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Westchester: Neighborhood council supports proposed skate plaza, but some question city policy regarding safety equipment

BY GARY WALKER

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Westchester Park is gearing up for a series of enhancements that will give the 22-acre recreation area a facelift going into the second decade of the new millennium.

While there will be increased lighting and more playground space, the centerpiece of the enhancements in the eyes of many will be a skate park, the third in Los Angeles Council District 11.

Though there appears to be a great deal of support in Westchester and Playa del Rey for a skate plaza, some residents are concerned that the skating area will not have sufficient lighting and that safety equipment will be optional, not mandatory.

The Neighborhood Council of Westchester-Playa approved a motion to support the park enhancements, including the skate plaza at its Jan. 4 meeting, but some of its members raised question about the planned lack of enforcement by the city for skaters to wear safety equipment.

Craig Raines, a landscape architect with the city's Department of Recreation and Parks, said the city's policy varies from park to park.

"Since the skate place or skate spot/plazas are not staffed, we are only required as per state law to post the signage regarding wearing of equipment," Raines explained. "At our parks that are staffed, you must wear the gear and the attendant will not let you in to skate unless you are geared up."

"These parks are also generally fenced in."

The proposed skate plaza at Westchester Park has not been budgeted to have a fence enclosure.

Sports injury experts recommend safety equipment for skaters, especially helmets. Dr. Clarence Williams, a neurologist at the Kerlan-Jobe Orthopaedic Clinic in Westchester, said head protection can decrease the level of high velocity impact and therefore should be worn while skating.

"The risk of orthopedic and musculoskeletal injuries are high in skateboarding, and they increase without leg, arm and head protection," Williams said.

Dr. Robert Watkins treats professional and collegiate athletes at the Marina

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Spine Center at Marina Del Rey Hospital, but during his residency at USC he saw many injuries from skateboarding in the emergency room.

"In my experience, skaters rarely hurt their necks or backs, but you do see a lot of knee and elbow injuries," said Watkins, an orthopedic spine surgeon and spinal consultant for the Los Angeles Dodgers and the University of Southern California. "But if they're not wearing helmets, there is the potential to sustain a concussion."

A state law passed in 1998, Assembly Bill 1296, classifies skateboarding as an inherently "hazardous recreational activity," and therefore exempts municipalities and their employees from any liability for claims of negligence resulting in skateboarders' injuries.

"Basically, it's a skate-at-your-own-risk type of deal, though it is still a code infraction, and if the police department/general services police wanted to, they could hang out all day at a skate plaza and hand out tickets," Raines said. "But I am sure there are better ways for them to serve their community."

Heidi Lemmon, the executive director of the Santa Monica based Skate Park Association of the United States, says her organization recommends skaters use helmets, elbow and knee pads when they skate in bowls over 8 feet deep. However, she views skating on the street and in a skate plaza as virtually the same and does not recommend safety equipment for either.

"It's the same style, with no transition like you would have in an 8-foot bowl," she said.

Lemmon said her association at one time required the use of safety equipment, until she was approached by a variety of skateboarders who displayed their opposition to wearing helmets and pads. "We had fewer reports of elbow and knee injuries after we made wearing it optional," she claimed.

Dr. Danielle Fisher sees a number of injuries from skateboarding in her practice every year. A Westchester pediatrician, Fisher said she sees injured joints like elbows and knees, as well as broken collarbones and head injuries.

"I find it outrageous that the city is not planning to make it mandatory to wear helmets," the doctor, who is the chairwoman of pediatrics at St. John's Health Center in Santa Monica, said. "I spend a lot of time counseling my patients to wear safety gear, and I even tell them that professional skaters wear helmets."

Skateboarding legend Tony Hawk released a list of safety tips several years ago for biking, skateboarding and anyone riding a scooter. Number four is "always wear a helmet, elbow and knee pads on scooters and skateboards. You'll never see Tony Hawk without this essential safety equipment."

According to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, each year in the United States skateboarding injuries lead to about 50,000 visits to emergency departments and most of the hospitalizations involve head injuries. Some heal quickly and others lead to disabilities including loss of vision, hearing and speech, and changes in thinking and behavior.

"Think of a skater who has had a serious fall," said Williams of Kerlan-Jobe. "The brain no longer functions normally, and if it has not healed properly, it can't respond as quickly to avoid impact with another skater."

Watkins recommends wearing a helmet while skating, but said even that piece of safety equipment can only protect a youth so much. "They can decrease the probability of injury, but they can't always prevent the brain from getting contused against the skull," he said.

Watkins suggests that anyone who sustains a head injury have a significant amount of recovery time before practicing again.

"Like we tell football players who have had a brain injury or a concussion, the main thing is awareness," he noted. "Kids have to realize that they are susceptible for having a long-term brain injury unless they get proper medical care."

Lemmon said the city and the police should treat anyone using a skate plaza

the same as if they were practicing any other sport. "Anyone can go to a public park and play baseball or basketball, and no one is going to get ticketed for not wearing a helmet or safety gear," she noted.

All of the doctors interviewed stressed wearing a helmet as the most important piece of equipment for those who choose to use any.

"It's important that it fits appropriately and is not too loose," said Williams, who has treated patients who suffered skull fractures while skateboarding. "Also, every head injury is serious, so I would strongly recommend seeking medical attention and an assessment after a fall."

Fisher also recommends that beginners practice on a flat surface before skating around others. "It's best to practice during non-peak hours, in order to make sure that you have good balance, which is critical in skateboarding," she added.

A group of philanthropists associated with the Annenberg Foundation has pledged to help pay for some of the skate park. Most of the other improvements will be paid for using Quimby funds, revenue that developers contribute to the council district where they are building projects. Quimby funds can only be used for recreational enhancements.

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Guest wrote on Jan 19, 2011 5:34 PM:

" Sounds like a great idea - so many kids and young adults enjoy the sport and need a place to go and skate. However, i wonder what the increase in 911 calls will be for injured skaters. The cost to the city given all the budget issues should be another factor in deciding if appropriate safety gear should be worn. Culver City has had a skatepark for the last couple of years - i would imagine they could share some of their growing pains (no pun intended) in operating and maintaining skate parks. Good Luck. "

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