. We fear the impact such a facility would have on all of this wonder.

- We are citizens of Toronto who have more than just a limited Coney Island and condo vision of our precious waterfront, who recognize the enormous value that local, natural sanctuaries offer to frazzled city dwellers. We worry that this could be the thin edge of the wedge. Coveted concession stand privileges next to the proposed skatepark are already being lusted after. What next? A bar, amusement park, music, more bars and restaurants!
- Friends of Sam Smith are residents, constituents, voters, community supporters and users of local business who understand that "revitalizing the Lakeshore" comes in many colors and is not just limited to business opportunities.
- We are a community that sees the changing face and future of the Lakeshore, that sees all the young professional families moving into this area, the creative talent pool that this community and this city needs, according to our Mayor. These families say over and over again that they are here because of what our peaceful waterfront oasis adds to their lifestyle. Imagine the future, a Greater Toronto, an urban sprawl that stretches from St. Catherine's to Pickering to Barrie without the relief of accessible, peaceful green space by the water to recharge our batteries.
- Friends of Sam Smith includes Dan Brookes, a 16 year resident of the area, a Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Toronto and a member of the National Academy of Science, whose professional opinion is that the environmental assessment done by the Parks Board is seriously deficient and does not even satisfy its own terms of reference with regard to buffer zones like the meadow south of the Power House, the proposed site. According to Dan, the destruction of buffer zones can set back the development of a self-sustaining wetland area substantially. You've all got to pick up the brochure with Dan's wonderful explanation of the park's evolutionary journey, where he likens the park's ecosystem in present time to a fragile child, full of life and energy and possibilities for the future. We wonder why this man's impeccable expertise was never sought.
- Friends of Sam Smith also includes teachers imaginative enough to wonder why the Power House cannot be used by both school boards as an outdoor education center – so many of these opportunities have been lost to our children in recent years. I used to bring my special ed students here every spring on a nature ramble, troubled kids from Regent Park. I would watch their hard faces melt as they held a garter snake in their hand or hear their excited wows as a hidden heron took wing right beside them. We have read and can relate to professional journals describing something called Nature Deficit Disorder, a condition increasingly seen in aggressive, stressed-out, anxious city kids who have lost their connection to the natural world, harmed in body and soul by our culture's sterile rejection of nature. We worry about that.
- We feel bad for local skateboarders who have been presented with a concept design that is timid, watered down and not what they want nor what they were promised. Money that should have been set aside for bowls, rails, steps and

ramps has instead gone to landscaping so that this ill-advised project will supposedly fit into its badly chosen surroundings. No one, skateboarders or nature lovers, ends up being even remotely satisfied with this. We believe that serious skateboarders have their own distinct, decent culture, one that is civil and desires to operate in harmony with the community.

- And, most importantly, Friends of Sam Smith are passionately committed to there being a first class, safe, skateboard facility in our community

Friends of Sam Smith are not

- “Against kids” as our councilor has sometimes labeled us. We have children who we know need challenging physical activity and quality facilities but we know also that they need undisturbed natural areas as playgrounds for exploration, wonderment and sensitization to the natural world in order to achieve healthy development
- Friends of Sam Smith are not people who are willing to passively accept a process that has been flawed from the beginning because of its lack of transparency and proper public consultation, its unnecessary rush, it’s limited scope in imagining other more appropriate locations, the inconsistent science in the biologist’s report and the outdated criteria used for the site selection. Not to mention the fact that the opinion is widely held amongst us that this site had been chosen long before the only public meeting, long before City staff came up with their faulty postscripted paperwork to support it. We have become mistrustful.
- We are not impressed by the site evaluation used by City staff to assess various locations for the skateboard facility. We are surprised, with so much emphasis on the environment these days, that the same weighting was actually given to things like storage and parking as was given to impact on natural areas. And even when these suspect evaluation criteria were tallied, Sam Smith only squeaked slightly ahead of its closest competitor by a small margin. We are astounded that the enormous up swell of public opinion from residents against Sam Smith as the site would not more than make up for this, especially considering that the City’s Parks staff stated in the site selection report, and I quote, “scores need to be considered with public input and other information”. Well, they’ve certainly received our input now!
- Friends of Sam Smith are not happy at the lack of vision shown here. With its exclusive emphasis, come hell or high water, on this one extremely controversial and inappropriate site, more imaginative solutions may have been ruled out, solutions that could have made everyone happy and not ended up creating winners and losers in our community. Time and opportunity have been lost.
- We are puzzled as to why our councilor changed his mind. The Etobicoke Guardian quoted councilor candidate Mark Grimes as stating at an all-candidates’ meeting during the 2003 municipal campaign that he “would advocate putting a skateboard park on the vacant industrial lands in our community”. We do not understand why a commonly accepted, levelheaded and realistic idea like that has morphed into one that nobody can make sense

of, one that makes the skeptical ones amongst us think that we might not have been given the whole picture.

- We are not people who have a short memory. We are not forgetful of the excitement generated in our community when this park was first established, this jewel that we thought would be the City and ours forever. We are baffled and angry that so much of our tax money, many millions in fact, was spent by the Conservation Authority to naturalize what started out as nothing more than building-site lake fill. Over the years we watched the trucks bringing out debris and we marveled at the miraculous regeneration and naturalization that followed. We feel strongly that this misguided proposal will put our wisely spent financial outlay in jeopardy, that it will waste what we have already invested at great cost.
- We are not impressed by City Council's decision to keep their hands off this matter, a matter that involves Toronto's Green Plan and our city's waterfront as a whole. Something like this should not have been left to only a local councilor, a junior councilor in his first term, to relentlessly force a pet project through against widespread opposition, like the ward bosses of old. We are not sure why our so-called green mayor remained silent and never stepped in.
- We are not filled with enthusiasm at what appears to be the growing demise of local democracy at City Hall with its unwieldy, rubberstamping council and its reluctance to embrace reasoned, intelligent input from on-site community groups. Neighborhood activist groups all over the city complain about this same problem.
- We are not in any way assured that the currently proposed location, tucked out of the way in isolated wooded parkland, without supervision, lights or telephone, watched over only by occasional users of the park access road and the rare passes by overworked local police looking after a high crime area like ours would even come close to providing the safety and guardianship, passive and direct, that we want our children and youth to have. We have all seen the uncontrolled vandalism already present in the park, the burnt-out wildlife viewing platform, the destroyed interpretative signs, the graffiti and tags, the broken beer bottles, the litter, the Power House washrooms perpetually closed because of vandalism – we cannot see any of that getting better if this goes through.
- Friends of Sam Smith are not NIMBY's. We want that first class facility built in our front yard, in an open, visible area, where these things are always built, no matter in whatever jurisdiction you wish to look. For example, the comparable skateboard facility they are building near Asbridges Bay is on open land right at the intersection of two busy main roads, Lakeshore Blvd. East and Coxwell. Incidentally, that project went through a proper public consultation. It was comprehensive and unrushed; it considered and valued public input, did not rely on the petition game and, guess what was the result – widespread community and skateboarder approval.
- And lastly, we are not happy about what has been poor and time-delaying dialogue between the local skateboarding community and the planners. We feel

bad that the skateboarders may have to wait even longer for what they were promised.

So, because of who we are and because of what we are not, Friends of Sam Smith emphatically says no to there being a regional skateboard facility at the proposed location in Sam Smith Park and urge the Selection Committee to proceed as fast as it can to get the promised facility built without delay in a location and with a design that meets the needs of everyone in our community.