



# CELOS

centre for local research into public space

## Municipal Outdoor Rink Report 2007



# City of Toronto Outdoor Ice Rinks

## Summary

A recent City document called “SERVICE PLANNING AND PROVISION STRATEGY OPTIONS” has called for the building of more arenas to address a shortage of skating opportunities in Toronto. While some areas in the city have no nearby place to skate, other existing rinks have unused skating times and can become a greater resource for Torontonians.

This report, presented by the Centre for Local Research into Public Space (CELOS), will show how Toronto’s existing 46 neighbourhood compressor-cooled outdoor rinks can attract more skaters with very little expenditure, mostly using what the City already has “in the pantry.”

## Recommendations

**1.** That Parks, Forestry and Recreation management staff be asked to collaborate with Dufferin Rink staff, with the CELOS research group, and with interested rink friends, to consider the information in this report, and return to the Parks Committee with interim recommendations for the next Parks and the Environment Committee meeting in March

**2.** That Parks, Forestry and Recreation management consider the following formula for new policy development, and report back at the next meeting of the Parks and Environment Committee, on the feasibility of using this formula:

All new policy suggestions affecting Torontonians who use municipal outdoor ice rinks shall include

- a) detailed, public documentation of reasons for a new policy being considered
- b) thorough consultation with user group(s) affected
- c) detailed, public documentation of the results of the new policy

**1.** That Dufferin Rink be identified as a “laboratory” for community collaboration with front-line rink staff and City management, about what works well in neighbourhood outdoor compressor-cooled ice rinks. That Parks, Forestry and recreation management allow Dufferin Rink staff to do several outreach projects in this connection:

- a) To put on four more cooking fire events at outdoor rinks, working with local rink staff and rink users who request such an event
- b) To research three outdoor rinks, in collaboration with the on-site staff at those rinks, and the rink users there, with a view to finding inexpensive changes that can make a material difference to those rinks by next skating season

## Background

Toronto has the most outdoor compressor-cooled ice rinks of any city in the world. There are 4 rinks at central locations and 46 in neighbourhoods. Thirteen of the rinks are double pads – rinks with one pad used for playing hockey, the other for pleasure-skating. The rest are single pads where hockey and pleasure-skating take turns. A double pad rink costs over \$1 million to build, not counting the rink change-rooms. A single pad rink costs around \$700,000.

For many years these compressor-cooled ice rinks were open from mid-November until the end of February when the sun got too strong, that is, about 15 weeks. But in 2001 City Council voted to reduce the season of the neighbourhood outdoor rinks to 10 weeks a year, not opening them until late December. This resolution is still on the books, as far as we know. But it caused such an outcry by skaters that there was only one year when it was actually carried out.

By the time of that vote, an experiment had been going for eight years at Dufferin Rink, located on Dufferin Street just south of Bloor Street, in Dufferin Grove Park. The rink had gradually been converted from being the secure turf of tough youth, to a lively winter social centre for all ages. This change was brought about through an unusually close, daily collaboration between local residents and City Parks and Recreation staff. The rink change house was renamed “rink clubhouse,” and activities were crammed into every corner.

In 2001, several park friends involved with Dufferin Rink approached Claire Tucker Reid, then general manager of Parks and Recreation, and Don Boyle, the director responsible for these rinks. They asked that Dufferin Grove Park, including the rink, be designated an “experimental site.” It would be a kind of laboratory for exploring what makes a park work in well in an urban neighbourhood.

But the general manager and the director did not feel that was feasible. So park friends set up a small research group of their own instead. They called it “the **centre for local research into public space**” (CELOS), and began to document what worked well at the park (and what didn’t work).

In 2002 the City of Toronto hired *Leisure Plan International* to do an “Outdoor Ice Facilities Harmonization Study,” at a cost of \$27,800. Word got around that the study was intended to make an argument for greatly reducing the number of outdoor rinks. However, on the basis of the information collected, the study did not make that recommendation.

The following year, Council's program of "harmonizing" all City recreation facilities to the same standard led rink friends once again to suggest the "experimental site" idea, so that harmonization might include new ideas and be inspired by a higher standard. The general manager, Brenda Librecz, was encouraging, but other events intervened and no arrangement was made.

Dufferin Rink became busier every year, with skaters coming from many parts of the city. A common complaint by skaters was that they were often unsure whether the rink in their own neighbourhood was open, since there is no way for the public to phone a rink directly (city policy). So in 2004, Dufferin Rink staff asked City Rinks manager James Dann to let them do a real-person rink hotline for the central and downtown rinks, using the existing Dufferin Rink phone line, and he agreed. Rink maintenance supervisors kept the Dufferin Rink staff informed about ice condition at other rinks, and the city's rink information line had the Dufferin Rink phone number added in, for "inclement weather" updates.

The hotline experiment resulted in Dufferin Rink staff going around to other rinks to get to know them for the hotline, and to enlist the cooperation of the other rink staff in keeping the information current.

## Methodology of this report

In 2004, the Metcalf Foundation funded CELOS to research and write about what makes Dufferin Grove Park work well, and how those experiences might be of use to other neighbourhoods. Part of this research has focused on Toronto's outdoor compressor-cooled rinks, and it is presented here. The research was conducted by volunteers, interested citizens and the front-line recreation staff at Dufferin Rink, before or after their own rink shifts.

The researchers visited 23 Toronto central and downtown rinks over three years. Each rink has been visited at least once a season since 2004, 15 were visited twice in 2005/2006, and all were visited at least twice in 2006/2007. 8 of those rinks have been visited on a weekly basis during the current rink season.

The Outdoor Rink Report is based on these visits, on the stories collected by the Dufferin Rink hotline over three winters, on anecdotal evidence from rink users across the city, and on the researchers' first-hand experience as rink users, volunteers and staff.

In general manager Brenda Librecz' first Committee presentation after the election of the new Council, she said that two of her division's main aims are to "promote community engagement and to improve service using existing resources." This outdoor rink report hopes to make a contribution to those aims.

# Factors influencing Toronto's outdoor rinks

## 1. Weather

CELOS researchers have monitored the effect of the weather on outdoor ice quality for the past six years.

During the months when the sun is weakest (November, December, January) the outdoor rinks hold ice in ambient temperatures up to 18° C, with very little trouble. Over the past six years, **ice conditions were often perfect in November and December when temperatures ranged between 0 and 16° C.** Even sunnier days did not force any rinks to be closed.

But: in late February and March, when the sun's angle begins to get higher, the situation changes. During those months the outdoor rinks have typically been closed during peak hours (11-6) due to strong sunlight, even with below-freezing temperatures.

So when the sun gets stronger in the later part of winter, ice maintenance is harder and the compressors that cool the rinks run all the time, increasing energy costs and burning more fuel. But when the sun is weak, these outdoor rinks work remarkably well. (Central Park in New York City opened its outdoor rink on October 20 this past season, Harbourfront Rink opened Nov.19. Both did well from the start.)

The way outdoor rinks work seems to be widely misunderstood. The Parks, Forestry, and Recreation document "SERVICE PLANNING AND PROVISION STRATEGY OPTIONS" reflects this misunderstanding. It conflates natural and compressor-cooled outdoor rinks, stating that both kinds of rinks are *"limited to a relatively short operational season that has recently been further reduced as climatic changes result in fewer days when it is possible to have natural ice or maintain outdoor artificial ice."*

This misunderstanding needs to be cleared up. **Compressor-cooled outdoor ice rinks, unlike natural ice rinks, are built for temperatures above zero.** The problem is not climatic change but scheduling of the rink season. If the rinks return to opening and closing earlier than they do now, there are between 15 and 19 good weeks to make outdoor ice. This will give more days of good skating and also be easier on the environment by not causing the compressors to struggle against the sun.

## 2. Ice maintenance

The Parks, Forestry, and Recreation document "SERVICE PLANNING AND PROVISION STRATEGY OPTIONS" suggests that outdoor rinks are fundamentally unreliable: *"Due to weather conditions, programs on outdoor rinks are frequently cancelled and/or rescheduled. For registered instructional programs, this results in a significant amount of administrative work to issue refunds and/or reschedule programs and also results in dissatisfaction among participants."*

What this statement omits is that outdoor ice quality is affected by many other factors besides the weather.

- a) Ice thickness: when ice is kept between 1 ½ and 3 inches, compressors work well at keeping it frozen. In years when there's lots winter rain and it's not removed before it freezes, the ice on outdoor rinks can get as thick as 7 inches, at which point ice maintenance becomes very problematic.
- b) Availability of ice resurfacing equipment: this situation has been improved in the past three years, with acquisition of more ice resurfacers (Zambonis or Olympias). All but one double pad now has its own machine, and the "flying squads" for the single-pad rinks are drawing on a better supply of machines as well. In previous years, there was often a zamboni operator on a site but no equipment for him to use. It's good that this has gradually become less common. The cost per operator for a 12-week season ranged from \$22,449.59 in the west to \$25,563.99 in the North in 2003 – per rink. So having the operator sit in the office with no equipment is expensive.
- c) Equipment well-maintained on a priority schedule: This has also improved from four years ago when it could take five days or more to repair a machine. Broken machines need to be repaired fast because when the travelling zambonis ("flying squads") break down, or the zamboni trailer gives trouble, outdoor ice can get too thin from lack of resurfacing and the rink has to be closed for emergency ice build-up
- d) Good rink access for flying squad zambonis: Not all city rinks have good parking for zamboni trailers or access for a zamboni to get over curbs and other obstacles, to reach the rinks they're supposed to plough. At some parks the zambonis have to drive a far distance over rough paths. This slows them down in poor weather and jolts the machines, causing them to need repair sooner.
- e) Scheduling of ice maintenance times around programs: single pad rinks are maintained by "flying squads" – two drivers go from rink to rink with a zamboni on a trailer and maintain them in series. Until last year, these visits were sometimes less than once a day. Now the zamboni usually comes twice a day, which is better. However the on-site rink staff don't always know the

schedule of ice maintenance at their rinks, and schedule changes are frequent. Rink users and on-site staff need to know when the zamboni is coming so they can plan around it.

- f) Tailoring ice maintenance to the weather: if it rains a lot, the zamboni can push water off the ice so it doesn't result in greater ice thickness later. However, it has been the practice of many ice maintenance staff to stay off rinks when it rains. Ice maintenance approaches vary too widely – last year one zamboni driver insisted on flooding the rink in the rain. So those rinks with more careful zamboni operators have good ice on the same days when poorly maintained rinks are closed. In 2005/2006 there were often days when all the neighbourhood rinks were closed but City Hall and Harbourfront were open. This was not because those rinks have better compressors but because they have better maintenance.
- g) Snow maintenance provisions: a few years ago, zamboni drivers were not allowed to push snow off the rink after a snowstorm, even if there was a tractor on site. That was someone else's job. So after a snowstorm, even when the weather was fine again, many outdoor rinks stayed shut for days until the plough got to them, and meantime the operators sat on their hands. Now many of the staff trucks are fitted out with shovels on the front in winter, and some of the zamboni drivers use them.
- h) Rink shovels on site and used: The City still owns many of the long metal green rink shovels from the days when the ice was maintained manually. For some years rink guards didn't allow skaters to shovel snow off the ice but now it's permitted again. When no zamboni or no zamboni driver is available, rinks where shovels are brought out, and where staff work alongside the skaters to shovel the snow off, can have many extra hours of good playing time.

### 3. Hours of operation

The Parks, Forestry, and Recreation document "SERVICE PLANNING AND PROVISION STRATEGY OPTIONS" suggests that more arenas should be built so that more Torontonians will get to skate. *"All the municipally owned and operated indoor ice pads are currently utilized fully during prime time hours and our research has identified a number of unmet demands for prime time ice which the existing facilities are not able to accommodate. As a result achieving and objective of increased access to this activity will imply either a reallocation of prime time hours in the existing facilities and/or the development of new additional indoor ice pads in the future."*

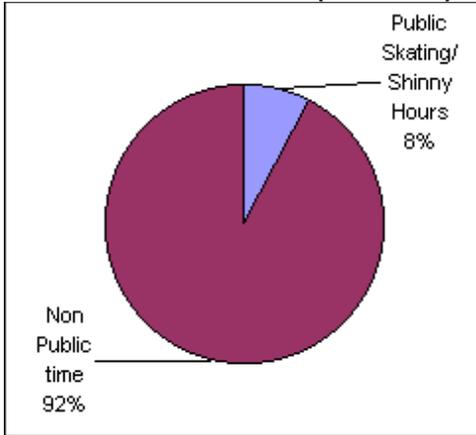
But even if more arenas are built, not all Torontonians who want to skate will get to do so, particularly if they don't want to be part of a class or a team. At the first Parks Committee meeting of 2007, Councillor Frances Nunziata asked whether there are arenas that have very little public skating time. General manager Brenda Librecz said that city arenas have about 25% of their prime weekday

evening times for public skating, and about 50% of their weekend times for public (non-permit) skating. But if instructional skating time is taken away, the total drop-in public skating and shinny times offered are much less.

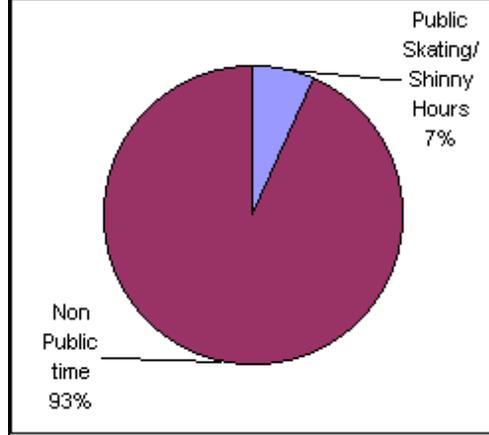
### 3.1 Arena public skating time:

North York (north district) is the highest with 10% of the total time; Scarborough (east district) is lowest with 7%.

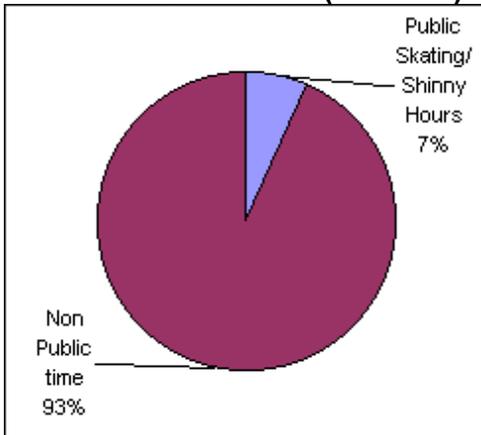
#### West Indoor Arenas (12 rinks)



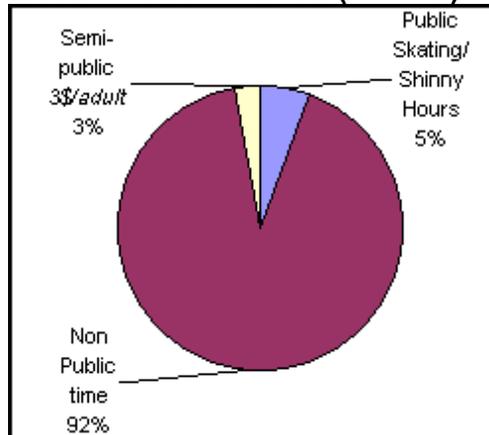
#### East Indoor Arenas (9 rinks)



#### North Indoor Arenas (17 rinks)



#### South Indoor Arenas (7 rinks)



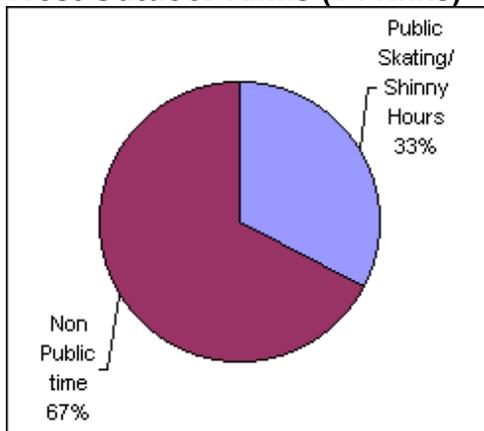
Data from Toronto Parks, Forestry & Recreation *Drop-in Skate 2006-2007*. Prime-time hours are defined as Mon-Fri 15:00-22:00, Sat-Sun 9:00-22:00.

### 3.2 Outdoor rink public skating time:

There are also big differences between different parts of the city, in the amount of drop-in public skating and shinny hockey offered in *outdoor* rinks, ranging from 33% of rink time in the west to 68% in central and downtown Toronto. If Wayne

Gretzky was right and shinny is the foundation of hockey, then kids who live in the downtown area are lucky.

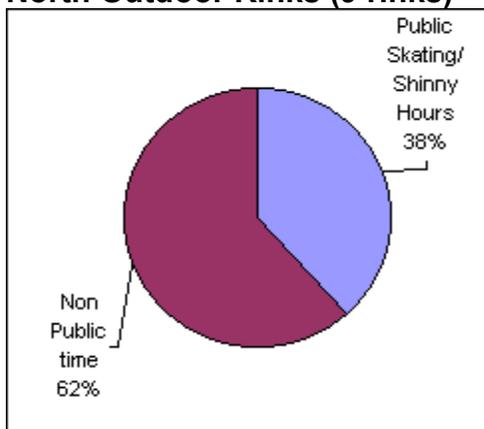
**West Outdoor Rinks (14 rinks)**



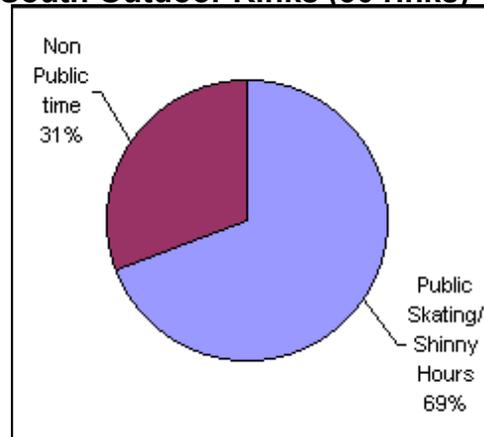
**East Outdoor Rinks (1 rink)**

No neighbourhood outdoor rinks in East District

**North Outdoor Rinks (9 rinks)**



**South Outdoor Rinks (30 rinks)**



*Data from Toronto Parks, Forestry & Recreation Drop-in Skate 2006-2007. Prime-time hours are defined as Mon-Fri 15:00-22:00, Sat-Sun 9:00-22:00.*

There is a lot of variation in the hours that outdoor rinks are open for skaters. The rinks in the central and east-central parts of the city keep the ice surface locked all morning on week days, and often into the afternoon, scheduling rink staff only after 12 or after 2 pm. This means no school classes nor shift workers nor families with very young children can go skating at those less-busy times.

Some rinks in the west part of downtown don't lock their gates at all, and so skaters can go there unsupervised in the morning and after hours, at night. Some rinks don't have a fence and so cannot be locked. These are all pleasure-skating rinks but after hours they're used for shinny hockey.

Some rinks are locked a great deal during what would normally be considered prime time, for example Giovanni Caboto Rink, a double-pad rink at St.Clair and

Lansdowne, which was transferred to West management last year. This once popular double-pad rink, rebuilt new about ten years ago, is kept locked during most of the weekend. According to its schedule, the rink is only open three and a half hours on Saturdays, and three hours on Sundays. Many outdoor rinks close early on weekend evenings, or even on weekday evenings, while other rinks remain open and very busy with shinny hockey until 11 pm.

If more outdoor rinks can be opened to the public (and for shinny hockey permits) for more hours of the day and evening, the existing available rink hours across the city will be considerably less scarce. To have the compressor plants running at all these million-dollar rinks, but the ice locked, is a false economy.

## 4. Permits

Outdoor rink permits are considerably cheaper than those for indoor ice, but there's a problem: in the case of snow or other bad weather, when the rink may be in such rough shape it can't be used or perhaps even has to be locked, permit holders don't get a refund in most city outdoor rinks. The exception right now is the central rinks, but that's only for this year. From the Permits officer: *"There will be refunds due to inclement weather for this season, based on past practice. However, keep in mind that other districts are already not refunding for inclement weather and we may all follow suit next year in keeping with our goal of harmonization."*

There are also no refunds for poorly maintained ice (see Section 2). Charging people for rink time even when they can't use it discourages rink users, and so the outdoor rinks have fewer permit contracts than one would expect. Some have none.

## 5. Helmet Policy

Toronto's outdoor rinks have a policy of mandatory helmets for shinny hockey. This is a very unpopular policy: many shinny hockey players say that the City is trying to change the sport of shinny hockey, and they are not pleased. They have a point: Football has helmets, soccer does not. Hockey has helmets, shinny hockey does not. There are a number of problems with trying to force helmets into a non-equipment sport:

- a) Resistance from rink users: many shinny players refuse to wear them, including women, who are playing the sport in greater numbers. Not all of them quote Don Cherry – that more equipment means more recklessness and therefore more injuries – but most resisters tell some version of the same story. This doesn't mean that no one wears a helmet – about 10 per cent of shinny players choose to wear one. But the consensus seems to be that,

other than for children, helmets on ice should be a matter of choice, as bicycle helmets are.

- b) Reduction in shinny players: It appears that shinny players are abandoning rinks where the helmet policy is enforced in favour of rinks where it's not, causing some rinks to be empty at times and some to be overfull.
- c) Rink staff as policers: Rink staffs become preoccupied with helmet rule enforcement over trying to make their rink more welcoming. Some rinks greet skaters with large hand-lettered posters about the consequences of disobedience, making "You Will Be Asked To Leave" the main message that greets the rink user at every visit. Several rinks have such posters completely encircling the rink change room walls. At one rink the staff tell rink users that if one person refuses to wear a helmet, all skaters will have to leave the ice. At other rinks, young rink staff are fearful of angry shinny players, and don't insist.
- d) Low user compliance rates: Of the 99 rink visits when helmet counts were included for this report, only on 19 occasions were there any skaters wearing helmets, which is roughly 20% of the visits. Only in four rinks were all mandated users actually wearing helmets.
- e) Insufficient public documentation of the helmet policy decision: Neither the lead supervisor for skating nor the South district recreation manager, consulted months ago, could find any data on the background of the mandatory-helmets-for-shinny policy. Staff could produce no information on shinny-related injuries, nor on claims against the city, nor data from other cities. Nor was there any memory of which working group might have discussed this policy before it was endorsed by the directors. A freedom of information request turned up the information that there have been only three claims against the City for injuries at outdoor ice rinks since amalgamation. All claims (indoor and outdoor rinks together) during those seven years added up to a total of \$36,000. Sadly, no more details were offered, and of course we need to know more if we are to learn from actual events. But it is clear that the helmet rule, adopted in 2002, was almost completely ignored until last year, and yet there were no injuries serious enough to make a major claim against the city. This subject needs to be revisited more carefully.

## 6. Communication

### 6.1 Bulletin boards:

A survey of city bulletin boards at 23 rinks showed that rink bulletin boards need to be better maintained and rink schedules more widely posted.

- a) locked plexiglass bulletin boards, outdoors – there are 13, of which ten were broken or defaced. 9 of them had out-of-date information, some as old as six years. Two more were empty.
- b) unlocked/open access bulletin boards, outdoors – there were no open-access outdoor bulletin boards, but 8 rinks had their schedules taped to the wall or in a window.
- c) unlocked/open access bulletin boards/indoors – 8 rinks have bulletin boards inside
- d) up-to-date schedules posted anywhere: 10 rinks didn't have any schedules posted at all, indoors or out.

### 6.2 Web site

- a) The City of Toronto web site

The rink section has the same information as the city's printed rink schedules. It lacks certain basic details such as rink opening dates or rink phone numbers, and it also has no capacity to report on rink closures for mechanical failure, or rink re-openings after a snowstorm.

- b) The [dufferinpark.ca](http://dufferinpark.ca) "City Rinks" section

In 2004 CELOS added a 'city rinks' section to the [dufferinpark.ca](http://dufferinpark.ca) website. This city rinks sections gives all the basic rink information including phone numbers, photos, and map links for 23 outdoor rinks. In addition there is a "rink diary" for each of those rinks. The diaries chronicle ice conditions, weather, and rink stories, and post the occasional letter from a rink user. The traffic on the "city rinks" section has doubled from last year to just under 400 page requests a day. It may continue to increase as more skaters bookmark the page.

### 6.3 City of Toronto main rink hotline

The City of Toronto rink information line is a recorded version of the City's printed outdoor rink schedules. It has a number of problems:

- a) it's not really a hotline, since there's no person to speak to, and the information is recorded at the beginning of the season.
- b) There is a 20-second mandatory helmet message that's impossible to skip, which can get so tiresome that it may discourage frequent use of the line.
- c) The caller is invited to choose from a menu that gives the administrative regions of Parks, Recreation and Forestry, and the "districts" may not be widely known beyond the bureaucracy.
- d) If a caller wants to check out a few different rinks, s/he has to start over at the beginning every time, getting the rink message again, etc.
- e) In the case of storms, the outdoor rink "hot line" cheerfully repeats all the normal scheduling information although in truth all the city rinks may be shut down.
- f) If the weather is doubtful, there is no possibility of reassuring the caller that a slight drizzle or a 12 degree temperature hasn't harmed the outdoor ice at all – "come on down."

### 6.4 The Dufferin Rink bad-weather hotline

In 2004 the Dufferin Rink staff asked the City Rinks manager of that time if they could try offering a real-person "hotline" for days of bad weather. He agreed, and the recording on the city hotline (south district only) was changed to add "in the case of inclement weather, to find out which rinks are open, please call 416 392-0913."

Use of this real-person hotline has climbed slowly but steadily, for all weathers and from all parts of the city. Information requests are of the following kinds:

- a) By far the most requests are for Nathan Phillips Square Rink. On warm days or wet days, Dufferin Rink staff often answer the rink phone: "Dufferin Rink, Rink Hotline, City Hall Rink is open."
- b) During snowy, rainy or warm days staff are able to give out live information about which rinks have been maintained and which are closed.
- c) The rink staff also get some calls for rinks in the other city districts, as well as requests about details such as skate loans, change rooms, directions to other rinks, and advice on where to find shinny hockey on a Sunday.
- d) When the rink staff are unclear about ice conditions or other specific details, they give the caller the phone number of the rink s/he's calling about. That gets

the Dufferin Rink staff into trouble sometimes, since the city has a policy – hard to understand – of not publishing rink numbers.

The Dufferin Rink hotline is maintained with the informal co-operation of rink supervisors and recreation staff at other rinks. Each morning rink supervisors in the former City of Toronto and East York are called for an update on their outdoor rinks. (NB: the Park supervisor for Etobicoke south has advised staff that they no longer want to participate). The staff are rink-boosters, and they enjoy being able to answer new skater questions and relay good news about good ice. The city has so many outdoor rinks – it's easy to satisfy the callers and encourage callers to go and skate.

Dufferin Rink staff have little time to count callers, but they did monitor one sample hour on Wednesday December 27 from 10am to 11am. In that time, rink staff answered 31 phone calls. Call Requests: Nathan Phillip Square: 51% Dufferin Rink: 19% East End: 16% West end (excluding Dufferin): 11% Skate sharpening services: 2% Etobicoke: 2%

## 7. Design & maintenance

The staff report SERVICE PLANNING AND PROVISION STRATEGY OPTIONS says that city-run arenas *“do not provide a high quality of user environment for this activity.”* (I.e. skating.) This is certainly true for the city's compressor-cooled outdoor ice rinks as well. It results from many problems with design, a few of which are illustrated here as examples (beginning with the small and ending in the large).

### 7.1 Rink change rooms

#### a) Windows

Of the 23 rinks visited, 10 had change rooms with no windows, and 5 had windows that were either very small, or too high up to see out, or not facing the rink. The absence of windows, together with harsh lighting and drab interiors, often give rink change areas a slummy look. The 8 change areas with good windows are much more cheerful and attractive to families, with a good view of the rink so that an observant parent can keep warm inside if the kids won't stop skating.

Those rink change areas that are more pleasant and have large windows do not report more vandalism; if anything, there seems to be less.

b) Signage

15 of the change rooms have no signage announcing what they are, and two more just have the “men’s” and “women’s” toilet signs. (Note also Section 6.1 on rink bulletin boards.)

c) Staff rooms

13 of the 23 rinks had no windows in the staff room, and often the staff at the rinks visited were inside and cut off from rink users. One staff room had windows not facing toward the rink, and one had windows blocked with black plastic garbage bags. That leaves only 8 staff rooms with windows allowing staff to see out or rink users to find staff. Ten of the 23 staff rooms had signage saying staff (two of them with a taped-on piece of paper). Six had no signage but it was obvious that staff were inside. The other 7 gave no clue of their function.

d) Benches and rubber skate mats

Of the 23 outdoor rinks visited, in 8 rinks the mats don’t reach benches or washrooms. In 7 rinks there are no outdoor benches for resting or skate-changing. The rest have some outdoor benches, although often not more than one or two.

e) Food: vending machines

In the 23 outdoor rinks visited, there is a total of 25 vending machines, of which 13 were out of order on the most recent round of visits. The ones that worked sold pop, gatorade, water, chips, and candy bars.

f) Food: community kitchens/snack bars

- i. At Rennie Rink the snack bar is used by volunteers to sell popcorn and prepackaged vending-machine-type food twice a week.
- ii. At Dufferin Rink there are two small community kitchens, one of them a snack bar called the “zamboni café.” It serves a variety of food prepared on site, including soup, English-muffin pizzas, cookies, and hot chocolate, seven days a week.
- iii. At Christie Rink a community kitchen/snack bar was built in this shared rink/pool building in the early 1990s. The kitchen has now been leased out privately until 2008, for \$2000 a year. The lessee keeps the kitchen locked nine months of the year and sublets it for \$900 a month in the summer when the swimming pool (which shares the building) is open. The lessee also operates the rink vending machines, which are often (but not always) out of order. The location is next to a very popular toboggan hill and recently there was some discussion about doing a winter community event

involving food, skaters and tobogganers. However, a Parks, Forestry and Recreation Business Services officer gave the news that *“due to the fact that there is an agreement in place at this location, it is not currently available for community use.”* When asked if the city has any problem with a private lessee of a community kitchen keeping the kitchen closed for most of the year, the officer’s response was that this is a *“concession area”* whose *“tenant is in good standing with the Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division with regard to the terms of the lease.”* Although the lessee may pay his fee on time and thereby satisfy Business Services, an unused snack bar reduces the “quality of the user environment” for skaters and other park users.

\* Some late-breaking good news: After the inquiries made for this report, the lessee made an arrangement to let the Christie Pits baseball committee run the snack bar on winter weekends. He will allow them to put any profits toward their baseball program. This sounds promising!

## 7.2 Access to rink entryways

Few rinks provide parking for users arriving in cars. The immediate pedestrian access to rink buildings is often by driveways meant for Parks vehicles, by out-of-the-way stairs, or by inclined walkways without railings, which get treacherously slippery with snow and ice.

## 7.3 Capital projects:

The two main kinds of City capital projects we have researched are “state-of-good-repair” projects involving existing facilities, and the building of new facilities. In this report we touch on two examples of difficulties in this area, relating to costs and design of rinks.

### a) State-of-good-repair:

Costs here are sometimes hard to understand. The cost and content of various rink facility inventories will be addressed in another report. On a very small scale, here is an example of the puzzling arrangements of one state-of-good-repair item:

The skate-friendly Dufferin Rink floor material was slated for replacement in 2005, and not a moment too soon, since it was visibly crumbling. It was replaced by a lighter floor of the same type. Associated with the cost was a \$2000 fee to an architect for designing the new floor installation. The flooring was made up of large tiles of two colours and it was installed by a flooring company. It was not possible to find out why an architect was needed for this, but the money went out anyway.

## b) Wallace Rink rebuild

Wallace Rink, built in 1983, was a direct-ammonia rink of the type no longer built by the city. \$1.1 million was budgeted to replace the rink surface and the machinery, but no money was included to renovate the ugly and dangerous windowless rink change room, nicknamed “the dungeon.” There was also no plan to include a zamboni garage, so that a maintenance vehicle could be sheltered on site. The rink is in a man-made depression and the existing stair access down to the rink was so out-of-the-way that a community-built set of stairs had been added the year before for temporary use. But there was no money in the budget for more direct stair access.

Consequently there was some community pressure to include these features in the design. The garage was knocked off immediately – no money – but stairs and rink house improvements were put in the plan, subject to funds not running out as the rink surface was replaced. The RFP visits were complete and the design done before the spring began.

Summer programming was relocated from the area, but no construction began until mid-September, 11 weeks before the start of the rink season. Then there was slow progress, and on many days there was no construction at all. Both rink maintenance staff and recreation staff reported great difficulty in getting information from either of the project managers (the first one was transferred in the middle and replaced by another one). The rink was not ready when the rink season began, but it seemed as though it might be ready halfway through the Christmas holidays.

Poor communication between operating staff and the project manager led to some last minute problems, and then, when the rink was finally ready near the end of the school holidays, there was a visit from three members of a Parks joint health and safety committee (JHSC). They judged the long Harbourfront-style built-in seating area along one side of the rink to be dangerous to their workers and to rink users, because it was not a standard stairway and because there are several gates leading onto the seating area from the hockey rink. Under a JHSC order, carpenters were hired immediately, subverting the design and turning the seating into a long step-down. The inspection report required under the OHS Act, giving the reasoning for the OHS order, has been unavailable.

The question here is whether the committee exceeds its authority (and its competence) when it makes recommendations for rink users rather than workers. This and other questions about where money goes, how decisions are made, and what follow-up is possible, need more asking.

## Comments:

### 1. Outdoor rinks as winter social centres

Neighborhood rinks can play several roles. They are obviously places where people can skate and play shinny hockey for free, or permit organized hockey times for low fees. But they can also be neighborhood social centres for winter, where Torontonians can meet and engage with one another. This potential is far from fully realized at the city's compressor-cooled outdoor rinks, but there are many good possibilities.

The good potential of outdoor rinks fits in very well with two primary interests of the Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division, as outlined by their general manager Brenda Librecz: using parks to promote "community engagement" and making service improvements that are not costly.

As these possibilities are explored, another point of Ms.Librecz' recent presentations to City Councillors should be kept in mind: her statement that the Division is moving from a focus on "revenue generation" to "community development."

#### 1.1 Families

Families with young children are the secret weapon of rinks. Rinks that make friends with such families will have loyal friends who use them often, and around which all the rest can be built. Families are attracted to comfortable rink houses and double-pad rinks where they can be sure to get pleasure-skating time. Dufferin Rink is one such place, and the details of what works well there are all in the "Outdoor Rink Handbook" published in 2006. Dufferin Rink staff found that there should be some games and toys for kids, storybooks, cheap nutritious food, a wood stove if possible, helpful staff if a parent needs help, and a quiet spot for fussy babies.

#### 1.2 Balance of ages

Families are the matrix for a sociable rink but rink change areas are usually a small space and in order to balance all groups, the change area mustn't be turned into a day care. Youth need to feel they're still in a real rink house. Rinks don't do well as ghettos, and they can only be social centres if they include all ages and some people with problems, too. If any one group begins to treat the rink as their own turf – parents, or the old card players, included – it's important for rink staff to restore balance.

## 1.3 Youth

Outdoor rinks are places of physical activity for all ages and stages, and for youth in particular they're practice grounds for athletic skill. It's important to give each age group a time when they can play well without too much crowding or peer bullying. This means, clear age rules and hourly, daily follow-up. When rules are fair, and worked out through informal consultation, they get cooperation in the long run.

In addition, rinks are places where youth like to socialize and also where they like to try out their power. Staff at outdoor rinks are often very young and that makes it almost impossible for them to regulate the social life of a rink. Where there are mature staff with a real interest in and curiosity about the young people who use the rink, youth can find a lasting resource, sometimes even a home away from home in the winter.

## 1.4 Campfires

In order for people to talk to each other, they need a story magnet, something beautiful to loosen their tongues. In 1994, Dufferin Rink friends discovered that winter rink-side campfires were one of the easiest, cheapest, and most dramatically successful ways to get rink users talking to each other. (The idea was borrowed from the winter campfires set up by Parks staff at the side of Grenadier Pond during cold snaps, for many years.)

The Fire Department gave park friends single-occasion fire permits at the beginning, and then after two years without problems, the fire permits were given as yearly permits. As collaboration between rink friends and rink staff improved, the permits were given to the recreation supervisor and he made sure that the rink staff were trained to assist and supervise the campfires. By then the fires were most often cooking fires, with soup or hot chocolate or people's own food if they were having a birthday skating-party. (The campfire birthday parties were never closed – parks have no walls! – and often strangers who joined the fire circle got to know new people through these parties.)

Parks and Recreation staff have long known the value of campfires in making a special event better. Ironically, during the time when the number of cooking fires at Dufferin Rink began to increase, campfires gradually diminished city-wide, as a staff-led activity in other parks. After amalgamation, fees were introduced and then more recently, campfire permits were banned from High Park and discouraged elsewhere. There was no mishap or injury that led to this – most people including children are very careful around fire – but perhaps more of a drift in policy.

This drift has recently brought Dufferin Rink campfires to the attention of Parks management, making it difficult for recreation staff to carry on with them or to use them as a community building device at other city rinks. This is a problem that needs to be addressed.

## 1.5 Food

Skating makes people hungry. At Dufferin Rink there are two small community kitchens, one of them a snack bar called the “zamboni café.” It offers a variety of foods prepared on site, including soup, English-muffin pizzas, cookies, and hot chocolate, seven days a week. The rink staff prepare and serve the food, often together with volunteers (mostly high school students doing their community hours). Although food prices are kept very cheap, the snack bar is so popular that it makes about \$20,000 a winter for putting back into expanded park programs.

Parents tell the staff that they can get their kids away from their computer games and out of the house with the promise of “a skate, a mini-pizza and a cookie.” The hospitality of a rink is enormously increased by the smells as well as the taste of good food. There are two other city outdoor rinks which have kitchens (see 7.1.f) A number of other rinks are attached to a community centre and so have a kitchen nearby. Not every outdoor rink could or should have food, but some rinks are ideal for such an addition.

## 1.6 Skate lending

City outdoor rinks generally don't offer skate rentals. When the recreation supervisor at Dufferin Rink suggested applying to the NHL Players' Association in 2004 for skates, hockey sticks, helmets, and gloves, rink friends were dubious. But when the fifty sets arrived and were sprayed yellow and \$2 loans were set up, the number of kids and adults who came to skate doubled. The supply of skates seems to have attracted more skate donations. Zamboni café income paid for even more, and now there are close to 80 pairs of skates available to rent for \$2. This is cheap enough that whole families come out, teenage shinny players bring their girlfriends on Fridays, and kids whose families can't afford new skated every year as they grow, can still keep playing shinny. Skate rental could be considered for a few more outdoor rinks in the city.

## 2. Staff structure

An organization that has frequent restructuring is obviously casting around a bit, trying to address some problems. During the last twenty-five years, there have been four major and three medium restructurings (“re-orgs” in slang) at Parks and Recreation (more recently called the Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division). The most recent one was probably the most drastic to date.

In the months since the latest restructuring, Dufferin Rink has been in the purview of thirteen different administrative sections:

1. building maintenance
2. electrical/ plumbing/compressor room (tech services)
3. rink manager and supervisor
4. parks manager and supervisor
5. skating programs supervisor
6. youth issues manager
7. neighbourhood teams/community engagement manager
8. planning and development project manager
9. health and safety (corporate services)
10. permits
11. fire service
12. business services
13. recreation manager and supervisor

Outdoor compressor-cooled rinks seem to be administrative orphans – not exactly at home in any part of the new park structure, certainly not “owned” by anyone who sees them as a vitally important resource for neighborhoods and community engagement. And it shows (see the front cover of this report, as a visual example).

### 3. Community engagement

All city rinks benefit from close engagement between on-site rink recreation staff and rink users. From park friend Georgie Donais:

*A park's existence is for the pleasure and enrichment of the citizens who use and cherish it. It is not just another place of employment that the city must manage, and citizens are not liabilities who get in the way of administrative efficiencies. Successful collaboration will pay the city back many times in healthier, happier citizens who love and support their communities. That is truly an opportunity worth taking.*

For more information:

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Also [www.dufferinpark.ca](http://www.dufferinpark.ca), click on “City Rinks”



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