

# Towns seeing need to build skateboard parks

*By Eric R. Danton, The Hartford Courant*

HARTFORD, Conn. -- On television, skateboarders are cocky rebels, skating where they please and poking fun at stuffy authority figures.

But as the sport increasingly takes hold in real life, many skateboarders are normal teens -- with nowhere to go. Most towns have no designated areas for skateboarders. Skateboarding on the street or in parking lots is unsafe and draws the ire of local residents and businesses. And skating on public property can lead to encounters between skaters and police.

Now, to legitimize their activity, skateboarders are teaming with authority figures to secure safe, sanctioned places to skate.

And they're getting results. Town-run skateboard parks have opened across Connecticut, and youngsters in a host of other towns are lobbying for parks.

"If they're going to kick us out of every place we go, they've got to give us a place to skateboard," said Jason Paternostro, 15, who finished his freshman year at Manchester High School.

"I just wanted to have someplace to go," said Matt Snyder, 18, a recent Portland High School graduate who got the park set up in Portland with the help of friend Patrick Green, 17, and local officials.

But youngsters who want skateboarding's equivalent of a baseball field or basketball court have the sometimes difficult task of convincing their elders that skating deserves the same treatment given to mainstream sports.

"It can really help with self-esteem," said Ben Custin, 16, who completed his sophomore year at Somers High School. "For kids who feel like they can't make (sports) teams, it shows they can do something."

Advocates say skateboarding is a way to connect with teens who have no interest in the more traditional sports.

"I think it gives a whole group of kids who didn't like those sports or didn't like the structure of team sports another avenue to explore," said Mark Philhower, planning and zoning chairman in East Hampton and father of two skateboarders. Without the benefit of town funds, Philhower organized a volunteer effort among local youngsters to raise money for a skateboard park.

"Some kids kind of get left out if they're not in Little League or basketball, and this is a chance to make some new friends and get some exercise," said Dan Pendergraph, 11, a pupil at Bennet Middle School in Manchester who has distributed surveys to area students for a committee created to determine the level of community interest in a park.

Phillips H. Roland, a Somers selectman who helped organize local youngsters' bid for a skateboard park, said municipal officials need to realize that skateboarding is not likely to disappear.

"Sports in America are changing," Roland said. "When I was a kid, I looked forward to going to baseball games with my father. Now, in the '90s, kids are watching ESPN2 and the X-Games," a series of competitions involving alternative athletics such as skateboarding, in-line skating and biking.

Prompted by skateboarders hungry for recognition, many towns are re-evaluating their recreation activities.

"We needed to look at other sports," said Portland First Selectman Ed Kalinowski. "Why shouldn't a municipality provide for another function? Not everyone is into softball."

By building a \$14,000 skateboard park, Kalinowski said, his town has moved most skateboarders off the street and forestalled much of the damage they do to public property.

"It has curbed about 95 percent of the problems in our town with skateboards, and it is a safe, controlled atmosphere," Kalinowski said.

Bill DeMaio, recreation superintendent in New Britain, said problems with skateboarding helped jump-start plans for a park that will open next spring or summer.

Though they vary in size, cost and construction materials, the parks usually contain concrete or wooden ramps and ledges and metal railings mounted close to the ground on which skaters practice tricks. Often, as in Somers, they are built over tennis courts or other existing structures that are no longer widely used.

Officials and potential private sponsors in some towns have been reluctant to set up skateboard parks because of concerns about liability and insurance costs.

In Manchester, the board of directors has twice left money for a skateboard park out of the budget, and last summer, the Rotary Club in Somers decided not to help fund the park there, citing potential liability and maintenance costs.

But supporters say those are poor excuses for not building the parks.

"That's nonsense when they tell you that," Kalinowski said, adding that Portland's insurance cost was not affected by opening the skateboard park. "To me, that's just a way of not doing it."

Towns with skate parks usually have rules requiring skaters to wear helmets and pads, and some, such as Somers, require youngsters and their parents to sign a waiver.

"There's liability for everything. When you build stuff for other sports, there's liability for that, too," Paternostro said.

Though costs vary between insurance companies, liability for ice hockey, soccer, football and baseball can be greater than the liability for skateboarding, said Chris Silver, Manchester's recreation supervisor.

"Look at the inherent risk of not building a park," Silver said. "These kids are on streets and sidewalks, and somebody could get killed."

In many towns, including East Hampton, Portland, Somers and Suffield, skateboarders were responsible for designing the parks, as well as presenting their plans to local boards and commissions. Skaters help to maintain the finished products, too.

Adult advocates say they are impressed at how teen-age skaters care for their parks and watch out for each other.

"It's allowed the kids to be somewhat accountable, and being accountable, we see them policing themselves," Roland said.

Local officials say involving youths in the planning stages is also a great civics lesson.

"It's getting the young people involved with the town, seeing how the process works," said Kalinowski, who made sure that skateboarders did most of the Portland park's design work.

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