CITY OF LONG BEACH

Department of Parks, Recreation and Marine

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November 9, 2004

HONORABLE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL
City of Long Beach
California

SUBJECT: Universally Accessible Playgrounds (Citywide)

DISCUSSION

On September 14, 2004, the City Council requested that the City Manager refer the issue of universally accessible playgrounds to the Department of Parks, Recreation and Marine to prepare a report to the City Council. Specifically, the City Council asked if it is feasible to construct universally accessible playgrounds in new parks and if elements of universally accessible playgrounds could be incorporated into projects currently under design.

Since 1994, the City has been modifying its playgrounds to meet Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) accessibility requirements and new playground safety standards that were adopted in 1993. Modifying these playgrounds has been part of the City's ten-year ADA transition plan, but many playground modifications were accelerated utilizing funding from the Los Angeles County Safe Neighborhood Parks Bond Act of 1992. Through these efforts, 39 of the City's 42 playgrounds have been upgraded to comply with ADA accessibility requirements, although 2 of the 39 need additional work to fully comply. The remaining three, and the two that need additional work, will be addressed in the coming year.

The requirements of the ADA are interpreted by court decisions. The two playgrounds mentioned above were brought into ADA compliance, as it was understood in the mid-1990s, but they do not meet the current interpretations of ADA. To date, the interpretations of ADA have been incorporated in standards for all of our new playgrounds.

Universally accessible playgrounds are playgrounds that go beyond current ADA standards to attempt to make playgrounds accessible and fully integrated for both disabled and non-disabled children. The term "boundless" playgrounds is also used, but is trademarked by a nonprofit organization that advocates for, designs, and helps communities build such playgrounds. Shane's Inspiration is a Los Angeles based

nonprofit organization that also helps communities develop universally accessible playgrounds, provides community outreach programs and funding guidance.

Some examples of how universally accessible playgrounds differ from the existing ADA standards include:

- Play area accessibility
  - ADA standards require that 50 percent of the play elements in the playground are wheelchair accessible.
  - Universally accessible playground standards increase the percent of the playground equipment that is wheelchair accessible to be between 80 to 100 percent.
- Play equipment accessibility
  - ADA standards do not require that the equipment itself be wheelchair accessible, requiring the disabled children to transfer out of the wheelchair at the edge of the play equipment and crawl or pull themselves along on the play equipment. As many disabled children are unable to do that, this is a severe restriction on their independent play. Many children in wheelchairs do not have the upper body strength to remove themselves from the wheelchair.
  - A universally accessible playground would provide ramps on the play equipment that would allow full access to wheelchairs throughout the play equipment.
- Age specific equipment
  - Playgrounds are typically age specific, with the equipment sized, and the difficulty geared, to two primary age groupings, pre-school aged (2-5 year olds), and school aged (5-12 year olds). An additional group would be infants (0-2 years old).
  - A universally accessible playground recognizes that the physical size of a child that is learning or developmentally disabled does not necessarily match their skills. Thus, some of the less challenging play equipment would be built of a size to accommodate a larger sized child.

Finally, universally accessible playgrounds take into consideration issues not normally considered in standard playground designs. One example is the common bright colors of playground are intended as visual stimulation to mental development. For children with impaired sight, universal playgrounds would include elements of tactile stimulation not included in typical playgrounds. Another example would be the inclusion of semi-enclosed areas in universally accessible playgrounds where autistic children could play without excessive distraction from the noise and motion of many other children.

Cost: Universally accessible playgrounds generally cost more to build and require more physical area than standard playgrounds. For example, a universally accessible playground was designed for El Dorado Park in the playground near the Duck Pond on Studebaker Road several years ago. Because the price was several times greater than standard playgrounds, building an accessible playground at El Dorado Park was put aside until ADA compliance had been achieved on all existing playgrounds.

No single cost comparison can be made between a universally accessible playground and a standard playground. This is because few playgrounds could be fully accessible to every disability. Thus, planning for each playground needs to include the disabled population to be served by the playground, and some of the features would be designed to the specific needs of the community. The City of Los Angeles plans to build 11 universally accessible playgrounds that range in cost from $400,000 to $700,000. This compares to the typical Long Beach playground of $100,000 to $150,000. Other sources indicated a cost for a universally accessible playground as low as $150,000 was possible, but $250,000 is preferred. Currently, out of 370 plus playgrounds in Los Angeles County, two are universally accessible playgrounds. Shane's Inspiration and Aidan's Place are playgrounds that have received "Best Playgrounds" awards in *LA Parent Magazine* and *Los Angeles Magazine.* They serve the entire community, not only children with disabilities. Attachment A lists the Shane's Inspiration playgrounds that are open, or are soon to be opened, along with the cost and size of each project.

Area: The available sources indicate an area of about 20,000 square feet as a desired minimum for a universally accessible playground, although a smaller square footage could be utilized. This compares to a typical size of about 5,000 – 10,000 square feet for playgrounds designed for Long Beach parks to be built in the near future. The primary need for additional area is to accommodate ramping within the play equipment instead of the typical steps. Other factors are additional play modules to address additional needs of anticipated users.

Inclusion in New Park: In answer to the specific questions asked by the City Council, it is feasible to include universally accessible playgrounds in most new parks. The size requirements of a universally accessible playground would make it infeasible, however, to include them in our smaller mini-parks, as the playgrounds would tend to be out of scale with the rest of the park, even in the largest mini-parks. In neighborhood, community, and regional parks, universally accessible designs would be physically feasible, but the additional cost of universally accessible playgrounds does create additional burdens in obtaining sufficient funding to build the park.

Inclusion in On-going Designs: It is feasible to include universally accessible designs in some new park projects that are currently being designed. Standard playground designs have been completed for two mini-park projects, Rotary Centennial Park and the new park at Plymouth Street and Elm Avenue. These sites are too small for universally accessible playgrounds to be able to serve all age groups requested by the community. These projects could possibly include some limited universally accessible playground design features, but at the cost of substantial delays to redesign the parks and increasing the costs for development of these parks, which have limited funding.

Other projects with playgrounds that are in some phase of design are the amphitheater/skate plaza at Bixby Park on the beach, the park to be built at 14th Street and Chestnut Avenue ("Seaside Park"), the Sports Park, the Chittick Field renovations, Admiral Kidd Park renovations, and the Lincoln Park renovations. Other than the Bixby Park amphitheater/skate plaza, the designs are early enough in the design process for the inclusion of universally accessible playgrounds to be practical.

Recommendation: Universally accessible playgrounds typically serve a larger population base than a local neighborhood. Locating them in all new parks, where they can practically be placed, would result in a somewhat random approach. It would better serve the community to strategically place universally accessible playgrounds in locations throughout the city. With this in mind, staff recommends that initially, a minimum of seven locations should be considered. Additional sites could be added, depending on community input and public meetings, which would be conducted as a part of this recommendation. The proposed sites are: Lincoln Park, Admiral Kidd Park, Martin Luther King, Jr. Park (or Chittick Field), Stearns Champions Park (the site of the adaptive recreation program), El Dorado Park, Houghton Park, and the Sports Park. Again, other sites could be included based on community input.

This letter was reviewed Senior Deputy City Attorney Donna F. Gwin on October 7, 2004, and by David Wodynski, Budget Management Officer, on October 8, 2004.

TIMING CONSIDERATIONS

City Council action is requested on November 9, 2004, to allow the scheduling and publicity for community meetings.

FISCAL IMPACT

Implementation of the recommendations to construct seven (7) universally accessible playgrounds will have an ultimate cost of between $400,000 to $3.6 million, with likely costs closer to $1.5 million, in capital construction costs above the cost of constructing typical playgrounds at the same site. As the universally accessible playgrounds are larger than typical playgrounds, and playground maintenance is more expensive than other park maintenance activities, there will also be added maintenance costs. The additional maintenance costs would be a total of $18,000 annually for seven (7) park

sites. Neither the capital nor the maintenance costs are budgeted, and funding sources have not been identified at this time.

IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT THE CITY COUNCIL:

> Refer the report on universally accessible playgrounds to the Parks and Recreation Commission and the Citizens Advisory Commission on Disabilities for public input and recommendation back to City Council on the proposed sites and possible funding sources for universally accessible playgrounds.

Respectfully submitted,

PHIL T. HESTER
DIRECTOR OF PARKS, RECREATION AND MARINE

APPROVED:

GERALD R. MILLER
CITY MANAGER

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Attachment