

April 18, 2014

Magical Bridge playground surges toward reality

Architectural Review Board approves design for Palo Alto's first 'inclusive' playground

by Gennady Sheyner

With funds nearly secured and its final design winning approval Thursday, Palo Alto's dream of creating an "inclusive" playground for children with and without disabilities is now on a firm path toward reality.

Spearheaded by local volunteers, including parents of children with disabilities, the Magical Bridge playground scored a victory this week when Santa Clara County provided \$150,000 for the project, augmenting privately raised funds. Thursday, the \$3.2-million project received a unanimous vote of approval from the city's Architectural Review Board, with members using words like "very exciting," "attractive" and "really wonderful" to describe the proposed playground, which would be located at Mitchell Park.

"It has been just a very magical ride," said Olenka Villareal, who launched the fundraising campaign in 2008 with the purpose of giving her daughter, Ava, and other children with disabilities a playground that can accommodate their needs.

None of Palo Alto's 34 playgrounds are fully compliant with the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires public places to include

wheelchair access, Villareal said in her comments to the Architectural Review Board.

"We decided that when we're building the Magical Bridge playground, let's take it well above and beyond the standards," she told the board.

The board's approval and the latest grant make it increasingly likely that construction could begin as early as June. Once built, the playground would include seven zones, each focusing on a specific type of play. These include a spinning zone, with five separate play structures (including a wheelchair-accessible merry-go-round); a swing zone with four different swing sets (including a set with six harness chairs); a sliding-and-climbing zone with four slides and a walkway bridge that reduces the need for ramps; and a "tot-a-lot" zone designed for children aged 2 to 5 and featuring a double slide, a climbing apparatus and a spinning bowl.

There also will be a music zone with equipment such as stacked bells, a "Metallophone" (a series of poles that produce different tones), drums and chimes; a "natural play zone" with a climbing boulder, a proposed playhouse and picnic area. There also will be an "open play zone," a large turf area that



Courtesy: Royston Hanamoto Alley and Abey

The design for the inclusive Magical Bridge playground to be built at Mitchell Park was approved by the Architectural Review Board on Thursday.

can accommodate group play and offer visitors a place to get away from the main playground.

The design consultant for the new playground is the firm Royston Hanamoto Alley and Abey, the same group that designed Mitchell Park.

Though the city contributed \$300,000 for the proposed playground, most of the funding was raised by volunteers, with donors including the Peery Foundation, the Enlight Foundation, former Palo Alto Mayor Leland Levy and the Palo Alto Weekly Holiday Fund.

Villareal said the latest contribution from the county leaves the project about \$200,000 shy of its goal.

In announcing the \$150,000 grant, Santa Clara County Supervisor Joe Simitian said he was "so pleased that our County could provide even a modest contribution

ward this worthy project," Palo Alto City Manager James Keene also praised the county for its grant.

"There's a lot to love about this project," Keene said in a state-ment. "I'm pleased that the County saw the value of partnering with the City to provide a unique facility of regional value."

The architecture board added its own voice of support for the project on Thursday. Board member Ran-dy Popp called it "very exciting."

"This is a very easy project for me to look at," Popp said.

The board's approval included a few caveils, including a request that the playhouse be made more iconic. Board Chairman Lee Lippert likened the playhouse to the castle at Disneyland — a structure that is so distinct that people instantly identify it with the theme park.

"There's an opportunity that's lost and it may not cost more. It's just how you use those materials and how it's put together," Lippert said. "I want it to be something that the kids go and, like, their minds explode almost."

Board member Robert Gooyer agreed.

"If you're going to do something with that, go nuts with it," Gooyer told the project architects.

Though they asked the architects to return May 1 with a few revisions, board members were unanimous in approving the over-all design for the playground. Alexander Lew said the new playground will be attractive to every-body and Clare Malone Prichard said she is happy to support it.

"I think it will be really wonderful for the kids," Malone Prichard said. ■

August 1, 2017

County establishes fund for inclusive playgrounds

Cities, nonprofits can apply for matching grants starting Aug. 1

by Elena Kadvany / Palo Alto Weekly

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What started as one groundbreaking model for inclusive playgrounds in Palo Alto could become the norm throughout Santa Clara County, which is calling on local cities, schools and nonprofits to apply for dollars to build more playgrounds accessible to children and adults of all abilities.

These playgrounds follow in the footsteps of the Magical Bridge Playground, which opened in Palo Alto in 2015. Earlier this year, Supervisor Joe Simitian introduced a plan, unanimously approved by the county Board of Supervisors, to set aside \$10 million in matching funds for all-inclusive playgrounds to be built in each of the county's five districts. (Two million dollars is available in each district, and one or more grant projects may be awarded to each district.)

The county has also previously provided "modest funding" to cities and community groups in Palo Alto, San Jose and Morgan Hill to help build more inclusive playgrounds for both children and parents with physical or cognitive disabilities, according to a county press release.

In Palo Alto, the Board of Education also recently expressed support for a staff proposal to apply for a county grant to build an all-inclusive playground at Addison Elementary School.

More than 10,000 children in Santa Clara County have major disabilities, and more than 20,000 take advantage of special education in schools, the county said in its press release. But the Magical Bridge Playground and the Rotary PlayGarden in San Jose remain the only parks, city or school playgrounds that are fully accessible to them or other family members with disabilities, the release states.

The existing parks are also "becoming overcrowded," the county said, "as they are in high demand – both by families with children with disabilities, and families who haven't faced disability."

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"To say that these parks have been a success would be an understatement," Simitian said in the release. "Families both with and without disabilities drive for miles to experience these parks. This will give them the same opportunities in the communities where they live."

The grant-funded playgrounds must have designed accessibility for wheelchair and non-wheelchair-bound individuals with disabilities, according to the county. The playgrounds should also include design elements that address the needs of people with autism spectrum disorder, sensory challenges, visual and auditory impairments, medically fragile individuals and those with cognitive, developmental and physical disabilities.

"As individuals, we can't always effect the direction of national policies but we can impact our communities," said Magical Bridge CEO and Palo Alto resident Olenka Villarreal said in the release. "How magical would it be to celebrate our most vulnerable community members by creating new and wondrous places for them to play?"

The fund will draw \$5 million from the county's 2012 Measure A sales tax reserve, with an additional \$5 million coming from other general fund sources, according to the county.

Grant applications are available starting Aug. 1, and are due on Oct. 18. The county will hold an informational workshop for prospective applicants on Aug. 17 at 10 a.m. in Los Gatos. For more information and to apply, go to sccgov.org.

August 11, 2017

Playground a model for other cities

All-inclusive parks could become common in county

BY JACQUELINE LEE
Daily News Staff Writer

Seven-year-old Kenzie Hamed has Williams Syndrome, a rare disorder that has her missing 24 genes, including one that helps her calculate depth.

She can run and jump, but has significant developmental delays and unique sensory needs. For these reasons and more, most playgrounds are scary to her.

But the Magical Bridge Playground in Palo Alto is different.

Because the playground is an all-inclusive park, Kenzie can play with her twin brother Adam, who does not have the genetic disorder, said Doaa Hamed, the twins' mom.

"If most children think Disneyland is their dream place, this is it for Kenzie," Hamed said. "We don't have to shadow her step-by-step here. At Magical Bridge she is safe and she is exploring."

Still, it's a toll for the Hameds, who live in Los Gatos and travel to the park, the only Magical Bridge Playground in the county. "We love the playground and we can't imagine our weekends without it," Hamed said. "If it were up to me, I would convert every park into an all-inclusive park. It would be a dream come true if there were Magical playgrounds throughout the Bay Area."

Santa Clara County officials are calling on cities to create such playgrounds.

Earlier this year, the Board of Supervisors approved a plan, introduced by Supervisor Joe Simitian

that set aside \$10 million in grants to build all-inclusive playgrounds in each of the county's five districts.

Half of that amount comes from the 2012 Measure A reserve and half from other county general fund sources, according to Simitian's office.

Applications for the grant, available online, are due Oct. 18. A workshop for prospective applicants is scheduled for 10 a.m. Aug. 17 at the County of Santa Clara Parks & Recreation Department, Administration Building, 298 Garden Hill Drive in Los Gatos.

Simitian said he hopes the grants will help cities, schools and nonprofits build playgrounds designed to address the needs of people with autism, sensory challenges, visual and audio impairment, and cognitive, developmental and physical disabilities.

To say all-inclusive parks such as the Magical Bridge Playground in Palo Alto and the Rotary PlayGarden in San Jose have been successes would be an understatement, Simitian added.

"Families both with and without disabilities drive for miles to experience these parks," Simitian said. "This will give them the same opportunities in the communities where they live."

Palo Alto resident Olenka Villarreal labored for years to build a playground adults and children, including her developmentally disabled daughter Ava, could enjoy regardless of their ability.

Villarreal imagined a playground where she, as an adult, could interact with her daughter, who is 14 but developmentally more than 1. A playground where a parent in a wheelchair can easily transfer

himself into a disc swing to



Patrick Tehan / Bay Area News Group
Michael Stevens, of San Bruno, and his daughter, Jillian, 5, who has cerebral palsy, play at Magical Bridge Playground in Palo Alto in this 2015 file photo.

its second Magical Bridge project, in Redwood City at Red Morton Park, 1120 Roosevelt Ave.

So far, Magical Bridge has agreements with cities including Sunnyvale and Morgan Hill to provide help in applying for the grant and fundraising. Mountain View also has set aside money for an all-inclusive park.

According to Sunnyvale Mayor Glenn Hendricks, Sunnyvale has allocated \$1.8 million and an acre of park space for an all-inclusive playground at Fair Oaks Park, which is being redesigned.

"As we look down the road, I'd like to have all-inclusive features in all of our parks," Hendricks said. "We should reach a point where parks like this are not a big deal because it has become the natural way a park would be built."

Magical Bridge's concept caught the eye of Heather Farrer, who was born in Palo Alto and resides in Louisville. She's hopeful she can bring something like Magical Bridge back to Kentucky and is visiting Palo Alto this week to learn about the project.

Farrer, founder of The Wheelhouse Project, said the playground's thoughtful design for those of all ages, sizes and abilities will help her create a space that improves the health of the Smoketown community, an area limited in resources.

"We want to restore a sense of safety and bring people together to an area green space, where they can play and gather and work to improve the neighborhood," Farrer said. "A fun, imaginative place for kids who grew up in multidimensional poverty. Magical Bridge solves some of these problems."

ing left out."

Villarreal, co-founder of the Palo Alto-based Magical Bridge Foundation, raised \$4 million, mainly from private donations, to make Magical Bridge in Palo Alto a reality. The playground, which opened in April 2016, sees an estimated 25,000 visitors a month, with more than 60 percent of them from outside Palo Alto, according to Villarreal.

Villarreal has since turned her attention to bringing Magical Bridge to other local cities and, she hopes, to other states by 2018.

The nonprofit will break ground this October on

"The remarkable thing is we've created something innovative and it really shouldn't be," Villarreal said. "It should be the norm. One in every five people who come through a playground will have some form of a disability, whether it's obvious or not obvious. We know many people are be-

ing left out."

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Have you enjoyed the all-inclusive playground at Mitchell Park? Should more be built?

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May 2, 2018



All-Inclusive Playgrounds Coming Soon to a Neighborhood Near You

Earlier this year, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved funding for pioneering all-inclusive playground projects in each of the County’s five supervisorial districts.

With accessible and secure slides, tree houses, carousels and swings, as well as playhouses and retreat spaces that encourage imaginary play and quiet time, all-inclusive playgrounds support recreation and social interaction for people with autism, sensory challenges, cognitive, developmental and physical disabilities – as well as those without special needs.

Two of these groundbreaking play areas are already in action: Rotary Playground in San Jose, and Magical Bridge Playground in Palo Alto.

Watching children play at the Palo Alto site on a recent sunny day, Olenka Villareal, founder of the Magical Playground Foundation, points out, “The way this playground sets itself apart is that it was mindfully laid out to be appropriate and fun for the typically developing child, the

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with autism, a visually impaired person.” She adds, “One in every five has a visible or an invisible disability. Only ten percent of the disabled population are wheelchair users, so this playground has been designed to accommodate as many different and unique needs as possible.”

A total of six new all-inclusive playgrounds have been funded so far, and County Supervisors are enthusiastic.

“We saw these two wonderful examples at the Rotary Playgarden in San Jose and the Magical Playground in Palo Alto, and my reaction was, we need more of this,” says President of the Board of Supervisors Joe Simitian. “It’s not just about providing playground spaces for, quote, kids with disabilities or kids with special needs — all-inclusive means everybody. It means everybody in the family, everybody in the community, and that’s what makes them great.”

He continues, “The good news is that we’ve got all-inclusive playgrounds that are going to be cropping up around the County in close proximity to virtually every resident of the County. My hope and expectation is that it’s not just a way to spread a really wonderful concept throughout the County and serve families around Santa Clara County, but that, ultimately, we’re a model that others adopt. I hope that 10-20 years from now the all-inclusive playground is the standard, it’s the norm, that people look back and say Can you believe we ever did it that other old-fashioned way?”

About the All-Inclusive Playground Grant Program:

The Board of Supervisors of the County of Santa Clara established the All-Inclusive Playground Grant Program (AIPG) to provide grants to local cities, school districts, non-profits and/or other governmental entities interested in bringing all-inclusive playgrounds into their communities within Santa Clara County.

The grant-funded playgrounds must have designed accessibility for wheelchair and non-wheelchair bound individuals with disabilities. All-inclusive playgrounds should include design elements to address the needs of people with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Sensory Challenges, Visual and Auditory Impairments, medically fragile individuals, Cognitive, Developmental and Physical Disabilities.

Video link: <http://www.santaclaracountynewsbeat.com/2018/05/02/scc-inclusive-playgrounds/>