
Building “the Getaway” – Teen Playground in Rockford, Illinois¹

Presenter:
Gayle Dixon,² Supervisor

Background

The Youth Recreation Council (YRC) was created by the Rockford, Illinois, Park District to address the needs and desires of young people in the Rockford Community and to provide youth with opportunities required for them to achieve productive and meaningful futures. YRC held several sessions to identify teen needs and interests in the Rockford/Loves Park Communities. The Council was also responsible for conducting two communitywide youth summits, including one for at-risk students. At the summits, teens gave the community an overall grade of D-minus in addressing the major challenges facing youth. These challenges included illiteracy, crime, dropouts, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, employment, and recreation. Results from middle-school and high-school surveys found that 69% of middle-school youth agreed with the statement: “Oftentimes I feel bored because there is nothing to do.” Only a slightly lower 61% of high-school youth reported they were bored. Students complained that they felt isolated and disconnected from the larger community. Teens throughout the community expressed a desire for a safe, secure, place to go where they could enjoy themselves, hassle-free.

Program Description

Objectives

The primary objectives of YRC are to:

- (1)serve in an advisory capacity on issues of concern and on activities related to use provided by the Rockford Park District;
- (2)organize, provide, and conduct programs and projects of interest to high-school youth in the Rockford Park District planned and conducted by the YRC with advice and guidance from Rockford Park District staff;
- (3)promote the development of leadership qualities in youth involved in the YRC organization and in participants in YRC programs;
- (4)work with existing recreational agencies, youth groups, and recreational programs to improve overall youth programming and participation;
- (5)develop new recreation programs for high-school age youth; and
- (6)serve as a line of communication between youth and adults, and between youth themselves.

The YRC suggested a bold solution to teen needs in the Rockford community: teens would plan, design, build (including raising the needed funds and identifying donors of food, recruiting volunteers, tools, and materials) and program “the Getaway” teen playground, a first in the nation and modeled after the two successful Youth Playworks projects in town.

¹ Material is taken edited by Witt, P.A., & Crompton, J.L. (Eds.). (1996). *Recreation programs that work for at-risk youth: The challenge of shaping the future*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc. Out of print, used by permission of publisher

² Rockford Parks District 1401 N. 2nd Street Rockford, IL 61107 Phone: (815) 987-8845

The YRC enlisted the services of a nationally recognized playground architect. Collaboration between the architect, the teens, and the community resulted in the Getaway being built entirely through volunteer effort. The Getaway is an economical, high-quality, custom-designed supervised play structure which offers a wholesome, unique community experience for teens.

Planning

The YRC, together with an adult community leader site committee, selected a wooded park picnic area in Blackhawk Park as the site for the innovative playground. Criteria used in the site selection process included: appropriate topography; visibility; compatibility with other park use; neighborhood support; safe accessibility; parking accessibility; mass transit availability; and easy accessibility for police, ranger, and emergency vehicles. The site is in the approximate geographic center of the community. The process of building a creative playground was divided into three segments. Each is described in the following paragraphs.

Design Day was the official kickoff of the community effort. On September 27, 1990, the architect evaluated the potential of the Blackhawk Park playground site and visited area high schools to solicit student input for the 64,000 square foot playground. Ideas included a large stage and dance floor, a changeable maze, a disorienting room with murals and mirrors, an obstacle course, teen-sized swings and slides, seating for hundreds of people, picnic areas, and a tree house. Ideas were collected and then transformed into a schematic plan drawing of the playground that depicts the dreams of the teens within the constraints of the site.

Organization Phase: A unique aspect of developing the playground was that it relied on the community to unite behind the project in support of the teens. Joint teen/adult committees were formed to secure all the tools, materials, volunteer workers, funds, food, and public relations needed to create the playground. A representative from each school served as committee coordinator for one of these core committees, and he or she was responsible for following through with the identified needs and requirements, and for obtaining additional student and adult volunteers to serve on the committee.

Construction Weekend: The construction phase was led by the architect. Due to the size and complexity of the project and the ages (13-19) of the majority of volunteer workers, a longer than average building schedule was planned:

Pre-Build	September 19-22	1991
Build I	October 2-6	1991
	(Achieved 65% completion)	
Build II	April 23-26	1992
	April 29-May 3	1992

Fundraising

Two hundred thousand dollars were needed for construction costs. Fundraising was seen as an opportunity to generate support and enthusiasm among members of the community. Twenty-three grant/foundation applications were submitted to local corporations and organizations. Individual donors, businesses, and service organizations also contributed. Coupon book sales and T-shirt sales also supported the fund drive. The Rockford Airport Authority aided the project by hosting the first major fundraiser at one of their airport hangars.

Volunteers

People of all ages worked each building day from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. YRC members were trained in the necessary skills to be foremen on the site and to work with volunteer crews. Approximately 7,625 person days of volunteer assistance were contributed for sawing, hammering, drilling, and sanding, as well as food preparation, first-aid, and volunteer information. Typically, these playground projects utilize the skills of adults. However, the majority of these volunteers were teens (ages 13-19), some working with adults or parents, but many working in crews made up solely of teens. The volunteers included groups from all of the high schools, building classes, middle-school and elementary classes, clubs, sport teams, juveniles required to do community service, scouts, and youth church groups.

Food

Feeding workers was a major factor in convincing the three-hour shift volunteer to increase his or her commitment to three days. The total cost of food was zero. By showing commercial businesses that this was a widespread community endeavor, large donations of food were acquired from local restaurants, wholesalers, supermarkets, and fast-food franchises to provide on-site meals during the building phase.

Tools

The task of the tools committee was to assemble all the tools necessary for construction of the playground, to ensure that these tools were

distributed efficiently and in a safe, serviceable condition throughout the building period, and to return tools to their owners after construction. Sources of donated tools included contractors, utility companies, public works departments, rental firms, parents, and tool companies.

Materials

The duties of the materials committee were to seek donations of specified supplies and materials to use during construction. A donation of supplies was considered to be more valuable than a cash donation because it helped foster greater community commitment to the project. Sources of donated materials included lumber yards, gravel and concrete suppliers, hardware and discount stores, steel companies, manufacturers, and paint, plumbing, auto parts, and garden supply stores.

Public Relations

Public relations efforts helped establish the validity and uniqueness of the project. These efforts helped arouse the enthusiasm of the community and elicit community pride (see Exhibit 35A). The sense of community was a key in securing donations of money, materials, tools, and volunteer help.

Ongoing Guidance for the Program

The YRC remains the controlling force of what happens at the Getaway. It is responsible for soliciting input from respective schools, making the decisions, and formulating future direction as the project proceeds. It has selected peak teen use times, including supervised hours, times, and season length. It is directly involved in creating and selecting the activities that are programmed and help the Getaway staff implement their ideas.

Young adults (ages 13-19) have priority at the Getaway. The playground is open daily to the public, but special teen hours are reserved each evening. Supervised teen activities are programmed from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

With the expansion of teen programming within the Park District, the operation of the Getaway teen playground has now become the responsibility of a full-time Pre-Teen/Teen Program Supervisor. The evening operation is run by two seasonal part-time facility managers and four teen technicians. The Rockford Park Rangers are responsible for security.

Youth must show a picture ID or purchase a Getaway ID to enter the facility. Promotion efforts center around flyers outlining the program. Individual event flyers publicizing specific events rely on teen distribution and word-of-mouth. Summer Hot Night Events are publicized through public service announcements and local newspapers and the Rockford Park District calendar of events and seasonal brochures.

Exhibit 35A

The Getaway

What has	Where can teens go
142 doors	to hang out with friends
750 poles	to loiter without hassle
1,450 pounds of galvanized nails	to hide in a maze
3,040 gallons of sealer	to swing from monkey bars
3,700 feet of utility poles	to dance to live bands
and a sound system that	to sit under the stars
will knock your socks off?	to just be themselves?

Financing and Resource AcquisitionError! Bookmark not defined.

Revenues:

Rockford Park District 1991	\$30,000
Capital Improvement Program 1992	58,000
Youth Recreation Council Fundraisers	8,298
Cash Donations from Local Individuals and Businesses	4,758
Trusts, Grants, Foundations	54,200
In-kind Value of Donations of Materials/Equipment	<u>35,613</u>
Total:	\$190,869

Expenses:

Architect Fees	\$43,407
Material Costs	112,495
Equipment	7,819
Supplies	5,590
Promotion	2,676
Maintaining Facility	<u>4,425</u>
Total:	\$176,412

1995 Operating Budget

Revenues:

Individual Recreation Fees	\$1,000
Miscellaneous Recreation Fees	1,000
Concessions	3,000
Sponsorships, Donations	<u>2,000</u>
Total:	\$7,000

Expenses:

Personnel:	
Regular Salaries	\$21,912
Seasonal Salaries	15,500
Employee Benefits	<u>8,931</u>
Subtotal	\$46,343

Supplies:

Operating Supplies	\$3,050
Food/Beverage (Resale)	2,875
Maintenance Supplies	3,600
Program Supplies	<u>3,700</u>
Subtotal:	\$13,225

Contracted Services:

Entertainment	\$10,900
Transportation	7,888
Advertising	3,000
Electricity	5,000
Other Professional Services	<u>7,350</u>
Subtotal:	\$34,138

Total: \$93,706

Measurement of Program Outcome

Although it took a little longer than anticipated, the teens' dream of a place of their own became a reality with completion of the Getaway teen playground. The program effectively met the goals and objectives of the YRC. The group responded to needs expressed by high-school-age youth in the community when they selected building a teen playground as their number one priority. Leadership qualities were developed among YRC members through their work as chairpersons of their respective committees.

YRC members studied the community to identify existing recreation agencies and programs and youth groups to enlist their support and dedication to the project. Many of the groups which became involved in the overall building have remained involved with the Getaway's operation, and are helping to improve youth programming and participation. With the completion of the Getaway, the YRC now has a location for developing many new recreation opportunities for high-school-age youth.