WOODSTOCK SENTINEL REVIEW

County tears down community playground

Resident upset there are no plans to rebuild

Bruce Urquhart - POLITICS REPORTER
Wednesday April 27, 2005

The Woodstock Sentinel-Review — The removal of the playground equipment from the County-owned James Street townhouse complex is scheduled to begin today.

Because of urgent liability concerns, county staff will be dismantling the wooden platforms and plastic yellow slides, purging this geared-to-income housing property of “all existing non-conforming playground equipment.”

“I know there are kids at the James Street property, and nobody wants to tear out playground equipment, but when it’s not safe playground equipment, that’s a problem,” said Paul Beaton, the county’s manager of social services and housing.

But the residents of 901-951 James St. aren’t upset by the removal of this potentially hazardous playground equipment. What concerns the families in this townhouse complex is council’s April 13 decision not to replace the playground.

“It’s a shock that they’re not planning to put playground equipment back up,” said Theresa Archer, the complex resident who drafted a petition urging council to reconsider its decision.

“This area is all kids. This is geared-to-income family housing, and almost every home has at least one or two kids.

“To take away the playground is disappointing.”

The county, though, says it has little choice in the matter. Oxford’s 2005 housing budget had included a capital allocation of $11,000 to inspect and replace its existing playground equipment.

Unfortunately, the replacement costs involved with both the James Street townhouses and a similar complex in Ingersoll were estimated to be in excess of $35,000.

“The James Street residents will have access to existing playground equipment at St. Rita’s school,” Beaton wrote in his social services and housing report. “Residents of the Thames Street property (in Ingersoll) will have playground equipment replaced to the extent available within the approved capital budget.”

Yesterday, there was a group of children playing in the soon-to-be-removed James Street playground, spending one last day with the slides, ramps and plastic panels.

“It’s not good. It’s not good at all,” eight-year-old Chelsea Jones said. “I love this playground. It’s fun for skateboarding because when you fall on the (rubber matting), it doesn’t hurt.”

Other children were also saddened by their playground’s fate.

“It’s really good because it’s fun for all the little kids,” eight-year-old Katy Smith said, “especially with the big slides.”

The residents of the townhouse complex received notice of the playground’s imminent removal on April 15, though they had long suspected the facility might be in jeopardy.

“We heard last year that they were going to remove the equipment and they didn’t,” Archer said. “But they were only rumours that we heard from other residents until this year.”

Archer and the other James Street residents have a number of reservations about the playground’s removal. Without a central play area, Archer said the children might wander into

the parking lot, which raises a serious safety concern. The public park in the area, she said, is not designed for smaller children while the equipment at St. Rita's school - the county's suggestion - is only for student use.

And with the planned removal of the townhouses' backyard fences, another "modification" in the complex's 2005 renovations, Archer said there was "nowhere for these little kids to play."

Beaton confirmed the removal of the playground equipment was part of a series of planned renovations for the James Street property. During the next year, the county will be spending about $220,000 to replace furnaces, kitchen cupboards and bathrooms, in addition to new landscaping for the entire property.

Still, these refurbishments, while welcome, do little to alleviate Archer's worries. With the county's decision on the playground made, she is wondering what options are left to the James Street residents beyond her 15-name petition.

"I haven't had time to think about it," she said. "I wouldn't know how to go about it."

Warden Don Woolcott called the maintenance and replacement of the playground equipment a "real challenge" for the county and speculated on the possibility of a community partnership.

"We do need to find a champion to assist this community in supporting (the playground) and that's not impossible to do," he said.

The county's decision was based on a comprehensive report from Playchek Services Inc. that determined the 25-year-old playground equipment did not meet current Canadian Standards Association guidelines. According to an insurance company publication, this non-conforming equipment could leave Oxford liable for any personal injuries.

"We did an inspection at the end of 2003, and we didn't have a single item of conforming playground equipment," Beaton said. "I know it's a very sensitive issue (on James Street), but for us, it's a safety issue and a liability issue."