

No simple solution to plague that's threatening our front lawns



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The simple solution to the plague of front-yard parking pads that is implacably infecting all central Toronto, despite the bristling *cordon sanitaire* erected by downtown ideologues, is just to ban them.

Except for mine, of course. And yours, perhaps. ...

So much for simple solutions. All the claimed exceptions, some of them actually reasonable, combine to make the irritant invincible. The assault on the shade trees of Toronto is the tragedy of the commons in action, visible immediately in brutalized streetscapes. No single person is responsible for it, and nothing can be done to stop it.

Which is precisely why the parking-pad plague commands such attention among the politicians responsible for grappling with it. One could even say their service in this cause - on one side or another - brings out the best in them.

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On the one hand we have Councillor and deputy mayor Sandra Bussin, queen of the Beaches, striving tirelessly to accommodate her tiresome constituents, appealing to "reasonable people with a sense of compassion" to help them ruin the neighbourhood with more parking pads.

On the other hand is Councillor Gord Perks, puritan of Parkdale, who once rescinded approval for an unlicensed pad a constituent had enjoyed for no less than 50 years - and narrowly avoided injury in the fracas that followed the vote.

Unnecessary parking pads, generalized as "too much hard surface," were responsible for the sewer explosion that polluted Sunnyside pool last summer and "shot a 10-foot by 10-foot concrete slab several feet into the air," according to Mr. Perks. More pads, he added, will lead to "massive heat death problems."

Just as somberly, Ms. Bussin witnessed the death of democracy in the scandalously flawed neighbourhood votes conducted to judge applications for new parking pads. Nothing else, she has learned from long experience, exposes the fiction of the official voter's list more scathingly.

Her modest proposal, as recommended by city staff, was to ease pad-acquisition by loosening a requirement that at least half of the neighbours polled about an application must respond, one way or another, for the vote to count.

"We are stuck with this system and the only way to make it a little fairer is to lower the threshold," she said, recommending 25 per cent as the minimum required turnout to determine the validity of a parking-pad vote.

"To lower it to 25 per cent would just let the system off the hook," Councillor Adam Giambrone complained. It would mean that a measly 12.5 per cent of voters could conceivably force a new pad onto a majority of unwilling neighbours, according to Mr. Perks.

But what hook, Councillor Michael Walker wondered, prevents the same weak pluralities from rewarding candidates for municipal office? Mr. Perks, to take one example, came to office in a ward of more than 50,000 residents with a mere 3,816 votes - fewer than one-third of those cast, which in total amounted to fewer than half of all eligible votes.

If the parking pad voting rules applied to council, there would only be one person sitting on it: Councillor Shelley Carroll of Ward 33, Don Valley East, the only electoral district that achieved a 50-per-cent turnout in the 2006 election.

Such are the dilemmas of literal grassroots politics. Or semi-permeable interlock, as the case may be.

In the circumstances, one is forced to admire the politicians who refuse to allow such votes even to take place in their wards. They held their ground yesterday and successfully resisted pressure to let pads proliferate elsewhere. The simple solution is always most satisfying, even when it is no solution at all.