

There's a will to fix up 'The Duff.' Why won't city find a way to help?

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Dawn Vrablic, a Friend of Christie Pits, has been lobbying with the group to make more of the decaying rink house, which has a kitchen — to no avail.

CATHERINE PORTER/TORONTO STAR

The first sign of despair is taped to the smudged glass doors.

It reads: "This door is out of order."

Inside, the pop machine is adorned with two "Out of Order" signs, just for good measure. It hasn't worked for years. There's a dented garbage can, a shuttered snack bar — also closed for as long as anyone can remember — and two sets of lost mittens sitting forlornly on the ledge against the dirty windows. A lone employee, tattoos on his neck, works his BlackBerry on a bench, dying of boredom.

A big sign on the smoke-grey wall states: "No loitering or trespassing allowed."

Is it a jail? A train station? Nope — "The Duff" is a parks and recreation building that we all pay for with our taxes. This is our space in the middle of Christie Pits.

In the summer, it is a change room for the outdoor swimming pool. Today, it is the sad, dirty rink house for the empty ice pad outside.

The only sign of love and attention is a turquoise banner: Friends of Christie Pits.

The Friends are a group of committed locals who meet monthly to brew plans to transform their neighbourhood park into an old-fashioned community square. They host family skating days, pizza nights, tobogganing events. Two winters ago, they turned their attention to the Duff. It needs all the friends it can get.

The locals knew that behind a metal shutter lay a functioning kitchen – two fridges, a stove, a microwave. Why not transform it into a community kitchen, so they could sell food and hot drinks during their community events? That way, people might gather in the winter for a few extra minutes after unlacing their skates. They could sit, eat, talk to neighbours, loiter.

Loitering is how communities form. The Friends met with their recreation supervisor, Kim Brown, and pitched the idea. She said the city's general manager of parks and recreation was working on a plan to lease the snack bars in the city's empty rink houses to non-profit groups like The Friends, and the Duff would be the first.

"It will not be done and in place for this season's pleasure skate program but will be in place for summer pool season," Brown wrote in an email. "We will let (The Friends) know when ... to apply."

That was in November 2008.

So, when did they apply?

"We haven't heard anything since," says Dawn Vrablic, a Friend. "We don't know what happened."

What about having city staff operate it for community events? Maybe make a little money for the city? What's the problem?

"Parks building attendants can't handle food or money," says Monica Gupta, the chair of Friends of Christie Pits. "It's not in their job description. It's just ridiculous."

So, 15 months later, the Duff slumps in Christie Pits, like most of the city's rink houses, empty and decaying.

The local councillor is Joe Pantalone, running for Toronto mayor.

He met with parks staff a year ago and had big ideas to transform the Duff into a full-fledged community centre. A warren of empty rooms sit empty under the pool. Kids could take ballet, gymnastics, chess classes there instead of in the small community centre across Bloor St. That plan has also sunk into the city bureaucracy. A couple of subway stops west of here, the staff at Dufferin Grove rink house were dishing up black bean soup and chili-con-bulgur to skaters for \$2 a bowl. They've managed to do this for years, by working with community members. But the order has recently come from management that they are in "conflict of interest."

They fear the days of soup making and cookie selling will be over under the city parks and recreation's new kitchen policy.

But I wonder: With this new policy, is the city hoping all community rink houses look more like the Duff, and less like Dufferin Grove?

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