

February 16, 2011

Catherine Porter

"You can tell so much about a city by its parks," David Harvey says as we wobble around the city's newest skating rink inside its newest park, Sherbourne Common. It's a beautiful, gleaming day — crisp, sunny. Neither of us are good skaters, but we are enthusiastic, enjoying the squeak of our rusty blades on the empty ice.

So, what does he surmise about our fair city from our parks?

He peters to a stop and squints up at the construction site and the grimy underbelly of the Gardiner across the way: "It's a little rough around the edges and a little neglected."

Not for long. Harvey has a plan to fix our broken parks. And it's a good one.

It's called Toronto Park People, a Bike Union for park lovers — part lobby, part networking, wholly loving. With Harvey at the head, the group aims to link park groups across the city, combining experience and muscle.

Its inspiration came last fall, after Harvey published a [study](#) with the Metcalfe Foundation outlining the problems corroding our parks: \$233 million maintenance and repair backlog, lack of staff, an inflexible culture too preoccupied with being sued to work with community groups. . . .

He also listed some solutions: Encourage community involvement in the parks, allow more cafes, bars and food stands, accept alternative donors, form a citywide parks advocacy group like the ones in San Francisco and New York. . . .

Park lovers around the city responded to his call to action, jamming his inbox and voicemail.

As the protest song goes: "The people, united, will never be defeated." The first target: the parks department's "culture of saying no."

"I'm really impressed with San Francisco's Neighbourhood Parks Council. They've been so successful in getting the city to think about the community. Now, in the city's hiring policy for parks staff, one of the skill sets they look for is — do you work well with volunteers?" Harvey says.

"In New York, the city has embraced organizations like the Central Park Conservancy and Prospect Park Alliance that bring money into the park, do maintenance and work hand-in-hand with city park staff. Whereas here, it's just confrontation and lack of creativity."

I am weary of privatization. I envision Coke bottle-shaped ice rinks in the city's future. But the alternative is worse: lifeless rinks with dirty, empty change rooms. Our purist ideology has delivered depressing results: refusals to allow community pizza ovens in parks, a disheartening permit procedure that kills most plans, a fear of lawsuits so intense that a group of volunteers offering to tend a garden donated to the city was instructed to get \$1,000 in liability insurance each year. . . . Let's see how flexibility works.

Harvey is the perfect person for the job. Traditional park advocates in this city have been hippies and dog walkers, neither of whom have garnered much attention at city hall. Harvey is a political insider. Until recently, he was Dalton McGuinty's advisor on the environment, natural resources and municipal affairs. He knows how bureaucracy and politics work and he's packed his board with other professionals, like architect and designer Ken Greenberg. There's even a city parks department staffer among the group — a sure indicator of Toronto Park People's future style: More dialogue, less OCAP-inspired lockdowns.

"In San Francisco, the head of the Neighbourhood Parks Council said 'I don't always agree with the city, but I'm not out to embarrass them.' We're trying to have a productive relationship," says Harvey, 47, who now works as a consultant.

So far, the group is working off a \$15,000 Metcalf Foundation grant. They plan to have an inaugural city parks summit in April and, after that,



David Harvey, shown skating with Star columnist Catherine Porter at Sherbourne Commons on Feb. 15, 2011, is starting a new parks lobby group for the city. He hopes it achieves what the Bike Union has in Toronto -- a strong voice that puts parks back on the agenda.

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host bimonthly meetings to bring park groups together. You can learn more about it at [www.parkpeople.ca](http://www.parkpeople.ca).

For the record, I think Sherbourne Common perfectly symbolizes Toronto parks. It is beautiful, but uninhabited. Only four other skaters joined us over lunch. A bored rink attendant sat in an empty glass room that parks staff promises will be a café, but I fear will follow the Christie Pits concession stand model: boarded up.

To Harvey, it is a hopeful sign. Soon, the park will be surrounded by restaurants, condominiums and George Brown College buildings. "That's the great thing about parks as urban infrastructure," he says. "If you build an exciting park, it attracts exciting things around it."

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