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Come in we're open: open for business: operational items to consider once your skateparks is in use

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Planning, financing and building your skatepark is just the beginning. As with any other sort of park, operations and maintenance are vital to the park's success and value to the community. Here's some advice about some of the main issues you'll encounter once your skatepark is open.

Graffiti

If you don't want graffiti in your park, consider a zero-tolerance policy. If you discover graffiti, remove it as quickly as possible. (Ideally, within 24 hours.) The last thing a tagger--that is, the graffiti "artist"--wants is to have his graffiti removed before anyone has a chance to see it. Some park operators suggest closing the park down until the graffiti is removed. This option is up to you, but you should do whatever it takes to remove the graffiti promptly.

Sandblasting may remove the graffiti, but it also removes some of the cement; this can make the surface rough and unrideable. Water blasting can also remove some of the cement, although it's not as destructive as sandblasting. If other methods of removal fail, this can be used as a last resort. What's better are spray-on brands that remove graffiti without damaging the surface. Check with your local hardware store for these products.

Don't use any non-stick anti-graffiti treatment that you paint on the surface. This will create a smooth or sticky surface for skaters, and will require a complete removal of the paint.

Some parks, such as in Venice Beach, Calif., and Boulder, Colo., have chosen to incorporate a graffiti wall into the park. The graffiti art is displayed in one area, and the parks have a committee to oversee new work. Graffiti art should never be confused with tagging or gang graffiti, which is rarely done by skaters and has a completely different message.

Remember, both the riders and the community will be looking at how you maintain your park. If your park is clean and well-operated, the riders will have more respect for you, and the community will appreciate what you're doing. If you take awhile to remove graffiti, clear trash and fix broken ramps, skaters will generally have less respect for your park, and will therefore be more prone to trashing the park and ignoring safety rules.

Staffed vs. Non-Staffed Park

You'll have to decide whether to have your park staffed or unstaffed. Although a staffed park may be recommended for safety reasons, it will incur more liability for the park. The worst liability is having a park that is staffed only part-time. In a lawsuit, it will be questioned why staff wasn't present during a certain injury or problem, to which an appropriate answer will be difficult. If your park is in a good location and is usually busy, there's no real need for supervision.

You may want to look at creative solutions, such as running a staffed program at the park. Riders would sign up for it and pay a fee. This would place a responsible adult on site for those who need it, but leave the other riders the freedom to come and go as they please. There are several groups that certify skateboard instructors.

Additional Police Support

You may want the police department to help support you. It's best to develop a relationship with the police department in the early stages of the design phase. If you begin talking with them in the late construction phase, they may be overwhelmed and offer little

help. The police can patrol the park during hours of operation and off-hours. They can also develop a personal relationship with the riders.

It's highly recommended that you and your staff develop a relationship with your skaters and bikers. The more they see and understand what you're doing, the more they'll respect your safety guidelines. Most skaters and bikers are great kids, and want adults to view them with some respect. When they get this respect, you'll be surprised at how much respect they give back.

It's also a good idea to give the park some energy by hosting special events, such as demos, classes and having deejays. These events can be inexpensive and fun, and keep the park looking active. It also shows the skaters that you want to be involved. A lot of skaters are in bands, and they would probably welcome a chance to play at a local event.

Helmets and Pads

Paradoxically, the Skatepark Association of the United States of America is seeing a slightly higher injury rate among pads users. The reasons are unclear at this time. Nonetheless, at this time, the association doesn't recommend enforcing pad requirements for skaters.

Even if you do require helmets and pads, don't use the police to enforce these requirements. Police should check on the park to keep drug dealers, gang members and pedophiles out; officers have real crime to attend to. If you want to enforce helmets, then staff the park or place the responsibility where it belongs--on the parents. If they want their child to wear a helmet, they can come to the park and sit with them.

Helmet and pad enforcement is a matter of civil rights. Do you ticket baseball players for not wearing a batting helmet? Do you ticket kids playing football without pads? Do you ticket kids playing a game of ice hockey in their jeans and jackets? If not, then you need to ask why you choose to enforce skateboard pad requirements.

Of course, you shouldn't discourage riders from wearing protective gear if they want to. Just as many park and recreation programs offer loaner safety gear, some public skateparks budget for loaner knee and elbow pads, as well as safety helmets. Extra skateboards are also a good idea, as kids break their own boards and often can't afford new ones. But beware of possible liability--if a child incurs a serious head injury while wearing a loaner helmet, attorneys might claim the helmet was defective.

Whatever you decide, clearly post the rules for using the park. You may also want to post a sign that says, "No riding in wet weather."

Maintenance

This is one of the most important, yet frequently overlooked, features of running a successful skate park. If something needs repairs, the quicker you fix it, the better and safer your park will be.

A regular maintenance schedule is a must. This can be a weekly or daily schedule that requires you to check and report any problems you may see in the park. A daily log is best. Also, document when you make the repairs or add new equipment. If someone were to take you to court, you would need to show proof of a maintenance schedule, so this becomes an important liability issue. You can hire local riders or use your present staff to clean the trash and tidy up the park. A well-maintained park reflects well on its operators. The community will respect what you are trying to accomplish--offering a safe, fun environment for kids and young adults.

Watch It!

You may have noticed that people enjoy watching skaters and bikers in a park, so you may want to set aside a viewing area. The viewing area should be detached from the park, and have either a fence or a large space between the park and viewing section. You can have either a grassy area for people to sit on, or benches. But be warned--unless the benches are properly secured to the ground, skaters and bikers will find a way to move and ride them.

If you want to install bleachers, there are new laws and regulations concerning the height and type of bleacher that can be used. Check with your park architect and bleacher companies to find out what type of bleacher will meet current safety regulations.

Appropriate fencing is a good idea, although not for the reasons you may be thinking. Fences rarely keep out bikers and skaters; chances are they will merely jump the fence to ride in your park. On the other hand, fences keep the skateboards and bikes from flying out of the skating area and hitting bystanders. They also keep small children and animals from entering the skating area. If you have an in-ground park, a fence will keep someone from falling into a bowl in the dark.

Heidi Lemmon is the founder of the Skatepark Association of the United States of America. For more information on SPAUSA, see www.spausa.org.

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