



Pay For Play

**Designing
playground
elements first
before the
rest of a park**

In the designing and building of a park, a lot of money typically goes into the infrastructure—the parking lots, custom shelters and restrooms, and more. Money for the playground—the important play elements—is what is “left over.”

If the true goal of a park is to create a fun place for families to gather, providing better quality playground equipment for children to play and interact on, you shouldn't have to rely on what's left over in the budget.

The Typical Park Design

For example, your community wants to construct a new park. It must have a playground, some parking, a restroom, and a shelter house. The budget is \$750,000. Out of that money, the designers are paid \$70,000, which leaves \$680,000 for construction.



Above: The stainless-steel family-style slide at Valley Park In Grandview, Mo., takes advantage of the park's topography.

Below: This all-rope structure allows kids to play on-site without touching the ground.

If the designer focuses on the architectural elements, the playground might include a 50-foot by 75-foot, custom-designed wood structure with a matching restroom at a cost estimate of \$430,000, plus a 25-space parking lot at a cost of \$150,000. This leaves \$100,000 for the new playground that will include a main play structure and some wood-mulch safety surfacing.

When the project is bid, the shelter and restroom come in over budget at \$475,000 and the parking lot at \$160,000 leaving only \$55,000 for the playground. Sacrifices and tough decisions have to be made, but in the end there is a nice shelter house, matching restroom, reduced parking lot, and a diminished



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Kids wait in line to go down an embankment slide in an Urbandale, Iowa, park.

playground. Unfortunately, the goal has been lost.

The “Pay For Play” Concept

In “Pay for Play,” the most critical factor in design is that the playground does what it is supposed to do—provide a fun and safe place for kids to play and families to gather. In other words, we pay for play elements first and then creatively determine how to get people parked and what facilities are needed.

The design of the playground is for high-quality play materials with a virtually maintenance-free, field-turf safety surfacing. It is expensive, but the price is known: \$400,000. The restroom is prefabricated at a known cost of \$75,000, plus \$25,000 for the utilities and installation. Instead of a custom wood shelter, a 50-foot by 75-foot shade structure is chosen at a known cost of \$30,000 installed. The parking lot remains at a cost of \$150,000.

Most of the project doesn’t need to be bid except for the parking lot. The playground, restroom, and shade structure can be purchased through a public purchasing program (e.g., the known costs). Through this program, discounts can range from 10 to 15 percent. In this example, consider a 10-percent discount, resulting in \$53,000

in savings. When the parking lot is bid, it still comes in high at \$160,000. However, the savings resulting from using the purchasing program covers this overage with a little money left for another playground element.

Implementing “Pay For Play”

Become familiar with the purchasing programs available through your state, the federal government, and other local organizations. Purchasing programs help parks departments, schools, and other public entities save time and money. They are pre-bid contracts for a variety of products and services, including playground equipment. These programs provide known costs, making it easy to build the budget for a playground, assuring there is no over-budget on these elements.

Also, become familiar with local landscape architects and playground providers. Involve someone in the planning process who will help assist in designing a space that focuses on the playground and embraces the goals of the community.

Whether you are creating a new playground or updating an existing

space, the design is an important part of the process.

Use these steps as an aid:

- Walk through options
- Understand the real costs of the project and where to save money
- Navigate the process—especially if this is a first-time experience
- Gain feedback and public approval
- Develop a conceptual design—the size, shape, and form of the playground.

There is no need for full-blown construction documents. Utilize the expertise of a landscape architect or playground provider in the planning process and then use design/build construction or a community/build type of project.

A good playground provider can put a rendering together to submit to your stakeholders (vs. showing a catalog of play equipment).

Know The Goal And Target Audience

At Valley Park in Grandview, Mo., the target was kids over the age of five, and the goal was to get kids and families to be physical together.

The city wanted to provide residents with an accessible playground that would encourage and challenge kids to play and return on a regular basis. Using a “pay-for-play” approach, the end result was a playground design that used the topography of the park to achieve additional play value, allowing the kids to travel up, down, and over the different terrain in a safe way.

The park utilizes all-rope structures, which enable kids to play on the entire site without touching the ground until shooting out of the one-of-a-kind, stainless-steel tube slides. There is also a family-style slide. This is a wide slide in which adults go down the slide holding hands with their kids. The park also incorporates outdoor musical instruments, a zip line, and hammock-style swings. While the playground is the main attraction, the site also has numerous infrastructure improvements, including a restroom and parking lot. Most importantly, utilizing “Pay for Play,” the project was completed on time and under budget. The goal was met.

All Sizes Of Projects

Valley Park had a large budget, which allowed the use of a landscape architect and engineer throughout the process; however, that isn’t always necessary.

Designers can help identify individual park elements, such as shade structures. Shade—or the lack of it—can truly kill the playability of a playground, yet shade is often a missed component in the planning process.

When another Grandview park needed to update its play equipment, the city built a traditional post-and-deck structure. Plastic play equipment can get hot and takes a long time to cool. A shade structure was included in the plan, one that was built over the playground and seating area, helping to keep the equipment cool. In contrast, another park in the area failed to plan for shade. The result: Southview Park is used, whereas the other park sees little use.

A playground in need of renovation may want to update play equipment to keep it fun and challenging for

kids. Instead of replacing a traditional post-and-deck structure with a newer one, involve a landscape architect or playground provider to help you discover the latest trends and new equipment and the options for replacing the old equipment. You may be surprised by the wide variety of options available.

The park will have more users

if you focus on play first and involve someone in the upfront process who has playground-design experience. **PRB**

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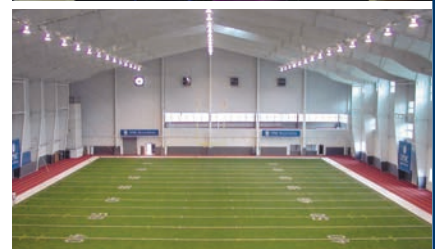
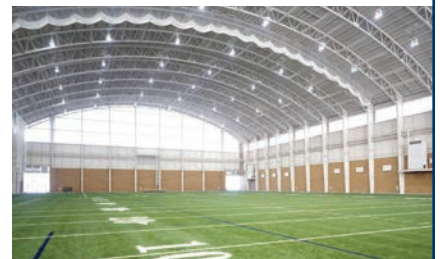
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