

Petrie Island 'ideal location' for Canada Day

■ Laura Cummings

With heavy rainfall causing parking and traffic issues at Petrie Island's Canada Day celebration earlier this month and some residents questioning whether the east-end beach is the best choice for the event, community stakeholders are standing behind the venue.

The Greater Orléans Canada Day Celebration began as a much smaller affair hosted by the Fallingbrook Community Association, recounts David Villeneuve, past president of the group. Their Canada Day celebration was launched in 1988, with the event's inaugural year held at the Apollo Crater – a storm management pond in the community, he explains.

The site then moved four times within the neighbourhood – including near Fallingbrook Elementary School – before relocating to the Ray Friel Centre for several years, Villeneuve continues.

"That was pretty good," he says of the location, with fireworks displayed over Sir Wilfrid Laurier Secondary School's football field and upwards of 20,000 coming out some years to enjoy the show.

But "regulations seem to get tighter every year," inhibiting most fireworks, Villeneuve adds, and with the construction of Ray Friel's double ice pad, the group had to switch venues once again.

In 2004, the community association attempted to shift the event to Avalon – next to a man-made lake – but permission was withdrawn by developer Minto at the last minute, he recounts. The following year, current organizer Fred Sherwin took the reins and moved it to Petrie Island, Villeneuve says – a location his group had considered but ruled out due to logistical problems.

Sherwin, for his part, says when the Fallingbrook Community Association's plans to hold the celebration in Avalon were halted – in addition to a Canada Day event in

Chapel Hill also being cancelled – the absence was obvious.

"There was a void there," he recounts. "Somebody had to step into (the role)."

The initial decision to move the festivities to Petrie was not entirely popular, Sherwin says, though since the relocation attendance has ranged from 16,000 with bad weather to its peak second year of 24,000.

"There were a lot of naysayers," he explains. "The motivation became the challenge in getting it done and proving people wrong."

The only other site that could support such an event would be Millennium Park, Sherwin continues, where organizers would face the same issues with parking and traffic.

"Petrie Island is the ideal location for (Canada Day)," agrees Orléans Coun. Bob Monette, especially with no nearby high-density residential areas where inhabitants could be bothered by the day-long event.

With recent water-quality incidents giving Petrie "a bad reputation," it's all the more important the annual event can showcase what the east-end beach has to offer, he continues.

Parking and traffic issues are the only "negative aspects" of the event, Monette says, attributing problems to the site's makeup, poor weather and sheer size of the celebration. Looking at solutions using OC Transpo buses and citywide Park & Rides may be an idea for future years, he adds.

"There's no question" access is the biggest challenge facing the east-end beach come Canada Day, Sherwin continues, suggesting that some city-funded additions – including paving the causeway and putting in pedestrian extensions – would certainly help year-round.

"As long as people are willing to bike down there, walk down there" the event will continue at Petrie, he says. "It's a place (people) can come that's safe and family-oriented."

