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The supervision solution: a public-private approach to skatepark management

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A major shift has occurred in how cities think about skateparks. Communities once agonized over the cost and wisdom of building what they feared might become centers for juvenile delinquency or fads that might soon die out. Many of those same cities now have multiple skatepark facilities, both permanent and mobile, and are planning to build more.

While the fears of widespread problem behavior, injuries and lawsuits have thus far proven to be unfounded, the issue of liability to cities continues to be worrisome. Many states have a law that classifies stunt skateboarding, inline skating and biking as hazardous activities. Cities are declared exempt from liability for accidents resulting from these sports if they enact ordinances requiring safety gear, post the law at the park and don't supervise activities there. The result is that a preponderance of city attorneys and risk managers discourage any kind of continuous skatepark supervision.

This development has created a real dilemma for communities that have discovered the potential that skateparks have as youth development centers. A park supervised by trained staff opens up all sorts of opportunities for sports training programs and special events. But the fear is that it also makes the city vulnerable to liability for injuries occurring there.

The Alliance Solution

Some publicly built parks have addressed this dilemma by partnering with the Action Park Alliance (APA). The APA is a private organization that operates parks designed and built by cities for sports such as skateboarding, BMX biking and inline skating-- activities once termed "extreme" sports by the media and now more commonly referred to as action sports.

Through public-private partnerships, the APA joins with cities to provide complete supervision of municipal parks built for such sports. APA management reduces the cost and the risk cities once faced when supervising parks. APA supervision ensures greater safety; it also allows bikes to use the park during BMX-only sessions.

The APA program, which is in place at locales such as Lake Elsinore, Calif., and Lodi, Calif., involves these management features:

Insurance: General comprehensive public liability insurance coverage is carried by the APA and covers all activities at the park. As the primary insured, the APA serves as a layer of liability insulation for the municipality.

Staff: A trained, full-time supervisory staff is responsible for monitoring park activities and conducting programs at the facility.

Session Scheduling: Separate BMX-only sessions are scheduled in parks where equipment is designed for both skate boards and bikes.

Maintenance: A documented procedure of safety inspections and maintenance is carried out weekly. The park is also checked daily before opening for any obvious problems, and any debris in the area is cleaned up.

Membership Database: A computer database of park membership maintains records of who uses the park and when. A photo ID of each member is kept on file along with contact information from parents and guardians as well as signed waivers releasing APA and the city from liability in case of injuries.

Online Monitoring System: It's easy for parents to know when their kids are using the skatepark. A phone call to the pro shop can tell them whether their son or daughter has logged in for a given session, and they can also go online to see live views of the park.

Youth Programs: A variety of sports training programs such as individual coaching and lessons, classes, clinics, and camps are provided by trainers experienced at working with young people.

Events: An ongoing schedule of special events features pro demos, local and regional competitions, concerts, barbeques and other activities that help to promote the park.

Benefits to the City

According to APA, municipalities get these benefits from the public-private partnership:

Cost-effective Supervision: A primary advantage of APA management, advocates say, is that it makes possible a supervised, programmed park without ongoing costs to the city of staffing and sports structure maintenance. It relieves the city of the hassle of part-time employee turnover.

Reduced Liability: Also significant to the city is the increased protection from liability it enjoys by virtue of the operator's general comprehensive liability insurance policy. The APA, as the primary insured, provides a layer of protection to municipal entities from any personal injury or property damage claims. Providing a safer recreational environment with a supervised and well-maintained park is, in effect, additional insurance, in that it substantiates the city's due diligence to protect the welfare of its young citizens.

Increased Return on Investment: Programs and other features that APA management brings to a skatepark greatly enhances a city's return on its investment in creating the park by increasing the youth-development potential of the facility and magnifying its value as a community asset.

Reduced Street Skating: Any decent skatepark will reduce the negative effects of street skating to some degree. However, advocates say, all APA park will have a much more significant impact because it provides a rich array of amenities and programs in a friendly youth-oriented environment and this makes it a popular destination for kids.

Property Protection: Having APA staff on hand monitoring and maintaining a skatepark reduces the opportunity for vandalism and destruction of the city's property. In a mixed-use park where bikes are permitted, the staff is able to require the use of special BMX accessories like peg caps to prevent damage to the park structures.

Enables Accurate Accident Reports: As part of their skatepark public liability laws, some states require cities to keep records of accidents occurring in skateparks and to report these to the state. However, if the law requires that cities not supervise their parks to be free from liability, it makes it impossible for the city to gather accident information. APA supervision and record keeping make it possible for cities to be in compliance with this requirement.

Benefits to Kids and Parents

APA advocates describe these benefits for the parks' users:

Increased Safety: One of the most important benefits of an APA-operated park is the increased degree of safety produced by constant supervision. Staff make sure that everyone wears proper safety gear, limit the number of kids in the park to a safe level and prohibit unsafe behavior.

Accelerated Skills Development: Another contributor to the safety in an APA park, proponents say is the development of good techniques derived from the training programs available to kids. They are taught skills like how to fall, how to increase their traffic awareness and how to handle themselves to avoid collisions. Shortening the learning curve gets kids past the vulnerable beginner stage earlier and more safely.

Security: Parents whose children visit APA-operated parks say they feel comfortable dropping their kids off at a park staffed by

experienced recreation professionals.

Partnership Obligations

So how does it work? The contractual relationship between the municipality and the Action Park Alliance combines requirements unique to the city and to the park with standard terms and conditions. Each agreement is negotiated to meet the best interests of both parties, however, generally the municipality provides the facility--that is, the park itself, including a structure to house the pro shop. The city also provides amenities, like lighting and fencing, required to operate the park, plus upkeep of same.

In addition there are facility requirements. Besides the skating structures, there need to be these features:

Pro Shop Building: A structure (minimum of 800 square feet) to house the park concession, operations office and visitors' lounge. It should be accessible to supply vehicles.

Flood Lights and Shop Security Lights: Operating hours are established by agreement between the city and APA; however, to maximize revenues, the park should be open at night and should operate seven days a week and on most holidays.

Fence and Signage: Signs at the entry gate should post local laws and park rules. Fencing needs to be adequate to prevent park entry except through a single gate.

Spectator Seating: Depending on the climate, a shade Structure over spectator seating is advisable.

Restrooms and Water Fountain: Existing, adjacent facilities may serve the park if restrooms are within 100 feet and a drinking fountain is within 50 feet.

Trash Receptacles: These need to be immovable to prevent vandalism and in sufficient number to make it easy for park visitors to use and to reduce clean-up labor.

Phone Service: The pro shop must have at least two phone lines installed--one for the shop phone and one for a DSL line for Internet connection to permit parent monitoring of the park via the parkcam. A public phone should also be installed for park users, especially for kids to call parents to be picked up.

Water, Electrical, Sewer, Trash Service: Lines for utility services should be put in place during park construction.

Pro Shop Air Conditioning: The pro shop should be supplied with equipment to heat and cool it. This is necessary for the comfort of the staff as well as park visitors in the shop lounge area.

Parking and Bike Racks: Concrete or asphalt walkways should provide access to the park. It's advisable that the park be situated near public transit service.

For its part, APA:

- * Carries complete insurance coverage.
- * Maintains park sports equipment and structures.
- * Provides management, operations and training staff
- * Furnishes the pro shop with fixtures, phone, computer, retail products, rental gear and food service.
- * Conducts a full program of youth activities, including sports training.

- * Brings action sports special events to the community through its affiliations with sports associations and professional athletes.
- * Develops support from corporate sponsors.

Plan to Supervise Early

The best time to decide whether a skatepark will be a supervised facility is before its designed and built. Retrofitting to add the amenities necessary for supervision after the park is built is more difficult and will inflate its cost over what it would have been had it been designed to be operated from the start.

For example, many parks are built without fencing, often without lighting, usually without utility services and rarely with an adjacent building adequate for a pro shop. To add these amenities later would require major modifications.

If the park is to be a pay-for-use facility, it's preferable to open it as such from the start rather than converting a free access park after it has been in use. This could produce resentment and protest from users that might doom the success of the facility for some time to come.

Revenue Sources

How will you recoup the cost of entering into a public-private partnership? Here are some possibilities:

Admission Fees: One possible revenue source to support the park operation is admission fees. These are negotiable based on city policy, but a typical entry fee for a three-hour session might be \$6. For frequent park users, the fee would be \$3 per session if they became members by paying an annual membership fee of \$50. The membership would be transferable, allowing them to use other APA-operated parks for \$3.

Retail Sales and Rentals: Each APP park has a pro shop that offers a full line of sports equipment, accessories and clothing for sale. Helmets and protective pads are available for rental, and there is also a food and beverage concession.

Instructional Program Tuitions: Classes, clinics or camps that charge fees for participation are another revenue source.

Events Admissions: Some vendor-sponsored events, like a barbecue or concert provided by a sports gear manufacturer, will be free and will increase park popularity and attendance. Other events like pro demos or contests will produce revenue from spectator admissions.

Facility Rentals: Renting the facility to private entities for events such as birthday parties is another potential source of income.

Corporate Sponsorships: In return for product placement or advertising signage, corporate sponsors--from large, national companies to local merchants--can be a strong source of financial support to the park.

Flexible Funding

Options for funding skatepark supervision are as variable as are the municipal policies, requirements and park user demographics that impact such funding from city to city. Several patterns have emerged from the APA's experience with cities in California and with its affiliate, Sanctuary Skateparks in the Southeast. These range from parks that are supported entirely by city funds to parks that are fully self-supporting through admission fees, pro shop sales, special events and corporate sponsorships, and which, in some instances, may even return some income to the city.

Most typical is the funding model that combines park income with a subsidy from the city budget. This arrangement works well when park revenues are insufficient to cover staff payroll, insurance, utilities, etc. or when, for example, the community wishes to maintain free access to its park. This permits the city to have all the advantages of a fully supervised skatepark with a complete program of

youth activities at less cost and liability than would be the case in as a city-operated park.

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