



How Park 96 Found Salvation in a New Groove

by Kevin Brooker, Calgary Herald

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I'll be honest: I'm a typical Calgarian with low expectations for my local community association. To me, it's the place that, at its best, puts on a winter carnival where 20 or 30 people play broomball next to tubs of orange drink and a gross or two of doughnuts. If it fails to generate much esprit de corps, few notice.

Then there's the Parkland Community Association, near Fish Creek Park in the city's southeast.

This weekend, it will stage the marquee event of its busy social year, the fourth annual Parkland Solstice Festival. In some respects, it's a typical community affair, albeit a well-programmed one, what with the fun run, art show, vintage car exhibition and the barbecue and beverages. Kids will enjoy face painting, balloons, a bouncy castle, magic and mini-golf.

Any mortal community association would be satisfied right there. But not the Parkland people. They have high standards to uphold, especially of the musical variety. So their eight-hour live outdoor show on Saturday will feature no less than five bands -- and we're not talking about somebody's uncle's pickup group, either. Among the acts imported to amuse the locals are the Tennessee Three (longtime backup band for Johnny Cash), plus Fathead, a killer R&B outfit from Toronto.

But wait, Parklanders, there's more: Texas guitar legend Johnnie Winter and his crack five-piece band. Johnnie Winter, I tell you!

How does one Calgary community exhibit this strong a pulse?

Turns out it's a classic tale of turning lemons into lemonade.

You see, the 1,400 homes of Parkland were built and sold in the mid-1970s with a particular enticement then in vogue: a gated park for the exclusive use of community residents, much like its more well-known contemporary, Lake Bonavista.

And Park 96, as it was called because each household was mandated to pay \$96 a year for its upkeep, is a lovely, rolling park indeed. It had only one problem: no lake, or anything equally special to get people jazzed about.

The venue was in grim shape five years ago when Kelly Morstad became president of the volunteer community board.

"It was all pitchforks and torches," he recalls of his first meeting with residents. Since the previous board had recently upped annual dues to \$150 per household, many families were flat-out refusing to pay.

Morstad, a former Edmontonian with well-honed community sensibilities, grasped the problem: there was no "there" there.

"Just because we don't have a lake," he asked, "why is this park an albatross and not an asset?"

So, along with a tight corps of fellow volunteers who had met through the association's successful babysitting co-op, Morstad set out to breathe new life into Park 96.

Recent years have seen the construction of an outdoor stage, plus gazebos and a picnic shelter.

There are newly lit and resurfaced tennis courts, a hockey rink to go with the skating plaza, and a sweet toboggan hill.

The playground is state-of-the-art, and last year's water spray park is a huge hit.

Another smash was Morstad's idea of building a championship 18-target disc golf (sometimes called Frisbee golf) course. Young dads now routinely put the kids in the playground with a walkie-talkie while they knock off a quick 18, and they get to call it child care. The course, by the way, is one of the province's best, and has become the site for the Alberta Open for both pro and amateur disc golfers. That goes this weekend, too.

Obviously, Park 96 is thriving.

Last year, when the headliner was Randy Bachman, some residents paid up to 10 years' worth of arrears dues just to regain a magnetic entry card to the park.

If you want to see Johnnie Winter this time, find a Parkland friend to buy you a guest ticket.

Otherwise, the public is invited Sunday for more music, with all donations to Feed the Children Canada.

Memo to would-be community-builders: Show up. Take notes.

(Kevin Brooker maintains his connections in Calgary)