

A Place for Nature, a Place for Youth:
A Report on the Skateboard Park Proposal for
Etobicoke's Colonel Sam Smith Park

Advice and recommendations submitted to:

Councillor Mark Grimes
(Etobicoke Lakeshore)

by

Councillor Glenn De Baeremaeker
(Scarborough Centre)

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Advice and Recommendations

Question #1 - Should the skateboard park be built in the proposed location within Colonel Sam Smith Park (adjacent to the “Power House”)?

My Answer - No, my recommendation to Councillor Grimes is that the skateboard park should not be located at the proposed location within Colonel Sam Smith Park because of ecological, historical and recreational reasons.

Ecological Reasons

Biologically speaking, the city is proposing to build on a wetland complex. While not technically a wetland (but rather a meadow), the site under review is an important part of a wetland complex that supports a magnificent web of life. The city should not harm this wetland complex. On the contrary, the city should protect and restore the fragile biodiversity of this site. Let there be no mistake, the wetland will suffer direct harm if the biomass of this meadow is replaced with a concrete skateboard pad.

Just as a human being is made up of many different parts (legs, arms, feet, head, etc.), wetland complexes are also made up of many distinct, but connected, parts (ponds, riparian zones, discharge areas, meadows, etc.). Just as the loss of a foot will permanently injure and weaken a human, the loss of a meadow will permanently injure and weaken a wetland complex. Whether the harm done to a person or wetland is lethal depends on many things, but there can be no doubt that damaging or removing one part causes harm to the larger organism.

Much of the natural area of Colonel Sam Smith Park was created from rubble – literally. From these ashes and urban castoffs, Mother Nature – with a lot of help from the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority – has reclaimed a small foothold on the north shore of Lake Ontario. Many of the creatures inhabiting this man-made nature sanctuary are rare in our city. Their life-line is extremely thin and the dangers to their continued existence in this location are extremely high. For the sake of a healthy ecosystem and human enjoyment, everything that can be done to ensure the survival of this natural community should be done.

The highest and best use of that small plot of land is as a natural area (such as a butterfly meadow) that will add to the biological diversity and “biomass” of the wetland complex and the park. The small meadow that would be lost to the skateboard pad is part of a larger riparian (or streamside) corridor, that provides food, habitat and protection to the many species of birds and animals that call the park home. If anything, the park desperately needs more habitat – more creeks, more wetlands, more trees, more meadows, more wildlife corridors – not more concrete, bricks or asphalt.

Future human activity in this park should seek to fulfill the original 1996 mandate of the park, which includes restoring ecological integrity to the area. A skateboard park, while a worthwhile project – can be located on numerous other sites, such as near a major streetcar route, busy school or recreation centre. Not so for the wildlife that live in the park; nature has few alternatives. The grebes and blue herons that have found sanctuary in the park cannot relocate to a busy intersection or schoolyard.

Councillor Grimes asked me to review this project because of his concerns that there might be some environmental damage. I have given him an answer. The answer is “Yes, there will be harm; there will be environmental damage.” It is now up to Councillor Grimes to decide whether or not the damage to the wetland complex is acceptable to him and his community.

Historical Reasons

In 1996, after an extraordinary citizen effort to protect this area, local residents thought they had signed a sacred trust with their local government (then, the City of Etobicoke) that would ensure the perpetual care of this precious green space. The vision and goals for the newly created park were set out in the Lakeshore Grounds Master Design and Implementation Plan.

The City of Etobicoke (and later, the megacity), while doing many great things within the park, has failed to live up to the spirit and intent of that original plan. Ten years ago, the city promised to create a public advisory group to guide the park’s evolution; no such group exists. Over ten years ago, citizens called for the re-establishment of the North Creek system in its entirety through the park; no such restoration was ever done. In fact, much of the North Creek remains buried in a sewer.

Citizens fought to save this area from being bulldozed and to protect it as a peaceful sanctuary for nature and passive recreational use. A large skateboard facility is rightly seen as an improper intrusion into this green oasis, and as a proposal that runs contrary to the spirit and intent of the original implementation plan given to this area in 1996. The gentle sounds and green beauty of the park would be replaced by the clattering of skateboards, the shouts of large groups of people and the grey of cement. Given the less than ideal follow-through on the park plan and the current proposal to pave a piece of the park over, it is therefore not surprising that many residents are angered by the proposal to put a skateboard facility in this area.

As a new city councillor, Mark Grimes has an opportunity to right past wrongs and to move forward in partnership with the local community and finally deliver what residents were promised for this park some ten years ago.

Councillor Grimes did not create this mess, but he can – if he chooses – fix it.

Recommendations

Based on a review of reports, documents and letters and the input of many people, I am recommending that Councillor Grimes consider undertaking the following:

- 1) fulfill the former City of Etobicoke’s original 1996 promise to create a citizens’ advisory group to help protect and restore Colonel Sam Smith Park to its full ecological potential
- 2) assist in the raising of approximately \$100,000 to undertake extensive ecological restoration projects within the park, including:
 - extensive tree planting that will double the tree canopy of the current park and assist Toronto in achieving its goal of increasing tree cover across the city
 - restoration of the North Creek with the goal of re-establishing a clean, year-round base flow and populations of both invertebrates and fish
 - increasing the width of riparian buffers along the North Creek and the park’s sensitive wetlands

- re-establish the ground cover that has been removed just north of the Power House community centre
- build a ice-skating path that improves public access to the area while not removing significant biomass. (Note: A ribbon of an ice-skating path winding through the area should not have the negative impact of a huge skateboard park, but great care and sensitivity must be taken to limit any possible damage from construction activities and an extensive replanting and restoration plan should be part of the ice-skating plan)
- create a young naturalists' program (based out of the Power House) to introduce urban youth to the miracles of nature hidden throughout Sam Smith Park

Recreational Reasons:

Ecological and historical reasons alone are enough to reject Colonel Sam Smith Park as the location for the skateboard facility, but skateboarders provide another powerful reason not to build the skateboard park in this location: a recreational reason. Simply put, the skateboarders with whom I spoke do not want the skateboard park built there. Their objections were as follows:

1) The park has too many leaves, which can lead to skateboard injuries. One simple leaf left on a cement surface can cause a boarder's wheels to freeze, causing the boarder to go crashing through the air, which can lead to major injury. To minimize injuries, skateboarders want a "leaf free zone" around their facility. While this will prove a challenge at any location, building a skateboard facility adjacent to mature trees, woodlots and wetlands is not good for skateboarders.

2) There are no social amenities in this park. Skateboarders tend to be a young, social group of people who enjoy "hanging out" with friends after they finish skateboarding. The skateboarders with whom I talked would prefer restaurants, stores and urban life around them; not crickets and birds. While senior citizens, dog walkers, joggers, birdwatchers, and families out for a stroll might find the park teeming with life, to a young skateboarder, the park is a "dead zone." The skateboarders want an exciting, vibrant, social place to hang out with friends; a quiet nature park is not the right match for them.

3) The site is too isolated. The skateboarders I talked to did not want to be located at the end of a very long dead-end street where they cannot "see and be seen." They did not want to be isolated in the back woods; instead, they wanted a highly visible site that would attract more youth to the location. Being hidden away from view where no one will ever see your great moves is not what skateboarding is all about.

Councillor Grimes has had great success in obtaining significant amounts of money to help the youth in his community; a more prominent and sports-based location for the skateboard park will ensure that the maximum number of youth will benefit from this investment.

Question #2 - If the skateboard park should not be built in Colonel Sam Smith Park, where should it be built?

Answer – I don't know. While a number of locations have been recommended by individuals, my recommendation to Councillor Grimes is to consider other possible locations in Etobicoke-Lakeshore, in consultation with the community.

Conclusion

The people of Etobicoke Lakeshore live in a beautiful and vibrant community. They now have a wonderful opportunity to enhance that community by protecting and nurturing the peace and tranquility of Colonel Sam Smith Park, and, in an appropriate location, creating a thrilling skateboarding experience that will provide countless hours of fun and exercise for the next generation of athletes and community leaders.

I would like to tip my hat to and thank Councillor Mark Grimes for having the wisdom to call for a review of this project when his residents told him our city's plan was not acceptable. In the end, if Councillor Grimes accepts and implements my recommendations, he will achieve two major accomplishments: bringing a much sought-after skateboard park into his community to benefit our youth, but also protecting this small, precious, green gem known as Colonel Sam Smith Park.

The park – with its beauty and its peace - is priceless.

Councillor Grimes, these are my findings. The rest is up to you.

Glenn De Baeremaeker
Councillor, City of Toronto
Ward 38, Scarborough Centre