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Rink workers, activist face off

**Dufferin Grove Park activist says ice badly maintained
City union frosty to idea community hire own facility staff**

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A revolt is brewing in Dufferin Grove Park pitting community activist Jutta Mason against an unlikely opponent — the ice resurfacers who use Zambonis to clean and maintain its two popular outdoor rinks.

But the two foes agree on one point: There's a citywide problem involving poor maintenance of outdoor rinks, often resulting in thick, soft ice that makes for poor skating.

The Dufferin Grove dispute, which Mason says has simmered for years, is expected to break wide open tomorrow at 7 p.m., when Mason, a former Jane Jacobs Prize winner for community activism, will propose her solution at a public meeting at the rinks' clubhouse: Allow interested communities to manage their own neighbourhood outdoor rinks.

Mason, the linchpin in the renaissance of Dufferin Grove Park, says there's a precedent — the management boards that operate city-owned community centres like Scadding Court at Bathurst St. and Dundas St. W.

Under the management board model, Mason says the city would still finance operations but communities that want more control would manage their outdoor rinks, including hiring staff and scheduling how often rinks are cleaned and maintained.

Only then could neighbourhood outdoor rinks get the same respect as the more prominent Nathan Phillips Square, which gets its ice surface cleaned far more regularly, Mason said.

Mason says she and other rink users are fed up with irregular and poor maintenance.

"We've struggled to work with (the city's rink workers) for over 10 years and it has not worked," she says.

"It's time for us to break away and for people to run the rinks through boards of management."

Mason's proposal is running into opposition from union members, but it comes from a formidable woman who has spearheaded the Friends of Dufferin Grove Park for 10 years.

The group has helped revitalize a dying park near Dufferin St. and Bloor St. W. Its accomplishments include an organic farmers market every Thursday, the city's first outdoor community oven and Friday night dinners with wine in the park.

The well-organized group is hoping other community groups that have had problems with their rinks will support its idea.

Mason's main beef is the unacceptable thickness of ice, between four and five inches thick — more than double



LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR

A battle is brewing between community activists and city workers who maintain outdoor rinks.

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the 1 1/2 to 2 inches recommended by experts for perfect ice conditions.

The thick ice puts a tremendous strain on the ice compressors that cool the rink's ice surface, which makes for poor ice and uses up to 40 per cent more energy, Mason says.

Mason blames the "low work standards" of a small number of members of Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 416, which represents outside city workers and services the rinks.

"They spend a huge amount of time doing nothing," she says, and attempts to negotiate with them to maintain the two Dufferin Grove rinks more regularly have been unsuccessful.

Local 416 members travel from rink to rink throughout the day to clean and maintain the ice. They visit Dufferin Grove three times daily, but two of the resurfacings occur at busy times, forcing skaters to the sidelines, Mason says.

John Richard, chief steward of Local 416, disagrees strongly that his members are the problem. But he did agree with Mason that the ice surfaces on the city's 49 outdoor rinks are often in poor condition.

Richard blamed city hall, saying workers who resurface the rinks aren't given the time or the training to properly maintain the ice, which involves scraping and cutting to reduce the thickness. His members have time only for a superficial flooding of the rink surface and cleaning, Richard says.

The problem, he says, is compounded by the fact that because of all the rain this winter, the ice begins to build up at a far greater level than indoor rinks, which are maintained by a different union.

The community is the loser because of stretched resources and not enough crews, Richard says, adding the number of members in his local has shrunk 20 per cent since amalgamation.

"Management thinks clean ice is the same as maintained ice and that's all the schedule allows," Richards says. "Clean ice is not the same as maintained ice."

Richard also says his union would oppose the plan to move toward management boards because it would mean job losses for his members.

The opinions of skaters at Dufferin Grove Park yesterday were mixed.

Karl Trutwein, 47, and Marco Fischer 48, said they were frustrated the ice doesn't get cleaned up more often — especially because the rink there is so popular and the ice gets chewed up a lot.

Others like Andy Trotter, who came early yesterday to skate with his sons Jason, 5, and Jasper 2, agreed the ice was soft but said it was good enough for pleasure skating with his children.

Some of the tension between skaters and Zamboni drivers at Dufferin Grove was evident yesterday when two city workers made rink users go inside the rink club house, instead of waiting beyond the boards, as usual, during a morning resurfacing.

"It's a new protocol," one of the city workers told Andrew Munger, 45, when the filmmaker told him in 10 years of using the rink, he'd never heard of such a rule.

Brenda Librecz, the city's acting general manager of parks and recreation, is cautious about Mason's proposal.

"The union will have a heart attack with this proposal," Librecz said. "This would have to be a council decision and we would have to evaluate it very carefully."

Librecz is offended by Mason's comments online and in a newsletter about "unacceptably low work standards at many outdoor city rinks" and "hostility from Zamboni drivers towards both Dufferin Grove on-site staff and community people."

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