

We're going to build a what? City-run skateparks are not a recipe for disaster - includes related article on skate-park video - Cover Story

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We see these kids everywhere. Flying through the parking lot, down the sidewalk and up the middle of the street. For the six million skateboard enthusiasts in this country, every inch of cement is their court and every obstacle is their hoop. And if you've seen these kids, no doubt you've seen the sign, "No Skateboards Allowed." The fact is, no matter how alluring a rail, bank or curb along Main Street USA may be to a skateboarder, it wasn't designed for that specific use, which is why many skaters are viewed as unruly vandals and dangers to themselves and the public. In response, local ordinances are passed prohibiting skateboarding in commercial and public areas. Some municipalities even go so far as to restrict activity in residential areas.

So what's a skateboarder to do? While many will knowingly and willfully break the law, a few will mobilize and march down to their city council and ask for the same thing that's done for the baseball, soccer basketball, and tennis players, provide a space that they too can enjoy, without fear of prosecution or injury. With the overwhelming success that park and recreation departments have had with city-run skateboard parks lately, the growing trend is to honor their request.

Dispelling the Myth

Certainly, for any park and recreation professional who begins the process of planning or researching a public skatepark, the issues of safety and liability are of the greatest concern. How safe is this sport? Is this going to bankrupt my city with never-ending liability claims? Are there actually people who know how to design these things? Not to

worry, municipal skateparks can be just as safe (if not safer) and just as much fun as any other recreational activity we can offer, without breaking the bank.

According to Jim Fitzpatrick, executive director of the International Association of Skateboard Companies (IASC), hundreds of skateboard manufacturers and companies supply American skateboarders with the most contemporary equipment available, contributing to yearly retail sales of more than half a billion dollars. But for three decades, despite its popularity, skateboarding has had to fight for recognition as a practical form of recreation.

Perhaps the most damaging prejudice is the notion that skateboarding is an unsafe sport. When compared to other recreational activities, skateboarding has a smaller percentage of reported injuries per participant (.49%) than other activities, including soccer (.93%), baseball (2.25%) and basketball (1.49%).

According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), of all persons treated each year for skateboard related injuries, one-third of the injuries are suffered by new participants who have been skating for less than a week. While proper safety equipment is vital to injury -- and liability -- prevention, it is even more important that new riders wear adequate protective equipment while they are developing balance and body control skills.

Even though each facility has its own rules governing safety equipment, there are additional safety measures that park and recreation practitioners can project upon participants to reduce and minimize injuries due to falls. Supplement the basics -- helmet, elbow and knee pads -- with wrist braces, padded clothing, gloves, or even special shoes that are designed for skateboarding. As with any other sport where safety equipment is recommended, make sure the equipment fits well and does not restrict movement, vision or circulation. Learning

how to fall properly can also mean the difference between a bruised ego and a fractured wrist,

Albert Fierro, vice president of the Association of Bay Area Governments Pooled Liability Assured Network (ABAG PLAN) Corporation, a provider of general liability and property insurance to 30 cities in the San Francisco Bay Area, says that "the issue of liability is really not there." Three of their member cities have skateboard parks, none of which have had any skateboarding claims since the beginning of the insurance program in 1986.

Fierro said that he would like to see cities take an affirmative step in providing skating areas in more public parks; areas that are treated just like basketball courts. One way Fierro hopes to achieve this goal is to expose the "two-headed liability beast" as a myth in the minds of the uninformed.

He offers some suggestions for communities considering skateboard parks: include skaters in the design process; involve professional risk managers and landscape architects during final design and implementation; and -- in his opinion -- open the park only to "free play" without supervision. Lastly, abundant signage in the park should be posted noting the hours of operation and the required use of safety equipment.

However, it is important to understand that skateparks do not come in "one size fits all." The following testimonies prove that you can have similar needs and still have different rules, facilities and policies.

Huntington Beach, CA

Bill Fowler, superintendent of Recreation and Human Services for the City of Huntington Beach (CA), says that after an ordinance prohibiting skateboarding in commercial areas was passed, it was evident something had to be done. "We are about providing safe opportunities

for everyone, not just the ones who play a particular sport." It opened up the opportunity to work with a whole new population of youth.

Fowler's department oversees two city-run skateparks. The Murdy Park skatepark opened in August 1993, and the other park, which is located on the campus of Huntington Beach High School, opened in 1994. Each is free to use and cost about \$70,000 to build. They are both "street" style parks, with concrete benches, rails, curbs, and small ramps. The specifically designed challenges of the skateparks quickly lured the loiterers from the shopping mall parking lots.

Four years later, Fowler describes the end result as a win/win situation in what was before thought to be a zero-sum game. Soon, police were expending less time and resources chasing skateboarders. They were working with the kids, and it turn, the kids were feeling less antagonized by the authority figures. If it hadn't been for the police enforcing the ordinance in the first place, the park and recreation department might never have had the chance to get involved, and the skaters wouldn't have a safe, legal place to meet.

Fowler adds that the skateboarding community's "positive mentality" really helped their cause, proving them to be committed and unified. "Although these kids aren't into team sports," said Fowler, "they still need to show off their moves, and they just want a place to do that."

Fowler went on to dispell other misconceptions about skatepark-related hassles. When asked about vandalism, he replied, "We've never really had any major incidents. They pretty much police themselves." Fowler also adds that skateparks don't require any more attention than the baseball diamond or blacktop.

Is this asking for trouble liability-wise? Karen Foster, risk manager for the City of Huntington Beach, doesn't think so. "It's an extremely successful program that's proven to be beneficial to the community." To date, there have been no liability claims against either of the

skateparks. Even though Foster said there were concerns at the beginning, the clientele realizes that there is an "assumption of risk" in this activity.

There are signs making participants aware of the safety requirements - pads, helmets and other safety equipment -- even though they are not strictly enforced. Foster said that they have not taken out any additional liability insurance for either park. They are covered by the same general insurance that blankets Huntington Beach.

Fowler strongly recommends that other cities with public skating problems take a closer look at city-run skateparks. And it looks like others have; Fowler said that his department has received "hundreds of requests for information from cities in almost every state in the country."

Ocean City, MD

The City of Ocean City (MD) has one of the oldest municipal skateparks in use. The 20-year-old Ocean Bowl Skatepark was also built in response to a police ordinance, still in effect, banning skateboarding on streets and sidewalks during warm-weather months. The fenced-in facility, which contains a half-pipe and bowl, attracts thousands of users each year. The 16,000-square foot facility is open year-round, with varying hours and days of operation, depending on the season.

To skate at the Ocean Bowl Skatepark participants must first pay a yearly (\$20 for O.C. residents, \$40 for non-residents), weekly (\$20), or daily (\$7) fee. Second, they must sign a liability waiver; those users under the age of 18 must have a parent sign for them. Third, users must have a helmet, knee and elbow pads and wrist guards. No exceptions.

Do all these precautions have an impact on safety? "Absolutely," says Susan Petito, Ocean City's assistant director of Recreation and Parks, "the injury rate has been surprisingly low." City of Ocean City Risk Manager Ralph Stitt is quick to add that there have been no liability claims made against the facility. Both Stitt and Petito attribute this success to the aforementioned rules, and to crackerjack supervision by an experienced, capable staff that does more than babysit.

In case of an injury, the city is covered by a supplemental insurance policy, in addition to self-insurance, that will, for example, pay a deductible on an insured individual after treatment.

A pressing issue at hand for the Ocean Bowl Skatepark is the need for redesign and renovation. Twenty years of wear, tear and salt air have left their mark. Originally the facility was comprised of two bowls. The half-pipe wasn't added until Hurricane Gloria destroyed the larger of the bowls in 1984. Plans are now in the works for \$150,000 in improvements to the park. Possibilities include adding a street course, mini-ramps and another bowl, which would accommodate skateboarders and in-line skaters of different skill levels. These improvements would not increase the size of the park, but make better use of the space.

Recently, the facility started renting out safety equipment, the use of which is mandatory. This has generated additional revenue, increased traffic and at the same time, reiterated the city's commitment to safety. Ocean Bowl's, policies and rules may differ from its West Coast counterpart, but the need for a safe, legal spot to skate is the same, as are the reactions from the field. "This gives the kids a creative outlet," says Petito.

Designing Motion

Landscape Architect Ken Wormhoudt, has designed eight public skateboard tracks that are currently in use, and is working with cities

on another 20. He says that the best explanation for the recent explosion in public skating facilities is due to the popularity of the ones that already exist.

Wormhoudt never expected that these types of projects would occupy this much of his time. "I have definitely had more fun doing this than anything else that I've ever done," says Wormhoudt. He added that a great deal of his enthusiasm comes from the skaters themselves. "They are totally non-competitive, always cheering each other on and very unified. And this is the sport they're passionate about,"

Which brings us to his most emphatic point about the design process. Involve the skater. Before anything else, Wormhoudt meets with local skaters and confers with them to see what type of facility is going to work best for the community. During these meetings, the skaters are given clay to construct shapes that represent the obstacles they want. Wormhoudt believes that this approach works to ensure that these parks are both safe and fun. If the park can't hold the interest of the skater, it won't keep them there for very long.

According to Wormhoudt there are a few guides you can follow in developing your own skatepark. The space considerations should be between 10,000 and 15,000 feet. This will vary depending on what type of park you are building (street scene, or bowls, or ramps, or all of the above). The total cost per square foot should be kept between \$8 and \$10.

Design elements of the park can also minimize danger for participants.

For example, bowls that are sunk below ground level can provide a safe way for the skater to "step-out" or "ride-out" of a new or difficult trick back onto the ground level of the park. Wormhoudt said that he feels most comfortable with steel-reinforced concrete, trowled smooth, for safety, durability and ease of design implementation. He also added that these structures are not the public eyesores that you would expect. Architecturally, many of them are attractive, free-standing

forms that you might not associate with skating at all, if it were not for the hordes of eager skaters crowded around.

Once the skatepark is complete, Wormhoudt says that most parks require no routine maintenance whatsoever. The skaters realize that excessive littering, destruction, or abuse can close down a skatepark just as fast as it went up and generally clean up after themselves, providing that appropriate waste facilities are available. It's not unusual to see a skater bring his or her own push broom to keep the area free of debris.

Although skaters take initiative in clean-up efforts, one of their unique forms of self-expression can unwittingly become a hazard in itself. Wormhoudt expressed concern about graffiti and the tendency for it to accumulate on the actual skating surface, and over time, become slick. Sandblasting is not an option because it alters the surface even more. However, if the skaters are shown that graffiti can adversely impact the operation of the park--whether that means temporary closings due to maintenance needs, or shut down all together--it is more likely that they will be as responsible about graffiti as they are about similar issues.

Just Do It

In either method--or combination of--one truth prevails, skateparks are not the dangerous liability traps that they first appear to be. Clearly, each city will run their facility as they see appropriate. The issues of whether or not to charge admission, supervise or insure each individual park are best answered when all the options, benefits and potential pitfalls are known.

If there are enough skateboarders to continually mandate against their access and participation, could it also be that there are enough skateboarders to serve as recreators and sports enthusiasts? No

matter how dangerous you think a skateboard park may be, skateboarding is not any safer in the middle of the street.

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You probably don't know it, but there used to be a skateboard ramp in your neighbor's backyard. It might not have been up for more than a week or a month, but it was there. A parent, realizing that the safest place to skate definitely was not the street, gave in to the repeated pleadings for a place to kill the grass for the summer. But at the same time, the same parent saw that their son or daughter and a couple of friends suddenly multiply into throngs of kids. The ramp, then, usually found its way from the backyard to the woodpile. If it didn't happen that way, maybe a city official stopped by or called just to let the parents know that they knew about it. It's not that the parent didn't want their kids skateboarding, it's just that they don't want to be responsible for the safety of every skateboarder in the time zone. And entrepreneurs shied away from private facilities due to the usual liability worries and the fact that you can't cram 100 skaters in a space that would accommodate as many rollerskaters.

Now that the word is out that cities across the United States are providing public skating areas--like basketball and tennis courts--your department might be looking into providing for their communities; enter the S.Park Revolution, the video primer for the skatepark uprising. This educational tool is offered--at cost--to anyone interested in furthering the common causes of skateboarding and in-line skating by learning about the many benefits that skateparks offer for both city and skater.

The S.Park Revolution documents, in detail, what it takes to start the ball-bearings rolling. The first part features mayors, risk managers, city attorneys, and fellow park and recreation professionals, dispelling common fears and misconceptions about city-run skateparks. The

second part deals with the particulars, including: funding, cost, location, and size. It starts the networking process, connecting the cities that know first-hand what their skatepark has done for their community and the cities that want to know.

Airwalk, Morgan Stone (of Groove Productions) and I created this video to address the tough questions that every kid, parent, city council member, and park and recreation professional asks about city-run skateparks. We are committed to ensuring that the millions of in-line skaters and skateboarders don't have to wait forever to skate safely on courses that accommodate their abilities. Airwalk has been pledged to donate to a fund that will be dispensed to non-profit skateparks.

From soft drink commercials to full-scale events like the ESPN Extreme Games, in-line skating and skateboarding have been receiving national attention and are more popular than ever. The time is now to recognize the need for public skating facilities. We must realize that our world is changing, and as it does, so will the concept of traditional sports.

To receive a copy of the S.Park Revolution, send a check for \$7.00 (to cover postage and handling) payable to S.Park Video, to:

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