



ENGAGING COMMUNITIES THROUGH PLAY

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Like most great undertakings, the Woodridge Park Inclusive Playground project was sparked by a need, and that was for an accessible, inclusive playground in the City of Cottage Grove and the East Metro. Until 2017, residents were driving around the Twin Cities, and some as far as Red Wing, MN to find play spaces that would allow children and adults of all ages and abilities to play and interact together. Cottage Grove needed a play space that fit the needs of their community. That is until 2013, when Molly Pietruszewski, Recreation Services Manager for Cottage Grove, and a group of determined individuals decided that change needed to be brought to their community.

“Accessible play” can be defined in many ways, but at its core it is simply allowing people from all backgrounds and of all abilities the opportunity to learn, grow, and play together. This is not only allowing access to the playground, but access throughout the play space. Even inviting other family members to play alongside them who could have disabilities. With this concept in mind, residents approached the City Council and Mayor of Cottage Grove in December of 2012 with their proposal and gained approval to start a citizen task force the following March of 2013. Little did they know they had just set in motion what would be a 4-year undertaking and a nearly \$800,000 inclusive playground that would become the largest in the state.

With approval and support from the city, the task force got right to work. At its inception, the group consisted of 22 members from all backgrounds. It was stewarded by the local Lion’s Club, teachers, nurses, and community members who had never built a playground

before. With no concept of what their playground would entail, they started hosting monthly meetings. The purpose of these meetings was to try and nail down design concepts, priorities, and location. Besides having meetings, the task force went throughout the metro visiting playgrounds to try and gain an understanding of scale and types of equipment that would best fit their community.

Some of the priorities that became the forefront of the design were full ADA accessibility, the incorporation of a sensory garden, management of a community build, and natural play. In December of 2013, Woodridge Park was chosen as the site and the official RFP was sent out to various vendors, and four were chosen to be interviewed. From the interviewed, the task force chose Landscape Structures (manufacturer, Delano, MN) and Flagship Recreation (Design/ Build, St. Paul, MN) to lead the design, construction management, and community build of the project.

When I interviewed Molly initially, I had asked her if there had been any appeal to Flagship Recreation doing a full turnkey project, and to my surprise she said no. She indicated that they wanted to help build it. Incorporating a community build aspect had been rooted from the very beginning and the task force was very passionate about that. Helping with the actual build would be a way for the city to truly have a sense of ownership and pride for what they would have worked so hard to achieve.

With the site and vendor chosen, Molly and the task force began the design process with Charlie Colvin from Flagship Recreation. Like

any good design, it was iterative and an evolution to achieve something greater. With Colvin's keen eye for design as a trained landscape designer, a playground began to take shape. He used the large forested hill on the site to back the playground into, reducing construction and excavation costs. The task force did not want your everyday flat playground, they felt the need for elevation and landform. Colvin designed Woodridge to have a full ADA path that whimsically and intentionally wove its way through the playground getting users to nearly 7 feet above the lower play space.

It took almost a year for the full design to take shape and by December of 2014 it was finalized along with a budget of \$787,000. The final design included a sensory garden, sand-play area, musical equipment, sensory panels, custom climbing nets, and what feels like the centerpiece, a 6' diameter culvert. The surfacing would be complete unitary poured-in-place to the tune of over 24,000 square feet. Though the design and budget had finally been cemented there was still much work to be done.

Over the next two years, Molly and the task force had to not only raise the funds for the project, but also had to get approval for site upgrades. They needed to upgrade the site facilities to support the type of crowds that would be expected for Minnesota's largest inclusive playground. In 2015, they gained approval and constructed a larger new parking lot, shade pavilion, restroom facilities, and tennis courts. The tennis courts would sit on top and hide basins to house runoff from the surrounding site. They also worked with the city to save existing mature trees and incorporated them into the final design, of which there were four.

The two years leading up to the construction of the playground was a whirlwind of events and fundraising. Molly applied for many grants and the task force had to figure out how to effectively solicit donations from the community. Funding started slowly but there were many small



donations. It wasn't until the familiar Lion's Club of Cottage Grove came on board in 2015 that funds started rolling in. Around this time is also when the first renders were presented that Molly and the task force began to realize that this playground was actually going to happen.

As funds started coming in, Molly and the task force started to figure out the who, what, when of the project. They reached out to the local engineering firm Bolton & Menk, Inc and got them on board to do the site plans and construction documents. Their work was later valued at nearly \$30,000. Also on board was a local excavation company that would take care of all the site grading and preparation for the poured-in-place surfacing. The project was then awarded a grant from the DNR that covered \$100,000. It was truly turning into a "takes a village" type of project.

Western Refining and SuperAmerica donated \$25,000 to the cause, along with Andersen Corporate Foundation (Andersen Windows) with a \$10,000 donation. Both companies are located in the area and feel strongly about sourcing locally. The task force also raised money with a "Give 5" campaign where they physically walked the streets of Cottage Grove and asked people to donate \$5. They knocked on doors and asked local businesses to participate. This along with a community "Walk Through the Park" raised over \$20,000. Both events helped to create a sense of ownership to the community. Without a passionate and determined group of people, none of these donations would have come through.

With a group of ten well known donors, smaller groups and organizations quickly followed suit. Though funding was coming in, there were other means that needed to be taken care of to ensure that this project was a success. The Mayor and City Council made YouTube videos promoting and supporting the project. These videos were shared across all platforms of social media. They also promoted multiple levels of funding and a donor board that would be installed on site with company logos. Molly believes that the donor board was a huge factor in garnering support



Finally, in the summer of 2016, Molly applied to the Lion's Club International Foundation (LCIF) that would hopefully award the project with their final \$100,000. With this last portion of unknown funding, the design had to be revised. Flagship had to make revisions for two possible outcomes, a fully funded project, and another that reduced the project by \$100,000. The reduced project had to dramatically pull back surfacing, eliminate equipment, reduce site furnishings, and minimize the concrete border and excavation.

In the fall of 2016, Cottage Grove had won the Lion's Club grant and had a final commitment from the city of \$350,000 to fully fund their inclusive playground. Outside of the major donors and the city's contribution, the task force had raised nearly \$237,000 through their local community engagement efforts. Purchase orders got signed and sent out, but the project wasn't done yet, it still needed to be installed. The groundbreaking took place in May of 2017 and was attended by the Mayor, City Council, and all the stakeholders and donors. The following week the existing playground was carefully removed and donated to Kids Around the World, an organization that works to reuse and install playgrounds in third world countries.

After nearly two months of construction, it was finally time for the community build in August of 2017. The playground had been prepared in such a way that equipment to be installed would be easy for community member of all abilities. They installed slides and decks, put posts in pre-drilled holes, assembled barriers and climbers, and hung up swing sets. In all, the community build lasted three days and nearly 200 people participated under the guidance of professional playground installers. Final touch up work and surfacing was installed over the following weeks and the ribbon cutting was scheduled.

September had come and what had been a rainy few days managed to subside for the summer afternoon. Hundreds of people of all ages showed up to be the first ones to play and experience the new inclusive play space. Crowds formed around the donor board to find their family's or company's name. The entire event went off without a hitch, hearing heartfelt speeches from the Mayor, Molly, and a few of the major donors. The ribbon cutting announced the name "Woodridge Park Inclusive Playground" officially for the first time.

I asked Molly over the phone what impacts she is feeling to this day, now that the project has been over for nine months. She indicated that one thing she is constantly getting reminded of is the personal connection that this project has had on her community. She is getting letters and calls constantly thanking her for the work that she has done to make this dream come true. No matter a person's physical or mental abilities, they are welcome on this playground and there is equipment that they can use. She says you can go there any day of the week and it is not just busy, but everyone is playing with everyone.

Since the grand opening last September, she said there have been a couple things to acknowledge. First, the Cottage Grove Middle School did their own fundraising and installed a free library. They even organized their own ribbon cutting. Secondly, they won an MRPA Award of Excellence under the Partnerships and Sponsorships category. They were presented this award in March of 2018. Currently, Woodridge Inclusive Playground is the largest in the state. This is not to say it will not encourage others to think larger in their own communities though. Molly's final words to me were that the design evolved and was iterative, but she would not change a single thing.



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Designer: Charlie Colvin ASLA, MLA II, CPSI (Formerly of Flagship Recreation, currently with St. Paul Public School's Facilities Department.)

Project Consultant: Brett Altergott CPSI – Flagship Recreation – Lead construction manager on the project.

