

Organizing Your Skatepark Committee

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“In a way this is a story about the community learning about its own diversity that it didn’t realize it had.” -- **Jacob Brostoff, assistant city planner, St. Helens, Oregon**

If the city where you live is willing to build a free public skatepark without a grassroots movement by local skaters, then you are very fortunate. In a less enlightened community the only recourse may be to get organized and lobby the city government to build that facility. Skaters everywhere will grit their teeth when I suggest that the surest way to get a skatepark built is to apply the politics of everyday life and take a well-planned, business-like approach. However, by working within the system you have the greatest chance for accomplishing the task quickly and efficiently. This is not the only way, but it has proven time and again to be highly effective.

Building a skatepark will take all the help you can get. A solid grassroots organization of skateboarders and their friends is one of the first things you’ll need in order to gain the support necessary to build your skatepark. This organization will be the key to planning, promotion, design and construction of the park. It has been my experience that few city council members want to listen to adults (who do not skate) lobby for the construction of a skatepark that they will not use. City officials need assurance that skateboarders will be involved throughout the process. In short, the people who will be using the park should be the ones to lead the campaign to get it built.

MAKING CONTACTS AND ESTABLISHING THE ORGANIZATION

The first step in forming an organization is to get in touch with every skateboarder you know or see. During a recent campaign, we formed a skatepark committee after the publication of an advertisement in the local paper. This advertisement asked all concerned parties to attend a meeting to discuss the building of a skatepark within the municipal park system. As a result, the first meeting was attended by 25 local skaters, representatives from the parks and recreation district, members of a local Catholic church, the city planner and several concerned adults. During this initial meeting, the group planned how to reach other members of the community. They decided their first step would be to put up posters designed to increase public interest and ask for broader community involvement.

As new members of a skatepark committee are recruited, they need to recognize the necessity for a strong commitment to the organization. Each member needs to be made aware that it takes a lot of work to build a public skatepark and that there is strength in numbers. All members must try to put aside any hang-ups regarding the involvement of a mix of skateboarders and in-line skaters. Aside from the history of conflicts between these groups, this must be done for two reasons. First, all of these interested parties need to be represented by the organization as a whole, as all are going to share in the use of the park in the future. Second, and most important, it can be assumed that when working with the city, any hint of disagreement among group members or potential users of the park is going to be the surest way to get the project placed on the bureaucratic back burner.

REGULAR MEETINGS

A newly formed skatepark committee should plan regularly scheduled meetings. Places for meetings will depend on the size of your community, but usually public locations like the city library or recreation center are work best. As an alternative, a local skateboard shop or a residence might serve as a meeting place. What is important is to find a safe and comfortable place to hold meetings where parents and other interested adults (including the press) feel welcome. I often work with skaters of differing ages from different schools and socio-economic backgrounds who have joined together for a common goal. Choosing a public meeting place offers “neutral territory” where no individual or group feels in control. Being in neutral territory is a great way to establish structure during meetings. Structure is needed in order to stay focused on the task at hand. Also, by using a community facility we often gain access to computers, fax machines, telephones and copy machines. The parents of skateboarders are excellent resources for establishing contacts for meeting locations and access to needed resources. Just ask-you might be surprised by what you get.

One of the first decisions to be made by a newly formed skatepark committee is the setting of a specific date and time to discuss issues, plan campaign strategy and increase the commitment of the members. Ideally there should be no change in the meeting day and time throughout the entire project. By maintaining a consistent meeting schedule, you allow members to disappear for a bit and then drop back in. This often happens as youth members are quite mobile (e.g., moving from one parent’s house to the other) or lose interest for a time as other priorities take over. Changing meeting times increases the likelihood that only the core group continues to participate throughout the life of the project. This in turn directly limits the number of individuals who can participate, feel committed to, and

ultimately go away with a sense of ownership in the project.

Skatepark committees also require youth spokespeople who are comfortable with speaking to the public. It's helpful to choose a few articulate (and outspoken) individuals who will consistently act as public spokespersons for the skatepark organization during speaking engagements while other members may come and go. It is also helpful to choose other members to help coordinate, organize and record the events of each meeting.

MEMBERSHIP YOUTH

Most skatepark committees are comprised of youth of different ages and socio-economic groups. Members will also represent interests in various sports including skateboarding, in-line skating and BMX freestyle biking. Although groups will change over time, you should expect that youth members will continue to attend weekly meetings throughout the planning, design, and fundraising phases of the project. A small group of the most ambitious members may also help with construction of the park. Overall, involvement in a skatepark project will offer the youth valuable life skills. In some instances the physically demanding and sometimes tedious manual labor of building a skatepark provides just the motivation committee members need to stay in school. If you are in a leadership position within a skatepark project, consider offering letters of recommendation to members of the committee after the project has finished.

The continued assistance from a dedicated group of skaters not only helps to reduce the overall cost of the park, but also increases the skaters' feelings of ownership of the park after it opens. In addition, the newspaper, radio and television media always enjoy the various opportunities to capture the youth in action, either fundraising or working on the construction of the park.

One of the first lessons the youth committee has to learn is to not underestimate the contribution that any individual within the community can make. They also need to be taught how to represent the skatepark committee and its mission by being polite and focusing on the goal of completing a skatepark. This process begins by training committee members in networking within the community. For example, I often have to stress to youth members that they are always representing the skatepark committee and any individual they come into contact with is important. For example, that scruffy-looking fellow asking questions might just be the mayor's uncle or a potential donor of goods or cash. The moral is, "Don't judge by appearances, and never blow someone off because you can't see how he or she could help."

ADULT FACILITATORS

Adult facilitators are typically the committed parents or other interested individuals who are willing to give up a substantial portion of their free time to get a skatepark built within their community. Most often they are skate moms, but not always. Although campaigns will benefit from as much adult participation as possible, at least a few adults should consistently attend and facilitate all meetings.

It's the facilitator's responsibility to do as much as possible to create an environment where people feel safe and their ideas are valued. It's necessary to have at least two adults present at all skatepark-committee meetings. Most often, the adult facilitator's role is to simply maintain the focus of discussion, ensure that everyone has a voice, make clear what was being decided upon, and record the vote. If design is the first phase of the project, the skatepark designer can facilitate those meetings. It helps if a volunteer coordinator can be recruited to attend and assist at all meetings.

THE YOUTH-VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR

Recently, after a campaign had just begun, an anonymous donor offered to match dollar for dollar any money raised by the youth committee (up to \$10,000). The city council was told about this anonymous donor and agreed to do the same. However, it was decided that the youth needed direction in order to raise funds effectively. They needed the guidance of a committed adult. Hence, a young man was recruited to be the youth-volunteer coordinator-he was a former skateboarder, had grown up and worked in town, had excess energy and interest, was respected by adults and young people, and shared the motivation to get the park built. His duties were to recruit and organize youth volunteers, plan speaking engagements, provide transportation and coach youth members in speaking skills. He also helped to keep the youth committed and energetic until construction began.

The youth-volunteer coordinator must be a dedicated and energetic individual who is committed to working with youth and community members. The person chosen for this position has to be respected and liked by the youth, and also organized and responsible when working with the community. The job of the youth-volunteer coordinator will likely prove to be the most difficult because of the need to coordinate events, assist the youth members to speak in front of groups, and do other tasks that the youth (and adults) don't particularly enjoy.

This person has to help the youth understand that these public awareness and fundraising efforts are necessary in order to meet their goal of building a skatepark. Of course, this is sometimes difficult because many youth are not particularly interested in delayed grati-

fication, planning for the future, and speaking to strangers about their needs and wants. After the fact, most committee members will tell you that designing a skatepark is fun, but fundraising and public awareness is generally unpleasant work. Select this individual carefully, as a devoted and energetic youth-volunteer coordinator will be critical to completing your skatepark.

ADULT MEMBERS

It is helpful to involve as many parents and other interested adults as early in the skatepark campaign as possible. Adults are essential connections to city government and business. At first, the city council as well as other groups and businesses might not pay much attention to a group of local youth, but recognition improves when youth are backed up by a group of adults who are taxpayers and voters. Adults simply have much more experience accessing and working within the “system” in ways that younger members do not.

GROUP STRUCTURE AND RULES

Many skatepark projects are so widely advertised that the meetings have a diverse group of committee members. As a result, there needs to be structure to the meetings or there will be little progress. Structure is needed for a couple of reasons. First, groups often include individuals with a broad range of ages (“youths” ranging from age 9 to 25), and many aren’t in the same grade, don’t go to the same school, and in some instances generally dislike other members of the group. Second, most of the meetings take place immediately after school. This means there is a lot of pent-up energy that needs to be discharged. I find it helpful to remember that from the youths’ perspectives, they are giving up free time to try to build something for the future when they could be skating (illegally) right then and there. During meetings it’s important to establish an atmosphere where all persons feel free to attend, have opportunities to express their opinions, and feel respected and valuable. The organizational rules for committees are simple:

1. Meetings are held regularly and are open to anyone.
2. Everyone present has the opportunity to speak on any issue before a vote.
3. Issues will be decided by a simple majority (more than 50 percent) of all members attending.
4. Once an issue has been decided by vote, it will not be brought to a forum or alteration without a successful majority vote to that effect. This rule comes in handy when committee members who’ve been gone for several weeks or months return to find that things have changed in their absence.

Most adult facilitators find it important to establish some boundaries and maintain them consistently. By establishing these boundaries, youths can more clearly understand what behaviors will or will not be tolerated. Rules of behavior at meetings and other committee events are also simple:

1. Acts of physical aggression are not tolerated.
2. Racist, sexist and homophobic comments are not tolerated.

This may seem a little too obvious and buttoned-down, but these behaviors are simply not appropriate and don’t advance the mission of the group. It’s all about giving respect to other individuals with the expectation that you will receive it in return. Just because supervision and rules are necessary doesn’t mean the initial flow of ideas does not come from the group as a whole. Also, steadfast rules of conduct do not necessarily stifle frank discussions. On the contrary, the youth speak frankly about their experiences and thoughts, listen to music, and watch videos during meetings. Meeting facilitators probably hear more inside information than most parents. As stated before, the goal is to make sure that all group members feel welcome and safe during discussions and activities. Overall, by insisting on an atmosphere of mutual respect, you will get tasks done more quickly while ensuring that from week to week people feel comfortable enough to come back.

Once the group is established and regular meetings are occurring, the next step is to establish contact with and gain the support of anyone in the community who can help further the cause. It’s called networking. This includes, but should not be limited to, the recruitment of religious officials, non-profit agencies, businesses and law enforcement. By involving the community, you demonstrate to city officials and financial contributors the seriousness and dedication of the youth, and you expand fundraising efforts.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT RELIGIOUS OFFICIALS

No matter what a person’s personal religious practice or belief, these individuals are powerful members of almost any community or government. When you approach the religious community, it helps to stress the community-based need for the skatepark. Take time to emphasize the positive aspects of skateboarding and the skateboard community. For example, emphasize how the park can help kids promote the sport in a positive manner by keeping skaters “off the streets” and out of trouble with the law. This is the kind of emphasis that will garner their support. Give examples like Skate Church in Portland, Oregon, that has ramps and obstacles for skaters to use in a safe and controlled atmosphere. Try to make contact with as many religious organizations as possible, and when you find ones that support your cause, ask them to write letters of support to the city council.

During one campaign, this support came from a local parish. For a long time, skaters were allowed to skate the ledges and benches along the church property. Finally the increased popularity attracted the proverbial few “bad apples” who spoiled things for everyone, and the church grounds were posted against skateboarding and in-line skating. For months, church officials tried to chase skaters away, creating animosity on both sides. The church officials experienced the angry hand signals and comments of skaters, and the skaters went away feeling betrayed.

The parish was considering enlisting the help of the local police to stop the skating on their property when the newly formed skatepark committee met with church officials and asked for their support. The church not only agreed to write a letter to the city council, but also allowed the youth committee to fundraise by holding a skating competition on church grounds. The church also allowed the committee to speak to the congregation in order to solicit monetary and in-kind donations. Accomplishing this was easy. The committee simply made an appointment with the lay person in charge of youth activities at the church, outlined how the church could best assist, and he did the rest. Remember: don’t write off any group or individual until you’ve tried asking for what you want. The support from that church was very influential and started the whole movement toward a skatepark on city property within that community.

NON-PROFIT AGENCIES

A non-profit agency is one of the strongest allies any skatepark committee can hope for. Some skatepark committees take the steps necessary to establish themselves as non-profit entities. If you have the time to spare, that’s great. But in most instances it’s more advantageous to identify an existing agency that will lend you the umbrella of their non-profit status. This essentially makes your group part of that agency for the life of the project. Among other things, this means when you go out asking for money or materials you will be able to say those magic words, “It’s tax deductible.” If your committee can find a non-profit community-service agency that will embrace the grassroots effort of the youth committee, your workload will be considerably reduced.

A non-profit organization, in addition to grant writing, may offer its staff’s time to oversee the project, handle the disbursement of funds, and work with the committee to contract for construction. With an established non-profit agency acting as your umbrella organization, you’ll be able to apply for grants and solicit monetary and in-kind donations under their auspices and take advantage of their past successes. In addition to signing grant applications, the non-profit may be in a position to offer bookkeeping and managerial advice as well as assistance with publicity, promotion, and fundraising.

Most umbrella organizations will not take just any group under their wings. They will consider the nature of the project and the impact that it will have upon the community. Non-profit and umbrella organizations rely heavily upon grants to pay overhead and salaries. Their ability to receive grants depends largely upon the success of the projects that they sponsor. Do your research before approaching an organization. This will increase your likelihood of success. Your research should include learning about the long-term goals of the organization and past projects. Determine beforehand as accurately as possible what your needs are, and how much of the organization’s time and resources will be required. Then make an appointment and ask for what you need.

LOCAL BUSINESS COMMUNITY

Local business owners are probably tired of skateboarders bombing down sidewalks, frightening customers and tearing up their benches, ledges, rails and other structures. Ironically, this means members of the business community can be powerful allies. Try to gain their public support, as they typically have deep ties within the community (especially with city officials) and may come up with leads that would have otherwise been overlooked. To succeed, the skatepark committee must actively demonstrate that the problem is not skateboarding, but the lack of suitable places to skate.

Once the local business community is convinced of the seriousness of the skatepark committee, it can be relied upon to consistently supply in-kind donations of construction materials and items for fundraisers as well as monetary contributions. If you can’t get business owners to come to city council meetings to speak out in your favor, ask them to write letters of support. At the very least, ask them to sign a petition reserved only for businesses and professionals. Whenever your organization needs something, identify businesses that can best address that need. Then just walk right in, explain why you’re there, what you’re out to accomplish and what you need from the business. This simple approach rarely fails to get skatepark committees free typesetting, printing, tools, construction materials, and all sorts of other goods and services.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Most cities have ordinances against skateboarding in some or all areas of the city. Of course, it’s the duty of the police to enforce those ordinances. All jokes aside, the police really do have better things to do than write tickets and confiscate skateboards because of a city code. However, until laws change or more skateparks are built, it will remain the job of law enforcement to stop individuals from skateboarding wherever it is prohibited. If you can get a few law enforcement officials on the side of the skatepark committee, your efforts to build a skatepark will go much easier.

In many instances the chief of police, or another representative from law enforcement, regularly reports to the city council. So go straight to the top. Contact the chief of police or head of emergency services and ask his or her opinions about building a public skatepark in the community. Most likely, the response will be positive. In my experience, the law enforcement and medical services communities are very accepting and supportive. They support the idea of a public skatepark because they understand the dilemma skaters are in and can see the skatepark as a solution to a problem. Basically, law enforcement does not enjoy stopping skateboarders on the street and confiscating skateboards. In almost all instances they are interested in reasonable solutions.

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