

Remarks to the General Committee of Markham City Council  
23 November 2015

Presented by Reid McAlpine

On behalf of:

- The Unionville Business Improvement Area
- The Unionville Ratepayers Association
- The Unionville Villagers Association
- The Unionville Historical Society

### **Re: Save Skating on Toogood Pond**

Mr. Chair, Mr. Mayor and Members of Council,

You may or may not be aware that Toogood Pond in Unionville has not been cleared or maintained by the City for skating for the past two winters – among the coldest winters on record! Imagine, the best skating in Markham (with all due respect to the Civic Centre rink) suddenly finished. No more shinny, no more toddlers taking their first steps on the ice, no more couples gliding hand-in-hand across the ice, no more crack the whip . . . Only after inquiring through Councillor Hamilton did we learn that the decision to cease maintenance had been made by staff without any public consultation or announcement.

Toogood Pond has been the centre of winter life in Unionville for decades. We believe that it is worth maintaining for skating when safe conditions allow. The Pond is a valuable community asset enjoyed by people from around Markham, not just Unionville. It is a significant

community, heritage and regional tourism amenity. And it draws business to Main Street in the slow season for retailers there.

We are all aware of the data about obesity and diseases related to inactivity. Opportunities to enjoy outdoor physical activity in winter should be encouraged not discouraged. Toogood Pond should play a central role in the City's strategies for promoting healthy living in winter.

When we queried staff about the rationale for ceasing winter maintenance they were very clear that cost was not the issue. Rather they cited imagined safety concerns for their decision. However there is no history of injuries or fatalities on the Pond due to ice conditions. Only after prodding by the community did staff do any research into best practices for maintaining natural ice. They cited the Rideau Canal in Ottawa and the expense of maintaining it. You should note that the skating surface of Rideau Canal is approximately 8 km long and accommodates tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people over the course of a winter. The learning there has little relevance in Unionville. Staff also cited a recent report by the City of Toronto with respect to Grenadier Pond in High Park. Grenadier Pond is right on the edge of Lake Ontario and the climate there is significantly milder than in Unionville. I have lived within 200 meters of Grenadier Pond and can confirm that.

The one example staff did not research, despite encouragement to do so, is the Richmond Hill Mill Pond, a much more comparable facility. Safety on the Mill Pond is simply not an issue. It has been maintained for many years by the Town of Richmond Hill and there is no plan to cease doing so now. The ice is tested daily and must be at least eight inches thick to permit skating. The equipment used is relatively small – a light tractor and sometimes a Jeep. Crews of four are typically assigned to the job for ploughing and flooding. Two work on the ice while two others warm themselves, in half hour shifts.

I think it is also important to know that Toogood Pond will likely be used to some degree whether it is maintained or not. Even over the past two years shinny players cleared small patches. However properly monitored, maintained and flooded ice is much safer. Maintenance prevents the build up of layers of snow and ice that make for weak ice overall. And proper monitoring helps everyone know exactly how thick the ice is and when it is safe. It is also worth noting that the Pond is very shallow – perhaps five feet at the deepest. Even if someone did go through the ice, the risk is minimal.

As with train horns at level crossings, concrete skateboard parks and bicycle lanes, many of the facilities the City manages involve some level of risk. But we need to consider the balance between risk and benefit. We are convinced that the risks in this case can be managed

in balance with the unequalled experience of skating on a large outdoor pond, surrounded by green space, or rather white space, on a cold sunny day.

Here are the procedures that we suggest be implemented to manage risk on Toogood Pond:

- The previous red/yellow/green flag system should be reinstated with a minimum of eight inches of ice and temperatures below freezing required for a yellow flag. The green flag should never be flown so that users know that natural ice always involves risk.
- The ice should be tested daily in the core weeks of the winter for its quality and thickness.
- Maintenance should be done only with light equipment – small tractors – and never pick-up trucks.
- Staff should work in teams of three, minimum, using appropriate clothing, perhaps survival suits and/or personal flotation devices?
- The City should post signs around that Pond indicating that skaters use the Pond at their own risk and that the City can accept no liability.
- The City might also want to consider hiring safety patrollers for peak weekend hours to monitor the skaters and ice conditions.

Of course with climate change Toogood Pond is unlikely to be open for as many days in an average winter as in the past. We accept this, but we also remind the Committee and staff that the preferred term is “climate change” not “global warming”. That means that periodically some winters will continue to be particularly cold, as the past two winters have proved.

Something else you may not know is that staff has proceeded with preparations for a rink beside the Pond without significant public consultation. Those they did ask, including members of the URA, UVA and UHS, rejected the notion. And no volunteers have been identified to maintain the new ice surface, as current City policy requires. In any case the proposed rink could never accommodate the numbers of skaters who typically use the Pond on a cold Saturday afternoon. It would never be the tourism draw that the Pond is or the boon to Main Street. And like the Pond, the rink would be subject to the vagaries of the climate. It cannot not address that problem. Perhaps most important is that skating on a large natural surface is an entirely different experience – an entirely different level of fun!

Mr. Chair and members of Council, closing Toogood Pond for skating is another example of turning over management of the City to lawyers and insurance companies. They are paid to deal in worst-case scenarios. We need a more balanced perspective and it seems to our

organisations that you are the ones best placed to bring that balance to the situation.

What problem is closing the Pond to skating designed to solve? Remember that there have never been any significant injuries due to ice conditions. In fact how many people have died on properly maintained ice anywhere in Canada in say the last ten years? There is no data, which means that there is no evidence that the risks of a properly maintained Pond are any greater than they ever were.

The community of Unionville asks you to direct staff to resume winter maintenance of Toogood Pond immediately for the sake of our children and families.

Thank you.