

Metro parks policy shifts from development to acquiring land but heat still on Islanders

The emphasis in Metropolitan Toronto's park policy will shift over the next few months from Toronto Islands to the mainland.

Not that the remaining Island residents should give three rousing cheers or get the idea that Metro Parks Commissioner Thomas William Thompson has had a change of heart about the Island. Any man who would have a copy of *Exotica 3*, a pictorial encyclopedia of exotic plants, or a *dieffenbachia* subtropical plant near his desk would have strong opinions about his course of action.

"I am not backing away from the Island project one bit," the parks commissioner declared the other day as he picked up a green telephone to answer a call from an Island resident. He confessed after the call that if he was an Islander he would probably fight just as hard to stay put as the remaining Islanders are.

What has come along to change the policy emphasis is the urgent need to revise Metro's 25-year parks development program to focus on acquiring more land rather than on immediate development.

While Metro has been spending an average of half of its annual parks budget on Toronto Islands for the past 10 years, Metro's population has been rising by 56,000 yearly.

The existing 5,000-acre Metro park system appears large in the middle of the week but is becoming crowded on peak weekends and holidays.

"Land acquisition is the most important thing we must do," Mr. Thompson said in an interview. In the next three to five years the foundation of the future regional park system must be laid, or the system will fail.

The parks commissioner could use \$2,000,000 yearly for land. While urban development continues to swallow open space, Metro is moving into a new borough administration that will mean adjustments and into a financial atmosphere where money will be costly to borrow. Also, parks have traditionally been at the bottom of the list in the contest for municipal tax dollars at budget time.

Metro has marked out four regional parks:

— Central Don, winding south from Lawrence Avenue through a valley area in North York and East York to join Dentonia Park near Danforth Avenue;

— Highland Creek, in Scarborough, linking the Colonel Danforth area with Old Kingston Road and running north-west to the Morningside area;

— South Humber Park, in the Humber Valley between Etobicoke and York Township, including Eglinton Flats;

— Toronto Islands.

These parks form an inner ring. Mr. Thompson wants to complete land acquisition in these areas before developing basic parkland further.

The Island is still included in parkland acquisition, so Islanders can't expect to stay entrenched until development is resumed later.

To proceed with a crash program of land acquisition, mainly on the mainland, the parks department is prepared to give a much lower priority to a zoological garden and development of an outer ring of four regional parks.

Mr. Thompson has been described as over-zealous when it comes to parks. He has a green thumb and green paintings on his wall but there is no mistaking his practical viewpoint. When he gets the time and the money he still wants to complete an island recreation centre that includes a network of archery, croquet and tennis court facilities, a monorail and an aquarium. He is continuing work on a public marina on the Island. He calls them parking lots for boats.

Mr. Thompson believes that the Metro park system, both on the Island and on the mainland, should serve as a laboratory for outdoor education and conservation.

He sees the need as part of the 25-year parks program for more horticultural gardens, a planetarium and an athletic centre that would be of a cal-

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ibre to attract Olympic and international competitions.

The parks commissioner plans to have the Central Don regional park contain Edwards Garden horticultural area, Serena Gundy, Sunnybrook, Ernest Thompson Seton and Taylor Creek natural parklands as well as the new Dentonia par-three golf course. The Central Don will also include Ontario's Centennial Year project, the Ontario Centre of Science and Technology.

Highland Creek Park will contain a par-three golf course and picnic facilities. The suggestion made in 1965 that it be the site of an \$8,000,000 zoological garden is being given second thoughts. South Humber Park may contain one of four future regional playing fields as well as the existing James Garden horticultural centre and a future par-three golf course.

What happens when the Metro parks system reaches 9,500 acres, the maximum expected within the confines of 240 square miles?

Mr. Thompson sees the eventual merging of the Metropolitan Parks Department in 25 years to begin a park acquisition and development program well beyond the existing borders of Metro. He also sees a waterfront park program based on land fill.

"The fact that we are only now beginning to reach a desirable ratio of open space to built-up area is the most emphatic indication that the acquisition program for park land must never stop."

What does a parks commissioner do in the winter?

"Sometimes I take a walk in the park to see what greater use they can be put to during the winter season," he said. The rest of the time he spends in his office doing paper work.

The winter months pass quickly with planning, budgeting and writing reports, not to mention answering telephone calls from Toronto Island residents. "I guess it must be a nice place to live."