

Lambrick Park Youth Park Process

Looking Back

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INTRODUCTION

It has been almost three years since I first stood in an empty field outside Gordon Head Youth Centre and began to see the possibilities of developing a "Playground for Big Kids".

With many, many hours of dedicated volunteer help, fundraising campaigns and both minor and major setbacks behind us, it is with great pride that I share the following information for others contemplating similar projects.

You will find a brief history of the development of the park, the community process undertaken with youth and families, fundraising events, liability issues, budget, park design, media reports, and related information. I hope

that this information will be useful, and that many other youth focused parks will be developed, as our whole country is sadly lacking in facilities of this nature. Please feel free to contact me with any specific questions after you have read the enclosed information, and I will try to answer any questions.

Obviously, every community will face unique challenges in their efforts to build adequate facilities for youth, but this document may help to provide some solid evidence of success in the inclusion of youth in the process. It is vitally important that the target group is involved from the very beginning, so that the facility is truly a "community" place.

All children, regardless of their age, deserve a place to play. With this as a fundamental philosophy, we build tot lots, play structures and baseball fields throughout the province. Let's remember to look a little wider at our definition of children, and plan to include older youth in activities that they will truly enjoy and respond to.

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COMMUNITY PROCESS

As the Community Services Supervisor for Saanich Parks and Recreation, I am often approached by community members who would like to see various changes in recreational facilities or program offerings. I am always willing to listen and respond to these requests. However, it is very important that the person making the request is aware that I don't "own" the problem in the community.

By this, I mean that the public is often quite anxious to point out design flaws in local parks, insufficient playground space, program scheduling problems etc, and then to "hand it over" for a quick fix by municipal workers. The sad truth is, we often don't have sufficient resources to meet all their needs, until the needs are clearly demonstrated. The solution to this is dramatic and very effective. Let the community know that they "own" the problem, and that they need to help us understand the problem, and we can work together on solutions.

This was the direction that I took when I was first approached by two parents who had concerns about inadequate space for their children to skateboard safely. I let them know that I understood they had a concern, but that it wasn't particularly high on the list of current projects, mostly because I hadn't seen a demonstrated need. However, if they felt strongly about it, I would be willing to work with them to assess the need and see what could be done.

At this point, these resourceful women began to gather "evidence" of the need for a skateboard park in Saanich. They called a meeting with local skateboarders, and I was able to meet over sixty youth who brought their enthusiasm for the sport along with their perspective about the alienation and obstacles they faced on a regular basis.

I spent many weeks after this first meeting going to local skateboard "hangouts", talking with youth and watching their sport. I became very knowledgeable and also much more sympathetic to the plight of these truly dedicated athletes, who were chased out of every space that they tried to practice in. After several more meetings with parents and youth, I was convinced by the numbers and the need, that Saanich Parks and Recreation had an obligation to provide services to this group.

Encouraging the Parks Design Team to attend the next meeting, we soon had the enthusiastic support of some very talented planners. They saw that the youth had extremely good knowledge about structures that would work in a skate park, and were wise enough to follow the kids lead in design. Many hours were spent touring other facilities on the Mainland, watching videos that the youth would bring in, and actually following the skaters to their favourite hangouts.

This process enabled us to have some very detailed information about everything from safety to usage patterns on skateboard parks. Armed with this knowledge, we took the information to the next level, and met with our Director of Parks and Recreation, Don Hunter. To say that his initial reaction was sceptical would be an understatement. Thankfully, the "homework" that had already been done, and the obvious community support for the project were enough to gain approval for the project.

We could then begin fundraising in earnest. (see Fundraising Strategies in this report). Besides raising money, however, the group also felt that they would like to gain recognition for their sport, and for the athletes that were so often "put down". A new image was needed, and it was decided to call the group ISSPY (I Support Saanich Parks for Youth), in order to gain some community recognition. T-shirts were printed with art work designed by the youth. Bumper stickers were made and distributed. Two major skateboarding sessions were held. And best of all, youth and parents began to become more public about their needs around skateboarding.

While the reception was not always positive, most often, the youth were pleasantly surprised to be well received as they began to speak to media, businesses, local service groups and other community members. As the youth began to advocate for themselves, an interesting phenomenon happened. Natural spokespeople developed, and were soon asked to speak on news broadcasts and at other functions. Over the three years of this project, this has been one of the most gratifying developments, as I watch these young people become well prepared public speakers. Whether they continue to skateboard or not, they will always take these other skills with them throughout life.

Another key development has been community recognition for the fact that "big kids need playgrounds too". All members of ISSPY advocated constantly within the community by inviting neighbours to meetings, writing articles for the community paper, talking on the radio, speaking to small business owners in the area, and generally spreading the word that skateboarders are our children and belong in the community.

This campaign has resulted in many wonderful surprises, as elderly people responded with donations; businesses donated goods, services and cash; other communities began enquiring about the process to develop a youth park; and politicians started to support our cause. The resulting publicity enabled us to reach our financial goals despite frequent setbacks.

As you read through this report, you will see the power of community development, and the benefits of a municipality working closely with the group most affected by the project. Although it is often exceptionally difficult to motivate community members at first, the rewards of working with the community last far longer than the end of the building phase. The young people that took part in this project will remember that they were included in every decision, were treated with respect, and as though their opinions counted. This is a powerful message for community members to get, and they will carry this with them long after they've hung up the skateboards.

The other members of the community, from parents to business owners to park designers and architects will also not soon forget their memorable meetings with the young people, and the excitement that a group that is being listened to can generate. It has been a community project of the best type, and when I see the youth skateboarding today, I feel that the physical structure that we ended up with is just a small part of a much larger reward.

The most exciting part of this project was the dynamic community process that took place in order to ensure "ownership" of the concept and of the physical structure. It was vitally important to our philosophical standards that youth be involved in every step of the process, and that the community be educated about the necessity of planning appropriate spaces for youth.

FUNDRAISING STRATEGIES

While the amount to be raised seemed at first to be astronomical, we jumped in with a variety of fundraising strategies. First, with a preliminary estimate of the total cost of the park, we were able to prepare a BC

21 grant with the Gordon Head Lions Club as the sponsor organization. We were hoping that this would cover one third of the cost, with community money and municipal support covering the rest.

1. It's a Puzzle: We had an artists rendering of the proposed park made into a 1000 piece puzzle that we displayed around the community at malls and recreation centres. We sold pieces of the puzzle for \$100 each, and symbolically filled in the puzzle as pieces were bought. The puzzle was a very visual advertisement for the project, and it was something tangible that people could see the "construction" of the park through filling in the blank puzzle. Many young people worked together to buy pieces of the puzzle, and we had a prize draw for sponsors and donors during the campaign.

- Donors received a receipt and a bumper sticker indicating their support of ISSPY.
- Recognition and advertising was offered during our fund raising campaign and at our special events, for sponsors of the puzzle.
- Donors were thanked in advertising donated by the Saanich News and Times Colonist at the completion of the project.
- Sponsors are recognized on the completed puzzle which will be permanently on display at the Backdoor Youth Activity Centre at Gordon Head.
- A business, group or individual purchasing 20 or more pieces (\$2,000) received permanent recognition on a plaque at the completed park.
- Saanich Parks and Recreation was willing to negotiate the type and amount of recognition available depending on level of donation.

2. Pennies For Parks: Buckets were decorated with art work done by ISSPY youth at a work session. These buckets were distributed to community locations throughout Saanich and Greater Victoria. A flyer advertising the "pennies for Parks" initiative was circulated through schools, community centres and businesses. Some youth went door to door soliciting pennies as well. Buckets were picked up regularly by volunteers and the pennies were rolled and deposited at a local bank.

3. T-shirt sales: Several hundred T-shirts were purchased and printed with the most popular images of art work that the youth had drawn. These very popular shirts sold at a marked up price in order to realize a profit for the campaign. Many youth bought shirts, as well as other community members. We also had the shirts on hand to use as prizes and thank-you's for events.

4. Chocolate Sales: ISSPY members sold chocolates at local malls and door to door. While the amounts realized from this endeavour were not huge, it was a way for youth to feel actively involved in the fundraising process.

5. Events : Several skateboarding events were held to raise funds. While the events went a long way to increase awareness of the project and increase enthusiasm among the youth, they were not successful fundraisers, as expenses were also high. However, the events were an important publicity event to draw attention to our fundraising efforts, and resulted in heightened awareness in the community, which translated to more dollars from a larger community after these events. With media coverage, many people who would not otherwise have heard about the project were willing to donate, and we received lots of support from a very diverse community; from seniors to the Boy Scouts.

6. Service Agencies and Businesses: We held many meetings with ISSPY members to encourage and support their fundraising efforts, and to help them plan strategies for approaching service agencies and businesses. Many young people attended service organization meetings, and became proficient at delivering the message and soliciting funds. These young peoples talks were much more eagerly accepted by these groups than if adults spoke about the project. The kids brought some unique perspective to the issues, and appealed emotionally for funds. The same can be said for soliciting donations from businesses.

We had the most success initially with small business owners in the community, and it was from their support that we were able to amass our first small funds. This success led to larger corporations becoming interested, as they could see our progress, and started to believe that there might be some advertising advantage to their business. Most smaller businesses donated simply from the owners interest in making the community a better place.

OTHER FUNDING

As the project began to take form, we realized the difficulties a group of youth and parents would face trying to raise fairly large sums of money. It was at this point that we began to appeal to other funding agencies, such as the Vancouver Foundation. We had reached our limit of fundraising ideas, and had tapped out all the local businesses, and we truly could think of no way to make our \$35,000 contribution grow any larger. We were exhausted!

Our "finest hour" came with the announcement from Vancouver Foundation that they would grant the project \$20,000. This amount completed our "community" commitment of one third of the total funds needed. We were ecstatic, as this meant that we could begin construction as soon as we heard the final word from BC21.

We were confident that the BC 21 grant would be successful, as we were given every indication of support by local MLA's, and we have a long track record in Saanich of successful partnership projects jointly funded by BC21.

It was therefore quite a shock to receive the news that BC21 funding was being suspended indefinitely pending government review of finances, and that our application would not be processed. We were actually able to ascertain that the committee that approves BC21 funding had in fact been defunct for many months prior to us hearing of the funding freeze. This was extremely frustrating for all the youth and parents, who genuinely believed that if they managed to raise their third of the project, that the province would support their endeavour.

With the collapse of BC21 we reached our "darkest hour", as we could not see any way that we could raise another \$55,000. We had exhausted all our fundraising efforts, and tapped out as many local businesses as we could. We simply couldn't bring ourselves to tell the kids that we had failed in our wonderful bid to build the park.

Once again, however, the "miracle" happened. A group of local business owners stepped forward and offered their services to fill the gap left by the BC21 grant pull-out. The Island Equipment Owners Association, headed up by Wayne Dalby, came to speak to our group and let the youth know that they would supply labour and materials to complete the project.

As you can see from the original estimate drafted, we were projecting figures based on a loose original design. It was also projected with costs almost three year old at the time of actual construction. Because of this, the actual cost of the park construction was much higher than originally estimated. However, we were extremely fortunate that many, many construction companies and sub contractors donated time and materials in order to meet these increased cost. Saanich Parks and Recreation also absorbed some of the increased costs. Our vision of a full service youth park, complete with outdoor cafe and volleyball courts is still short of funding.

We are still holding our breath about receiving BC 21 funding, as the program has released some money recently to community projects. However, the likelihood is that the municipality will need to budget for the future improvements.

LIABILITY AND SUPERVISION ISSUES

Almost the first questions we received from anyone when we began to talk about building a skateboard facility were concerning safety and liability. I must admit that these were also grave concerns I had as well, and I wasn't sure that the municipality should be exposing itself to such risk as operating a park like this.

However, in further detailed research, it became very obvious that liability and safety issues would not be major problems. For one thing, the park was situated close to a recreation centre which allows access to telephone and emergency care in case of an accident. As well, the situation of the park enables the youth centre and recreation centre staff to keep an eye on activities at the park.

We gathered anecdotal reports from other communities that had skateboard facilities as well as from skaters themselves. The information we received from communities such as North Vancouver, was that their insurance coverage was the same as for any of their facilities such as tennis courts or lacrosse boxes. In ten years they have not had reports of any injuries other than minor scratches. They recommended that we post sign indicating the recommended safety gear, which we have done.

From speaking to emergency room doctors, it was clear they see more children brought to the hospital emergency room for injuries received on monkey bars, swings and teeter totters, as well as trampolines and from sports such as baseball, than youth injured while skateboarding. After watching many hours of skateboarding, I would ascribe this to the fact that young people spend many hours improving their sport in small increments, and the huge jumps and heartstopping manoeuvres we sometimes see are the result of hours of practice and confidence in ability.

This was made clear to us in the design phase of the park, as youth helped us to develop elements and jumps that would be safe as well as challenging for many ages. Certain heights of some of the elements such as the pyramid made it too difficult for younger skaters to get up, and so posed no problem with them "flying" off the top.

Also, there is an incredible sense of "etiquette" involved in skateboarding, and older skaters watch out for the younger ones, and give advice and demonstrations. People wait their turn, and the flow of "traffic" is generally easy and unhurried, which means accidents are rare.

With over 300 hundred skaters at opening day, our St. John's Ambulance attendant treated one bee sting! We have had four reports of first aid administered by Gordon Head Recreation Centre staff over the first four months of operation . All incidents were minor.

The other major safety concern has been the fear of large groups of youth congregating in one place, and the potential for problems. We have identified some drug and alcohol use on some evenings at the park. Our youth centre staff, as well as a practicum student have been working with the group to discourage this. It must be noted however, that the development of the youth skate park can not be seen as the reason these young people are drinking! However, some local residents have expressed the opinion that the skate park is centering the focus in one area. While this may be true, it also has the advantage of being easily accessible to police and the youth centre, and both are making sure that there are regular patrols.

Philosophically, I feel very strongly that parks and facilities for young people can not be built "out of sight, out of mind". If there are problems such as drugs and alcohol occurring on the new park, you may be sure that they were occurring somewhere already in the community! With the incentive of the skatepark, community workers can make contact now with a large group of kids, and involve them in the life of the community. All of our children deserve a place to play.

The skateboard park, being a public facility, should receive the same attention as a soccer field, tennis court, etc. We do not charge for these facilities, and no fees will be collected for use of the skatepark. Skateboarding is a wonderfully self expressive sport that can look after itself without excessive organization. The youth have proven this time and again while we put together events during our fundraising campaign. Supervision of the park, and fencing and fee collection would be a horrendously expensive and ridiculous endeavour.

DESIGN

Perhaps the most interesting part of this entire project was the process of design, and the youth involvement in a truly youth inspired plan. The patience of Gerald Fleming and Gary Darrah, our parks design team, added greatly to the experience. From the first meeting, Gerald and Gary made it very clear to the youth participants that their expertise would be solicited.

The youth responded by bringing in video tapes of parks and areas that they enjoyed skating in. They were very vocal about the kinds of elements needed, the take off and landing room necessary and the size and shape and integration of all parts. They also told Gerald and Gary about parks they enjoyed on the mainland, and they made some special trips to see and photograph these.

Our design team would carefully consider all suggestions, and drafted many plans for approval by the group. It was a wonderful process of give and take, which resulted finally in consensus about what the park would look like. The final plans were approved by the group, before they were finalized.

The design is intended to serve as a multi level "street" skate park for skaters of mixed abilities. The idea to eliminate a large "bowl" construction came out of the knowledge that this would attract an older , more experienced, and higher level skater, leaving less room for younger youth and beginners. While more half pipe constructions would have suited some of our skaters, everyone felt comfortable with the compromise between safety and skill development.

We have incorporated a number of elements that skateboarders pointed out that can be found around the community where they had in the past liked to skate (eg: the University and underground parking garages.). These are things like steps, railings and curbs, all of which we have tried to duplicate in the park environment, in order to attract people away from some other favourite skateboard spots.

While we can now see some minor adjustments that might have improved usage, we are satisfied that this design has the potential for the greatest amount of use by the largest group of youth. It works equally well for rollerbladers, and also receives use by BMX bikers.

CONSTRUCTION AND MAINTENANCE

BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

In these days of municipal cutbacks and economic downsizing, we were able to build a wonderful facility exactly to the needs of the community. While the municipality contributed to the overall costs, the facility we received was far grander and more "user friendly" than we could possibly have built on our own. The advantages of involving the community in fundraising and construction are numerous:

1. Economic assistance- fewer tax dollars were spent on this project, and citizens could contribute directly to a project that they wanted to support.
2. Community Development- the targeted youth community gained skills in public speaking, fundraising methods for community projects, media relations, and design process. These are skills that will ultimately help in any future endeavours these young people pursue.
3. Community contact- as municipal workers, we sometimes lose contact with the community we are supposed to be serving. The public is often faced with a bureaucrat, who does not seem to have much empathy for the general public. With this project, and other similar projects through Community Services, a more "human" face is put on public interactions.
4. Media Coverage- the nature of this project was appealing to the media, and we tried to keep in the "spotlight" in order to raise community consciousness for youth needs. We often spoke to reporters and asked them to interview the youth instead of the adults or municipal workers. This served to give an exciting and positive slant to all our media coverage.
5. Community Awareness of Issues - In order to successfully complete this project, a huge amount of community awareness had to take place. This has spilled over into general awareness of youth issues, and is instrumental in support for future projects.
6. Community Ownership- the business owners who climbed up on their excavators and began the

MEDIA AND PUBLICITY

A large part of this project was an extension of a philosophical mandate that Community Services has been promoting in Saanich over the past eight years. It is vitally important that youth are seen as a powerful resource within our community, and are not marginalized by being ignored and rejected by the larger adult society.

As Supervisor of Community Services, it was essential to me to ensure that a community development process took place within this project, so that there would be some future benefit to the youth community, and not just a physical structure built. I believe that our major media and publicity campaign was exceptionally successful in raising awareness of youth issues within the municipality, and highlighting the lack of recreational services to some groups in our society.

Our young people appeared articulate and intelligent on TV broadcasts, and in radio interviews. We received a lot of attention in local newspapers, as well as farther afield. Everyone involved on the project was outspoken and enthusiastic about our abilities to succeed.

The media attention was particularly helpful in bringing in large corporate donations, but more importantly it helped the average citizen see our project in terms of community need. The youth who participated felt particularly empowered when they saw the media attention, and were for once in a positive spotlight, and able to highlight their accomplishments in their sport, rather than receiving negative publicity in the media.

I have included a number of articles with this report, which may also help readers trace some of the history of our project.

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