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 - Crime
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- ENTERTAINMENT
- LIFE
- AUTOS
- PHOTOS
- DIVERSIONS
- CLASSIFIEDS
- OBITUARIES

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Rexdale residents locked out of Catholic high school's 'field of dreams'

The new track and field are off-limits, though they were paid for on a promise of public access.

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Peter D'Gama stands in front of the fence that blocks the general public from using the newly refurbished track and football field at Father Henry Carr Catholic high school. The Rexdale resident started a petition seeking public access to the field again.

By: Kristin Rushowy Education Reporter, Published on Wed Jan 11 2012

A new track and a football field were built with public funds in a needy Toronto neighbourhood, with the promise they would be accessible to the community.

But community members are now wondering why there's a fence around the so-called "field of dreams," with a locked gate to keep them out of a schoolyard they'd used — pre-renovation — for years, for morning runs, an evening walk or informal soccer games.

"The dream has turned to what seems a nightmare for many residents," said Peter D'Gama, who helped organize a petition that garnered 240 signatures asking that the Toronto Catholic District School Board give locals access to the yard at Father Henry Carr high school in Rexdale.

But the board says the track and field — which cost almost \$1.6 million, with the federal and provincial governments covering two-thirds of the cost through special recreation infrastructure grants — needs to be protected from wear and tear, which could prove costly, especially for the artificial turf.

Angelo Sangiorgio, the board's associate director of planning and facilities, said it is considering allowing public access to the six-lane rubberized track during certain times, but that is still under discussion.

The field is of particular concern, he added, because it is "susceptible to more damage than the track," especially if it is overused when wet, or if people wear shoes with metal cleats.

But he said the public can already purchase a permit to use the facility — as some local sports organizations do — at a cost of roughly \$50, which means someone is responsible for the field in case there is damage.

"This is really the only artificial turf field we have in the system," added Sangiorgio. "We're not trying to exclude community use — we're just trying to manage it."

Barry Marsh told the Catholic board at a meeting in December that he's lived in the area 25 years and the old field at Henry Carr was a part of a daily routine for many.

"Every morning you could see people running on the track as early as 5 a.m.," he said.

D'Gama noted that the board's plan to limit access wasn't part of its application for the government funds — in fact, the board cited community use many times.

He also said that for individuals, having to purchase permits makes no sense, "because people just want to go in if they are walking by and use the track."

"I think it is the best thing that the board put out a policy that it is open during certain hours, and everybody can use it" for free, he added. "We're not asking for unlimited access, just public hours when it is not already (booked) or being used by the school."

Etobicoke North MP Kirsty Duncan — who supported the board's application for the grants — has called Catholic school officials to "express her displeasure at the public not being allowed access," said her assistant, Chris Ethier.

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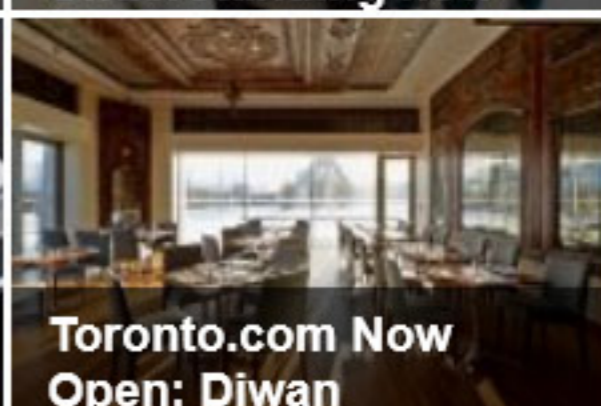
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