

Planning Your Skatepark Campaign

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“Many people have worked very hard for a long time. They dedicated a chunk of their lives to see this through...it was the skaters themselves who brought the need for this facility to the community’s attention. They were tired of being chased out of parking lots, cited for trespassing, and hit by cars. They offered a solution, and they asked for help” -- **Barbara Peschiera, Columbia Foundation Director**

KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE PRIZE

Once you’ve rallied the local skate community, recruited a few adults, maybe had a meeting or two, it’s time to initiate a campaign to gain community support for a public skatepark. When trying to advance from planning to fundraising and then construction, it’s seldom a good idea just to proceed without a clear strategy, especially when working with community members and city government. In order for your skatepark campaign to succeed in the shortest amount of time, you’ll need to make all non-skaters aware that you are the local experts -- not only on the sport of skateboarding, but on skatepark design and construction as well. Your group will have to demonstrate to others the need for a skatepark and convince them that they should support the park financially. Remember, most supporters will eventually have to part with some of their own hard-earned money to make things happen, so you want to be convincing.

The more knowledgeable your group is and the more you demonstrate this knowledge, the more likely community members will be to ask for your opinion in the future. When it comes to making key decisions during the construction of the skatepark, you will want them consulting you first. You want them to ask for and respect your knowledge and opinions. At some point your input may be the difference between a flowing, smooth transition and some horribly kinked concrete nightmare. For them to even consider including you, all individuals interested in and associated with the project must have faith in your knowledge, ability and willingness to work as part of a team. They must also find that you are accessible, reliable and dependable.

You will you have to convince all sorts of people not only that a skatepark is needed and that they should support it emotionally and financially, but also that an unconventional construction method is best. The methodology used for modern skatepark construction is unusual. Most contractors do not know this method. However, it’s the best way to build a high-quality skatepark and, if done correctly, will provide the flawless results required. Most people, local concrete contractors included, will not be easily convinced that such a method is necessary, particularly if they feel that their reputation may be at stake. Offer information regarding design, construction, and the availability of skatepark professionals as soon as possible. Be patient and deliver your message consistently.

DEVELOP INFORMATION AND FACT SHEETS

Your campaign should begin by compiling information on skating and skateparks, then arranging it in a format that you can provide to people. This information will do two things: 1) give them an overview of the sport and the growing popularity of skateparks, and 2) answer their questions and concerns about a skatepark. Keep it short, no more than one page in length. Make sure it includes a concise summary of your specific plan and why the park is needed, as well as general information on skateparks. It should also discuss the need to build community support for your park.

Remember, the majority of community members are not skaters. So concentrate on providing information on the benefits to the community. Explain the economic and social benefits of a skatepark. Compare skating to other sports that require a specialized facility, such as tennis or basketball. List the number of individuals who would use and could benefit from a skatepark. Make people aware that parks are being built all over the world at an astonishing rate, some in towns smaller than yours. Describe how popular these skateparks have become. But remember that most people have never ridden a skateboard and will not appreciate stories of police harassment or how the best spots have been shut down. Accentuate the positive. This information sheet should be available when skatepark-committee members and other involved parties make their first contacts with community members.

Here are some facts you might want to include:

- 1) In 2002, there were about 16 million skateboarders and an estimated 400 public skateparks in the United States. That number is up from 11.5 million skateboarders in 2000. (Incidentally, in 2000, there were only 9 million Little League baseball players in the U.S., yet most cities with multiple baseball fields had yet to build skateparks.)
- 2) The city of Oceanside, California has been carefully tracking the use of its modest 11,000-square-foot ramp park, and reports

that 1,000 skaters per week have used the park in the past year. Oceanside is now planning to build three more neighborhood skateparks.

3) At a recent national convention of parks-and-recreation officials, the topic most were eager to discuss was skateparks and how to get one -- quick.

Second, develop a fact sheet. The fact sheet is an extension of the information sheet but provides more detailed information. The fact sheet answers the nitty-gritty questions concerning the skatepark. For example, who is going to pay for it? How will it be monitored? What about liability, vandalism and drugs? Address these issues intelligently from the start and they will become non-issues. Be sure to tailor the information sheet so it speaks to members of your own community. Laws associated with skateboarding differ from state to state, so do your own research and make the information packet applicable to your community. Remember to pass these information and fact sheets out everywhere! Never miss an opportunity to increase support for your skatepark.

DEVELOP A FLYER

The flyer should be a shorter, boiled-down version of the information and fact sheets. It's best if you design it to meet United States Postal Service requirements so it can be folded into thirds, taped at the top, and mailed without an envelope. Distribute the flyer, information sheet and fact sheet around the community. Always leave a few extras. Divide these items up between youth committee members and make them available during speaking engagements. Make sure the flyer lists the committee members to contact when people want to inquire about volunteering and/or want to make monetary or in-kind contributions.

DEVELOP A PETITION

A petition is essential to your cause. It provides detailed information to city government officials and others about how many individuals are in support of your skatepark project. Make copies of the petition and give them to friends. Leave them at local skate shops, bike shops and sporting-goods stores. Use your imagination to gather as many signatures as possible. Ask permission to stand outside grocery stores, the mall library, or sporting events to solicit signatures.

Don't be shy -- simply state your case, ask for support, and give everyone an information sheet, fact sheet or flyer to pass along. Then ask them to sign the petition. The more people you involve, the better your chances are. Try to get a local newspaper to follow your progress. Ask schoolteachers for help. Ask parents to take petitions to work. Think about groups at a college or university in your area. There are literally hundreds of groups that could be approached for support. Save a few petition pages for business owners and other prominent members of the community. Put those pages right on top. When you feel you have enough signatures to demonstrate solid grassroots support, get ready to take your case to the city council. At a city council meeting you can present the need and support for a skatepark, and ask to have all signed petitions entered into the meeting record. A standard petition heading is as follows:

Petition in Support of a Free Community Skatepark:

We the undersigned, as citizens of _____, support the development of a free public skatepark within our city. We recognize the need for and the benefits of a free public skatepark and believe the city should at the very least provide suitable land and agree to maintain the skatepark after construction, and at the most, fund, build and maintain the skatepark just as it would a basketball court, tennis court or other public general-use area.

DEVELOP A MAILING LIST

Starting and maintaining a good mailing list requires a lot of time and effort, but it's well worth it. It's best to start from scratch so you'll have complete control of the content of the list. The petition pages are a good place to start. The mailing list should be updated often so the information is current. Avoid the tendency to go for the big list -- always opt for quality over quantity. Include only those groups or individuals who have expressed support and can help to further the cause now or in the future. Don't use other organizations' lists, as they are unlikely to be of much good. The only exception might be to use the mailing list of a non-profit agency in the event that you are operating under the umbrella of their nonprofit status. Never pay for a list and never wait until you need the mailing list to put it together.

COMPLETE A USER SURVEY

The idea here is to find out how many potential park users are there, how often they would use a park, and how much they spent on skateboarding per year. This information is important because it allows you to accurately address issues such as potential use patterns. It shows community members and city government that you are prepared and have done your research. It also provides a resource of potential volunteers when it comes time for skatepark design, fundraising and construction. In addition, the combined information can be invaluable during the design phase as it provides the design group with information on potential use patterns, age groups, and skill levels.

COMPLETE A SURVEY OF COMMUNITIES WITH EXISTING SKATEPARKS

You can glean powerful information by sending out surveys to people who have built skateparks in other communities, particularly those in your region or state. The people who fill out the surveys probably will be very similar to the ones who are deciding the fate of your skatepark (e.g., members of city government), which means they speak the same language. This survey can help you identify potentially troubling issues and take steps to avoid them before you ever speak to the city council. The gathering of this information will demonstrate that you are prepared, have done your research, and are not asking for allocation of a large amount of funds without forethought and planning.

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Develop and maintain a list of all media contacts so you know immediately who to call when needed. Include all of the newspapers, magazines and television and radio stations in your area on the list. Consider regional and national sources only if you have a reason to believe they will take an interest. Newspaper and television editors send out reporters based upon the news of the day. Magazines, on the other hand, prepare for press months in advance. Call each contact and ask for their deadlines and submission criteria. Include this information on your list.

THE PRESS RELEASE

Press releases should be written and used to announce and describe anything newsworthy. Do not send press releases out too far before the deadline. If the release arrives too early for publication, it is likely to be misplaced or discarded. Some publications are interested only in information in advance of some major event. Others are interested in reporting the fact that something interesting has taken place. If writing a press release to announce an event that has already occurred, let them know what happened, what was seen, said, and heard, and who reacted. Remember, what seems ordinary to you could be fascinating to an editor, journalist, or the host of a radio or television interview program.

A press release should tell the facts but not sound like a weekly report at school. It should interest the reader, inspire an editor to assign a writer to a story, or inspire a television reporter to provide coverage. Usually it has to be something that will get the general public interested and involved.

If writing is not your expertise, find someone in your organization who is good with words and who likes to write. Keep the press release simple so it will be accessible to a large audience.

The following items should be included in the press release:

1. The headline should set the hook and announce the event.
2. The first paragraph should state the purpose of your project and capture the readers' interests.
3. The second and third paragraphs should contain what is known as the "Five Ws": who, what, when, where and why. Any additional paragraphs should back up the first two or three with quotes or other interesting details.

Whenever possible, issue the press release under the auspices of the city or your nonprofit umbrella organization. Ask for permission to use their letterhead with the understanding that they can approve the final copy. In some instances they may have a public-relations representative who's willing to help. If so, make sure he or she:

1. Is not threatened by your aggressive pursuit of good press coverage.
2. Is willing to cooperate.
3. Is someone with whom you can communicate freely.
4. Really understands and is committed to seeing a skatepark built in your community.

THE MEDIA KIT

Anytime you have an event, you will want to invite the media. They have the greatest capability to bring your project to a large audience. Every time the newspaper, radio, or television media shows up, provide them with a media kit. This is a current packet of information regarding the project and the progress currently being made. The reporter can keep this media kit to assist in the preparation of

news stories. The media kit makes the reporter's job easier and increases the likelihood for positive, accurate coverage. The media kit should contain the information sheet, wish list (a list of donations needed), fact sheet, flyer, press release, photos and any other information. Do not overwhelm members of the media with this kit. Keep it fairly short and concise.

THE INTERNET

The Internet is also a valuable tool to gain support and gather information. Develop a web site and start by posting your information sheet. Add pages specifically addressing fundraising, current activities and progress. During the design phase, the design plan can be placed on the Web with an area for viewer comments. Weekly comments posted to the Web can be shared at regular meetings. As design plans change, the revised plans can be posted so interested persons can follow the progress of the skatepark.

Don't forget to add links to other sites (such as this one) that may help further your cause. TransWorld (skateboarding.com) and many skateboard manufacturers and organizations have sites with skatepark directories and other information that can prove useful. Once fundraising has started, use the Internet to let the public and volunteers know what's coming up. After construction begins, take digital photos or scan in pictures to provide weekly updates. The establishment and upkeep of the Web site is best left to members of the youth committee. They have or can quickly gain the expertise needed to build a Web site, and the resulting site will reflect the interests of that age group.

PUBLIC SPEAKING

Many skatepark committees find that the best way to reach the largest number of citizens and to gain the greatest exposure for monetary and in-kind donations is to take the message to the streets. This requires the development of a speaking tour. First, select a few of the more dedicated and articulate members of the youth committee to act as public spokespersons. Then work together to write speeches and coach the youth on public-speaking skills.

In most cases the youth will have to leave school to complete these speaking engagements because many civic organizations meet early in the morning for breakfast or over lunch. Therefore, it is necessary for adult committee members to contact parents and the schools to arrange for these events.

Every speaking engagement is worth your time. Sometimes the organization as a whole will give you cash. Other times, individual members will just come up and hand one of the youth a check for \$50 or \$100. You will also be offered in-kind donations or leads on gravel or lumber as well as discounts on cement and professional services such as excavation and printing. People get excited when they hear from youth within the community, particularly when it's a sector of youth that does not typically participate in group or adult activities.

A short list of the organizations that can be contacted includes Rotary International, Kiwanis, Jaycees, Day-Breakers, Masonic Temple, Elks Club and various churches. Look at your own community to see where your cause will be best served.

DEMONSTRATIONS

In addition to the speaking tour for civic groups, you may want to try to get additional youth in the community excited by giving lectures and demonstrations to elementary, middle and high school-age youth. This will spread the word and garner support. It will also generate cash and material indirectly by getting more and more parents involved through the involvement of their children.

SCHEDULE OPEN FORUMS AT TOWN-HALL MEETINGS

A town-hall meeting can be scheduled to open up the idea of a skatepark for public comment. The town-hall meeting should be scheduled in an easily accessible public location and, if possible, should take place at night when most people are not at work. Use the local newspaper, radio station, your web site and word of mouth to get the word out about the meeting in advance. Personally invite all interested parties you have met through your networking campaign. Always invite members of the press to town-hall meetings and provide each press member with a media kit. Along with supporters of the skatepark, it's likely that opponents of the skatepark and individuals who are undecided will also attend. Be prepared to talk with opponents and those who are undecided.

Make sure you come to the meeting prepared so you can provide information and answer questions about the sport, liability, injuries and damage to the area. You must be able to answer questions effectively in order to enlist as much support as possible for the campaign and to address the concerns that the meeting attendees have. By being prepared and answering questions fully, you may stop future vocal opposition of the skatepark. It's better to confront opposition and undecided community members at a scheduled town-hall meeting than at a city-council meeting. If you wait to address the concerns of community members at a city-council meeting, your skatepark plan might die an instant death.

PORTABLE KIOSKS

While campaigning and fundraising for the skatepark, it's wise to have a stationary information kiosk that circulates around the community. This can consist of a three-fold cardboard pasteboard, like the kind you probably used in your last science-fair project. They can be purchased at any office-supply stores. The pasteboard should contain information about the project, the budget, your current needs and contact information. A model of the facility and a secure donation box can accompany this display. During the planning and fundraising campaign, the kiosk can make the rounds to churches, city hall and the public library. This display can also accompany speaking engagements. After speaking engagements, ask if the display can remain at that location for a week or so before being moved to another location. Depending on the size of your community, it may be helpful to have multiple stationary kiosks to place in various locations.

THE BIG DAY: APPROACHING CITY GOVERNMENT

Now that you have the petitions, user surveys, skatepark surveys and community support, it's time to go to City Hall. The key to being effective when approaching city government is to be humble, respectful and prepared. A lot of people will tell you the squeaky wheel gets the grease. It may be true that breaking down doors and demanding your rights as citizens may get you attention. However, this is not the approach I recommend, and I have serious doubts that this would work when proposing a skatepark in your community. What does work is preparation and documentation of support from within the community. Bring the petition sheets and the information from your user survey, the results from the existing skatepark survey, a list of potential donors, site evaluations, and potential skatepark design plans (if possible). Make a list of all of the basketball courts, tennis courts, baseball diamonds, playgrounds, and other recreation facilities that exist in your city. Record how many people actually use them and compare that to local skate spots. Get as many people as you can to attend the first meeting to show their support for both the skatepark and the skating community.

Toward the end of most city-council meetings, there is a period of time set aside for public comments. When you go up to the podium, you will have to state your name and address for the record. Then make your case. Keep in mind that most city-council members are business professionals who have already put in a full day's work before the council meeting. Make your points, but don't be redundant. If there is a huge turnout of supporters, you may want to recognize the group as a whole, but only let half a dozen or so supporters speak.

Begin your presentation to the city by explaining that a skatepark is just like any other sport or recreation area and should be evaluated from that position. Describe your comparisons of use from other recreation spots to your information on the potential use of a skatepark. Describe the problems with legislation against skating in public places, and point out that baseball diamonds were created to give kids an alternative to playing in the streets. This is comparable to what needs to happen with skateboarding. Tell them the goal is to have a safe place to participate in your sport. However, don't expect a big handout. Let the city know that the skatepark committee members are committed, willing and able to help in any way that the city needs and allows. Simply state your case for a public skatepark and submit the petition and other items for the record.

Don't be surprised if the city council does not express an opinion that night. City-council meetings are open to the public and often reported on by the local media, so council members will be careful about what they say in public. Most of the real decision making goes on behind closed doors. Keep in mind that a group of non-skaters will likely decide the fate of your skatepark project during a meeting you will not be invited to. Your only representation may be the information and personal impressions offered by your group up to that point.

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