

illinois

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PARKS AND RECREATION

The magazine of the Illinois Association of Park Districts and the Illinois Park and Recreation Association



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spaces



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IN THIS ISSUE



4 From the Editor
Making the Most of Outdoor Space

6 Get on Board
IAPD - Excellence by Design

8 Eye on the Profession
Yes, You CAN Work in Parks and Rec Your Whole Life

10 Statehouse Insider
IAPD Navigates Challenges to Conclude Highly Successful Spring Session

12 Education Corner
How IoT is Shaping the Future of Parks & Recreation

14 Beyond Boundaries: Designing Universally Inclusive Environments in Parks and Recreation

20 Innovative Green Design

26 Transformation of Nelson Golf Course: A Tale of Success and Revitalization

31 IAPD Corporate Members

35 IPRA Commerical Members



FROM THE EDITOR

Making the most of outdoor space



While park districts, forest preserves, conservation, recreation and special recreation agencies continually work to preserve open space, they are also constantly seeking new ways to make the outdoors engaging, interactive and fun.

Are your parks compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act? Are you providing safe, up-to-date equipment and structures for your residents? Are you seeking new ways to revamp the facilities you have to better serve your community?

I hope with this issue, you can discover the many ways you can reinvent outdoor spaces to give your community and visitors something exciting and new. When it comes to creative and unique outdoor designs, Illinois agencies and associations are a cut above the rest.

Our first article, *Beyond Boundaries: Designing Universally Inclusive Environments in Parks and Recreation* on page 14, covers the principles of universal design. In *Innovative Green Design* on page 20, ForeverLawn Chicago examines the role of synthetic turf that is being utilized in park districts around Illinois. Finally, on page 26, *Transformation of Nelson Golf Course: A Tale of Success and Revitalization*, the Decatur Park District details the transformation of one of its golf courses into an incredible variety of outdoor spaces.

With so much to explore throughout Illinois, I hope you get a chance to experience some of the fresh and innovative ways park districts, forest preserves, conservation, recreation and special recreation agencies deliver memorable experiences to residents.

Thanks for reading!

— Wayne Utterback, Editor

Photo Credit: This issue's cover image earned Honorable Mention in the Give Us Your Best Shot photo contest. It was submitted by Samantha Cicogna from ForeverLawn Chicago.



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JOHN DEERE



Peter M. Murphy, Esq., CAE, IOM
IAPD President and CEO

IAPD - Excellence by Design

This issue of *Illinois Parks & Recreation* is focused on *Designing Outdoor Spaces*, and when I think about things that are perfectly designed, I cannot help but think about our park districts, forest preserves, conservation, recreation, and special recreation agencies working in partnership with the Illinois Association of Park Districts to shape the quality of life in Illinois.

In fact, this design works so *well* that the incredible work we do in meeting the recreational needs of residents and preserving valuable forests and open space might indeed appear 'invisible' as Don Norman's quote states.

The Illinois Association of Park Districts knows about the countless hours that you, our member commissioners and park professionals, spend working behind the scenes, attending meetings, creating strategic plans that align with the needs of your residents, attending workshops, and participating in webinars so that you can advance your skills and stay abreast of trends and laws that impact your agencies.

IAPD sees this, and we are here to make sure that others see it as well with an array of opportunities to elevate public awareness and appreciation for your hard work and dedication.

In 1994, IAPD and the Illinois Park and Recreation Association partnered with Illinois State Fair officials to create **Park District Conservation Day**. Held annually on the last Saturday of the Illinois State Fair, this statewide public awareness event provides special recognition for Illinois park districts, forest preserves, conservation, recreation, and special recreation agencies. These agencies send dance groups, bands, chorales, zoos, and more to perform or exhibit at various locations throughout the fairgrounds for more than 100,000 fairgoers while educational announcements about the benefits of parks, recreation, and conservation echo the entire day throughout the sound system of the fairgrounds.

The 13th annual Park Pentathlon also takes place on *Park District Conservation Day*. This fun, friendly competition consists of five individual events: disc golf, horseshoe pitching, soccer, basketball knockout, and a golf chipping challenge. Competing teams include dignitaries from the

Illinois State Fair, Illinois Department of Agriculture, Illinois Treasurer's Office, Springfield Mayor's Office, Sangamon County, and IAPD/IPRA. This event is covered by local media and highlights some of the fun things that our member agencies have to offer and creates a bond and new friendships through competition.

This year, *Park District Conservation Day* is Saturday, August 17. Park, recreation, and conservation agency board members and staff are encouraged to volunteer on this exciting day in Springfield. Volunteers are welcome to bring family and friends to enjoy this fun-filled day at the Illinois State Fair distributing giveaways, engaging with fairgoers at the *Park District Conservation Day* booth, and coordinating stage performances.

"Good design is actually a lot harder to notice than poor design, in part because good designs fit our needs so well that the design is invisible."

- Don Norman



Volunteers can choose the timeframe and location for their volunteer shift while receiving complimentary admission, parking, and a colorful Park District Conservation Day t-shirt.

For more information about this exciting day, visit our website at ILparks.org.

Another event that highlights the incredible design of our park, recreation, and conservation system is the IAPD **Best of the Best Awards Gala**, coming to Wheeling Park District's beautiful Chevy Chase Country Club the evening of Friday, October 25.

The Illinois Association of Park Districts first organized this formal event in 2007 to give our member park districts, forest preserves, conservation, recreation, and special recreation agencies an opportunity to celebrate their successes. The event recognizes board member and agency anniversaries as well as the businesses, media,

citizen volunteers, and coaches who go beyond the call of duty to make Illinois a better place to live, work, and play.

Eighteen years later, this highly anticipated annual program has become known as the red-carpet event of the year for Illinois park districts, forest preserves, conservation, recreation, and special recreation agencies. The event is a resounding affirmation that the work you are doing is making an enormous difference not only in preserving the wildlife and natural areas of this great state, but also in the lives of children and adults of all ages.

Each year, our gala generates positive media stories and leaves attendees motivated, inspired, and deeply touched by ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Their stories live on through this incredible event, and every year, there seems to be 'that one story or two' that leaves a lasting impression on all attendees.

Take our 2022 Outstanding Citizen Volunteer of the Year, Martha Demko. Martha, at 100-years young, was the chairperson for charity at the Glenview Park District's Senior Center, a position that she held for 22 years. Two mornings a week, she would lead volunteers in making flannel teddy bears for delivery to children at local hospitals.

Martha purchased the flannel, cut out the bears, and sewed them together. She would bring them to the Senior Center for volunteers to stuff, close, and embroider. The Glenview Park District estimated that Martha had sewn more than 15,000 bears!

Martha's involvement with the park district senior center made an enormous impact on children in area hospitals; making their difficult situations a little more 'bearable' as she said in her acceptance speech.

Our 2023 Partnership winner, the Forest Preserves of Cook County with the Chicago Zoological Society and the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine resulted in the nation's first wildlife residency program, the Illinois Zoological and Wildlife Health Management residency.

This three-year program meets the rigorous standards of the American College for Zoological Medicine and allows participants to earn a degree while receiving mentorship from all three partner organizations. The program supports a new level of specialty care and professional veterinary medical services focused on establishing a baseline of wildlife health.

This collaboration is incredibly important to the future survival of our region's wildlife, and it will serve as an excellent model for other organizations nationwide.

The *Best of the Best Awards Gala* is designed to recognize excellence while casting a bright light on the *critical importance* of what we do.

Please consider submitting nominations for your agency's success stories at ILparks.org by August 21 for partnerships, intergovernmental cooperative agreements, relationships with local businesses and journalists, arts programs, environmental advancements, coaches, and citizen volunteers.

Thank you to the entire IAPD family for your tireless commitment both locally and statewide to design the best parks, forest preserves, and recreational opportunities in the nation.

IAPD Calendar of Events

Oct. 8-10
NRPA Annual Conference
Atlanta, Georgia

Oct. 25
Best of the Best Awards Gala
Chevy Chase Country Club
Wheeling Park District

Nov. 7
Legal Symposium
Hyatt Lodge/Conference Center
Oak Brook, IL

Jan. 23-25, 2025
2025 IAPD/IPRA Soaring to New Heights Conference
Hyatt Regency, Chicago

The
IAPD Leadership
Institute

Thursday, August 22
**From Conflict to Conversation:
Practical Conflict Resolution
Skills for Leaders**
In-Person
6 to 9 p.m.
Itasca Park District


IAPD
Summer Golf Tour

Monday, August 26
Shepherd's Crook Golf Course
Zion Park District

Monday, September 30
Sunset Valley Golf Club
Park District of Highland Park

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EYE ON THE PROFESSION

A CLOSER LOOK AT TRENDS AND ISSUES IN THE PARK AND RECREATION PROFESSION



By Suzi Wirtz, IOM
IPRA Executive Director

Yes, You CAN Work in Parks and Rec Your Whole Life

"If I could be a lifeguard my whole life, that would be the perfect job!" This is something I've heard more than a few times from IPRA members across the state of Illinois. Couple that with, "I just never knew all the various jobs that exist in parks and rec," and "I wasn't happy with my major and then my friend told me I'd be great at this" ... and you're looking at some excellent reasons that help to promote the benefits of a career in this field.

Last year, IAPD reported that 56,619 Illinois residents were employed by park districts, forest preserves, conservation districts, recreation and special recreation agencies. In addition, jobs generated by park districts, forest preserves and conservation districts along with special recreation agencies contribute \$739 million to household incomes statewide. Those are some pretty significant numbers that are reinforced by the fact that people who work in parks and recreation are happy and love what they do.

In a study called "How Americans View their Jobs" conducted by Pew Research in March 2023, only 50% of workers in the US say they are extremely or very satisfied with their day-to-day tasks, the amount of feedback they receive from their manager or supervisor on how they're doing their job (49%), and the benefits their employer provides, such as health insurance and paid time off (49%). Additionally, less than half say their job is actually fulfilling. In fact, 29% find their jobs to be overwhelming.

Professionals in the parks and recreation world have the opportunity to blend their love for the outdoors, community service and a healthy lifestyle into a fulfilling career. Working in parks and recreation is not only beneficial for the individual but also has profound positive impacts on communities and the environment.

And, did you know that just about every agency has a finance director? They also have marketing departments and human resource specialists, graphic designers, data analysts and more. The traditional and "fun" Leslie Knope-Ron Swanson characters do exist, but this is a profession filled with highly trained, educated individuals who consistently seek out future development opportunities. Professionals can also move within the agency, or between agencies, to find the niche that best suits their interests and abilities, leading to a more satisfying and dynamic career path.

According to the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA), in a 2023 report, more than 280 million people in the United States visited a local park or recreation facility at least once during the past year. And, for you real estate moguls out there, 84% percent of U.S. adults say they seek high-quality parks and recreation when choosing a place to live. A desire to live near high-quality park and recreation opportunities is common across nearly every segment of the U.S. population. Well-maintained parks and recreational facilities attract tourists, new residents, and businesses, contributing to the local economy. Special events and programs generate revenue and create job opportunities. By working in this field, professionals help build vibrant, economically resilient communities.

"Find a job you enjoy doing, and you will never have to work a day in your life."

- Mark Twain



They're Just Good For You

One of the primary benefits of working in parks and recreation is the opportunity to promote physical and mental health within the community. Parks and recreation professionals plan, organize and facilitate activities like sports leagues, fitness classes and outdoor adventures that encourage community members to stay active. Regular physical activity is crucial for preventing chronic diseases, maintaining healthy weight, and improving overall well-being. The National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI) reports that one in five Americans has some type of mental illness.

Especially important today more than ever, parks and recreation professionals play a vital role in mental health. Access to green spaces and recreational activities can reduce stress, anxiety and depression. Parks and recreation professionals contribute to creating and maintaining these spaces, thus enhancing the quality of life for individuals in the community.

People who love people work in this field. Fostering a sense of community and social cohesion, so many facilities and activities

serve as gathering places where people from diverse backgrounds can come together. Events such as festivals, concerts, and community fairs organized by parks and recreation departments provide opportunities for social interaction and cultural exchange. These activities can create a more inclusive community. By designing programs that cater to various age groups, interests, and abilities, parks and recreation professionals ensure that everyone has the chance to participate and benefit from communal resources.

A career in parks and recreation often involves a commitment to environmental stewardship—whether you're planning a summer camp, maintaining the parks or determining where the funds go for future projects. Parks and recreation professionals play a crucial role in conserving natural resources, preserving wildlife habitats, and promoting sustainability. They manage public lands, develop conservation programs, and educate the public about the importance of protecting the environment. It's pretty cool that parks professionals will ensure that future generations can enjoy and benefit from these outdoor spaces.

Job Satisfaction for a Lifetime

I've heard time and again, from agencies in southern Illinois to Gurnee to Annawan to Chicago ... parks and recreation professionals love their jobs; they report extremely high job satisfaction due to the meaningful nature of the work. The ability to make a tangible difference in people's lives and the community at large can be incredibly rewarding. Seeing the positive impacts of your efforts—whether it's a child enjoying a new playground, a family participating in a community event, or a thriving local ecosystem—provides a sense of accomplishment and purpose.

A career in parks and recreation also offers continuous learning opportunities—through organizations like IPRA, IAPD and NRPA. The field is ever-evolving, with new trends in recreation, conservation techniques, and community needs. People are living longer—look to a park district to be on the forefront of senior programs, like IPRA's Senior Games last month. New rules in technology? Agencies are well aware of this and are increasing ways to keep the community informed, able to register for programs and more. Professionals must be on the cutting edge of trends, often engaging in ongoing training and education, attending programs like Professional Development School and the Annual Soaring to New Heights Conference. This commitment to lifelong learning not only enhances personal and professional growth but also ensures that parks and recreation services remain relevant and effective.

So, as you look at your summer part-time workers, your lifeguards and snack bar workers, your summer camp counselors and more, please take the time to emphasize the benefits of working in parks and recreation! Maybe they can shadow one of your employees for the day. Someone interested in finance or accounting? How about an hour with your Finance Manager? If you hear someone mention they love to organize things, maybe a tour of the park with a program manager would be worthwhile. The benefits extend far beyond the individual; those lifeguards today can become part of a unique group of professionals tomorrow who touch the lives of community members on a daily basis.

IPRA Upcoming Events

Volunteer Management Training September 3 – October 1 Online

Presented by Janet Capety, Founder of Take5 Training, this virtual, activity-rich program will discuss the five essential steps to Focused Impactful Volunteer Engagement.

Marketing is Everyone's Business: An Integrated Approach to Agency Success September 11 or September 19 Online

Using an integrated marketing approach, we'll explore today's 8 Ps of Marketing and how they impact the entire customer life cycle and brand consistency.

HR Symposium September 20 Carol Stream Park District

This symposium presents a unique opportunity for professionals in the Parks, Recreation, and Conservation field to enrich their knowledge and skills in human resources management. Whether you're a seasoned HR expert or new to the field, this event promises insights and resources to further develop your role within the HR department of your respective agency.

Illinois Delegate Reception @ NRPA October 9 Atlanta, GA

Join us in Atlanta! On October 9, 2024, IAPD and IPRA are co-hosting our annual Illinois Delegate Reception during the NRPA Annual Conference.

Details and registration available at ILipra.org



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Certified Pool Operator (CPO) Course



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ILipra.org



Jason Anselment
IAPD General Counsel

IAPD Navigates Challenges to Conclude Highly Successful Spring Session

After two straight years of record OSLAD funding, we began the second year of the 103rd General Assembly optimistic about the possibility of one more year of at least \$50 million for new OSLAD grants. The historic funding levels the past two years were possible because of IAPD's efforts in preventing proposed fund sweeps during the budget impasse in 2015-17. Although OSLAD was protected from sweeps during the impasse, without a state budget there were no grants. Consequently, these funds were still available to supplement the annual real estate transfer tax receipts dedicated to OSLAD the past two cycles resulting in historic funding levels.

For similar reasons, approximately \$30 million is still available this year because of IAPD's success in preventing another proposed fund sweep of OSLAD in 2021 when there were no grants due to the pandemic. Consequently, when the Spring Session began in January, we were already advocating for a full OSLAD appropriation of more than \$50 million by supplementing next year's expected real estate transfer tax receipts with these 2021 funds.

Unfortunately, the landscape quickly changed in February when the Governor delivered his proposed budget that included a provision to sweep all of next year's real estate transfer tax receipts for OSLAD into the state's General Revenue Fund. This action would have eliminated funding for an additional 40-50 projects during the next grant cycle at a time when demand for OSLAD grants has never been higher.

IAPD and its membership immediately sprang into action. At the time, the 12-event legislative breakfast program was just underway, so OSLAD became the focus of these important advocacy events. Back in Springfield, IAPD spent countless hours educating legislators and key staff members about the Administration's proposed sweep. By the time hundreds of IAPD members arrived at the Capitol on May 7-8 for Parks Day at the Capitol, the Legislative Reception, and the Legislative Conference, budget negotiations had just begun in earnest, so key messages about OSLAD were perfectly timed to support our advocacy on this critical issue.

\$54 Million for New OSLAD Grants

Not only did **lawmakers reject the Governor's proposed sweep** as the direct result of these advocacy efforts, **but the General Assembly also appropriated another \$54 million for new**

OSLAD grants in the state budget, **SB 251/P.A. 103-0589 (Sims, E., Jr. / Gordon-Booth. J)**, delivering a major victory for the IAPD membership.

After this grant cycle, we project that nearly all the protected dollars from the budget impasse and pandemic will have been awarded. At that point, new OSLAD grants will once again be funded solely through the real estate transfer tax receipts that are generated each year. Therefore, we strongly encourage all IAPD member agencies to apply before the current grant application cycle closes on September 13.

Two More IAPD Platform Bills Approved

Last year, during the first year of the 103rd General Assembly, **five IAPD Platform bills were signed into law**. Most organizations are pleased to pass a single bill during a two-year General Assembly, so by that measure the 103rd General Assembly was already a legislative success.

IAPD is never an organization to rest on its laurels, so this spring we pushed for more legislation to assist the membership. As a result, **two more IAPD Platform bills passed both chambers and are on the Governor's desk**.

If signed by the Governor, **SB 2849 (Morrison, J. / Rita, B.)** will allow units of local government to adopt rules related to the use of drones above public property that is intended or permitted to be used for recreational or conservation purposes as long as those rules do not conflict with any federal or state laws or regulations. This authority will give park districts and forest preserves the ability to address problematic drone use at the local level. As this issue goes to press, the Governor has not yet taken action on SB 2849, but he will do so by August 25, 2024.

Another IAPD Platform bill, **HB 4488 (West, M., II / Morrison, J.) P.A. 103-0600** has already been signed into law, and will protect park districts and their patrons from election officials who have forced them to make their facilities available as early voting polling places for up to four weeks regardless of whether the facility was already scheduled for another program or event. While most election authorities and park districts are typically able to work through scheduling conflicts, some overzealous election authorities used the old state law to displace park district programs and services or threatened legal action. The new law will require county clerks

to work cooperatively with park districts to find an alternative location to serve as an early voting polling place if the room requested by the election authority would interfere with scheduled park district programming. In the unlikely event the park district and the election authority are unable to identify a mutually agreeable alternative room at the park district, the legislation requires the election authority and the park district to document their difficulties for the county board, which shall have the final decision.

IAPD also initiated **HR 736 (Sheehan, P.) / SR 957 (Johnson, A.)** that champion the vital role that park and recreation programs play in Illinois communities and declare July 2024 as Parks and Recreation Month. The resolutions were unanimously approved by both the House and Senate.

IAPD's Efforts Protect Members on other Legislation

Throughout the two years of the 103rd General Assembly, legislators introduced more than 9,800 proposals and filed more than 3,000 amendments to these bills. IAPD reviewed each of these proposals for their potential impact to our membership, and throughout the legislative session we worked diligently behind the scenes on dozens of proposals by obtaining amendments to improve legislation, provide clarity to avoid future problems and unintended consequences to our member agencies, eliminate or reduce exposure to liability, and exempt member agencies from burdensome mandates.

As a result of our efforts, many of these bills did not move forward, but several passed both chambers with IAPD's suggested changes and await the Governor's signature or veto as this issue goes to press.

HB 255 (Mussman, M. / Villa, K.) will create a new grant program administered by the IDNR to offer grants to provide employment opportunities to youth and young adults, develop and implement conservation education or job training programs, and offer internship opportunities with IDNR. Initially, the legislation would have eliminated the Youth Recreation Corps grant program that has benefited IAPD member agencies in the past while excluding local governments from eligibility for the new program. **IAPD opposed the elimination of this historically successful grant program, and a new amendment left the Youth Recreation Corps grant program intact while expanding eligibility for the new program to include local governments.**

SB 3342 (McClure, S. / Faver Dias, L.) will create the Pesticide Application on Rights-of Way Notification Act and place substantial new notification requirements on most units of local government when applying pesticides to a public right of way. As introduced, the legislation applied to all units of local government, including IAPD member agencies. IAPD met with the Senate sponsor to point out that pesticide application notices are already mandated on park district property under the Lawn Care Products Application and Notice Act. As a result, the amended bill that passed both chambers specifically **exempts park districts, forest preserve**

districts, and conservation districts from the legislation's requirements.

SB 3567 (Harriss, E. / Elik, A.) alters a provision in the Truth in Taxation Law that requires a taxing district with a website maintained by its full-time staff to post notice of a Truth in Taxation hearing on its website in addition to the "black box" newspaper publication. Originally, the legislation would have required taxing districts to post these notices "*conspicuously*" on their websites for at least 30 consecutive days. IAPD opposed the original bill out of concern that a taxing body could have its notice challenged by parties with differing interpretations of what "conspicuous" means. **As a direct result of our advocacy, the sponsor amended the bill to strike the word "conspicuous"** and instead require that the notice must be posted on or near the top of the taxing body's homepage or on a page accessible through a direct link from the homepage. This requirement will still only apply to a taxing body that has a website maintained by the full-time staff of the taxing district, but the notice will need to remain on the webpage for a period of not less than 30 consecutive days.

SB 3646 (Peters, R. / Hernandez, B.) is an Illinois Department of Labor (IDOL) initiative that will update and reorganize the Child Labor Law. The introduced version omitted the current exemption that allows 14- and 15-year-olds to work an additional two hours (until 9:00 p.m.) during the school year and an additional hour (until 10:00 p.m.) during the summer when working for park districts, not-for-profit youth clubs, and municipal parks and recreation departments subject to other limitations. Additionally, the proposal would have quadrupled the civil penalties for violations in all circumstances. **As a result of IAPD's advocacy, the bill that passed the General Assembly restored the exemption for 14- and 15-year-olds and addressed our concerns over the enhanced penalties by creating a tiered penalty structure depending on the severity of the violation along with other important changes.**

As introduced, **SB 3597 (Ventura, R. / Gabel, R.)** would have allowed townships, counties, and school districts to borrow money from the Illinois Finance Authority to build, purchase, or lease new clean energy infrastructure projects. **At IAPD's request, this borrowing authority was extended to all units of local government, including park districts, forest preserve districts, and conservation districts.**

All these bills now head to the Governor for his signature or veto.

These bills are just a small sample of the legislation that IAPD closely tracked this session. Several significant bills that were covered in our regular Legislative Updates would have been extremely harmful to IAPD member agencies, but as a result of our efforts they failed to pass either chamber this Spring.

These successes would not have been possible without the advocacy efforts of the IAPD membership. Your support makes all the difference!



By Vince Davis, CPRP
IPRA Membership Manager

How IoT is Shaping the Future of Parks & Recreation

Who remembers 2016? Some may recall it as the year the Chicago Cubs won the World Series, marking an end to their 108-year drought. But for many, 2016 was synonymous with the summer Pokémon Go took the world by storm. In the days following July 6, 2016, everyone, young and old, ventured outdoors, smartphones in hand, embarking on virtual quests to 'catch' their favorite Pokémon. The sense of community was palpable, and public spaces teemed with life. This phenomenon offered a glimpse into the potential of augmented reality (AR) and the Internet of Things (IoT) to transform public spaces.

Integration of IoT in Parks: A New Era

Across the globe, IoT technology is revolutionizing our interaction with urban and natural environments. Anoka County's parks provide a prime example, where visitors can use their smartphones to unlock historical insights via AR — making history leap off the pages and come alive right before their eyes. This integration of technology turns ordinary green spaces into hubs of learning and adventure, enhancing visitor experiences and extending education beyond traditional methods.

Enhancing Park Visits with Technology

IoT is transforming parks into more accessible and enjoyable places. Here's how:

- **Interactive Trails and AR Overlays:** Imagine walking a trail while your smartphone alerts you to historical events that occurred on the spot you stand or identifies flora and fauna around you. This melding of technology with natural exploration feeds curiosity and makes each visit unique.
- **Smart Lighting:** As you wander through the park at dusk, lights along the path brighten at your approach and dim as you pass, saving energy and reducing light pollution, all while ensuring your safety.
- **Personalized Visitor Experience:** Future Park apps could recommend trails based on your interests and physical capabilities, from a serene walk through a sculpted garden to a challenging trek up a rugged hillside.

Wildlife Monitoring and Digital Engagement

Technology like AI is ushering in a new era of wildlife conservation and interactive learning:

- **AI-Driven Wildlife Identification:** The Bird Buddy Project is a smart bird feeder that identifies the species that visit it, providing valuable data on bird populations and behaviors. It also allows for real-time engagement with nature enthusiasts worldwide through live streams and social media shares. Parks

can replicate such technologies by setting up web-connected cameras at various natural points of interest to stream video feeds live. Available apps like PictureThis can be used to easily identify different plant species in your parks and preserves to create informative programs to educate the public and boost engagement.

Streamlining Operations for Sustainability

Efficiency is crucial, whether in resource management or budget maintenance:

- **Smart Irrigation Systems:** These systems adjust watering schedules based on real-time weather conditions and soil moisture levels, significantly reducing water wastage and ensuring plants thrive with minimal human intervention.
- **Solar-Powered Devices:** Transitioning to solar power for park operations cuts costs and aligns with sustainable practices by reducing fossil fuel dependency.
- **Efficient Waste Management:** IoT-enabled trash bins can compact waste and alert staff when they're full, streamlining garbage collection and keeping the park clean without constant human oversight.

Navigating Challenges

However, the road to a fully integrated IoT park system isn't without obstacles:

- **Privacy Concerns:** Increased surveillance and data collection through IoT devices can raise privacy issues that parks must address transparently to maintain public trust.
- **Infrastructure Investment:** The initial costs for setting up IoT systems can be steep, but the long-term efficiency gains and potential revenue from enhanced visitor services can offset these expenses.
- **Maintenance and Security:** IoT devices require ongoing maintenance to function correctly and need robust security measures to prevent data breaches, necessitating a continuous investment in technical expertise.

Looking Ahead

The potential of IoT in parks is immense, promising not only to enhance the user experience but also to make park management more efficient and environmentally friendly. As we look to the future, the integration of IoT within park ecosystems is likely to become standard practice, heralding a new era of smart recreation that current and future generations can look forward to. IoT-equipped parks offer more than just improved operational efficiencies; they create dynamic spaces that encourage learning, exploration, and a deeper connection with the environment.

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Beyond Boundaries:

Designing Universally Inclusive Environments in Parks and Recreation

By **MARK TRIEGLAFF**,
Accessibility Consultation and Training Services, Inc.

For the past 34 years, the United States has had a national law dedicated to protecting and increasing opportunities for people with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is considered a civil rights law for people with disabilities with the intent to protect them from discrimination by requiring equal rights to programs, services, and goods offered to any other individual. Emerging from the ADA in 1989, Universal Design Principles have inspired a movement to enhance design practices, surpassing mere compliance. Today, children seek inclusive outdoor play environments that cater to diverse developmental needs - physical, cognitive, communicative, social/emotional, and sensory.





A Universally Designed Park requires the collaboration of architects, city planners, recreation professionals, citizens and people with disabilities.

Through these play experiences, we celebrate inclusivity and a focus on one's ability. The standards established by Illinois Parks and Recreation Agencies and Special Recreation Associations far exceed those of other states. As a community of professionals, we should celebrate our achievements and strive to create inclusive play environments that surpass ADA guidelines and embody the Universal Design principles.

The Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) were expanded in 2010 to include recreational standards that were not

previously covered. These new standards cover areas such as amusement rides, boating facilities, exercise equipment, golf facilities, miniature golf, play areas, and swimming pools. While these standards provide more opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in recreational activities, they are considered minimum standards and may not meet the needs of all individuals with disabilities.

In 1989 architect Ronald Mace coined the term "*Universal Design*" to build environments that are aesthetic and usable to the greatest extent possible by everyone regardless of their age, ability or status in life.



These 7 principles of “Universal Design” are:

- 1. Equitable use:** The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.
- 2. Flexibility in use:** The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
- 3. Simple and intuitive use:** The design is easy to understand and operate.
- 4. Perceptible information:** The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user.
- 5. Tolerance for error:** The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.
- 6. Low physical effort:** The design can be used efficiently and comfortably with a minimum of fatigue.
- 7. Size and space for approach and use:** The design provides appropriate size and space for reach, manipulation, and use regardless of the user's body size, posture, or mobility.

Let's consider why it is necessary to incorporate the key elements of Universal Design when developing playgrounds that will withstand the test of time.

Park and Playground Universal Design Features

A Universally Designed Park requires the collaboration of architects, city planners, recreation professionals, citizens and people with disabilities. This collaboration aims at not only meeting accessibility standards but also exceeding them by incorporating Universal Design features throughout the park and playground elements. Through this review, the seven park elements will be examined with regards to accessibility code and how they embody Universal Design Principles.

Walkways

It's important to install park walkways with a running slope of less than 5% to ensure accessibility. According to ADAAG standards, slopes above 5% are considered ramps, which may not be usable by some individuals with mobility issues. By keeping slopes below 5%, the walkways can provide easy access to a greater number of people.

Playground

One option of the 2010 Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines for recreation is the use of a transfer platform to access elevated play areas. The transfer platform is intended for a child to transfer off their wheelchair and onto this platform. This transfer platform is connected to a stair system that allows a child to bump up the stairs to the higher or elevated play components. The intent of the design would allow a child to go down a slide,

use a play panel, slide down a pole, etc. However, feedback indicates that children do not like to get out of their wheelchairs, and the effort required is strenuous and not inclusive. The recreational standard also allows a ramp for accessing the elevated level, providing access to at least 50% of the play components and is only accessible at one side. To improve inclusivity, consider installing a ramp system that extends the full length of the elevated play area, allowing access to 90% of the components. Other considerations may include a playful color palette, the use of natural light and incorporating a quiet space for children who get overwhelmed. Be sure to also design the play space to include a variety of play including strength building, manipulative, pretend, sensory and creative arts play. This aligns with Universal Design Principles.

Playground Surface

In the 2010 playground standards, the Access Board allowed the use of engineered wood fiber as an accessible playground surface. However, it has been determined that with normal use a wood fiber surface does not stay in place and quickly becomes inaccessible to children with disabilities using mobility devices. To be considered an accessible surface, it has to be maintained on a regular basis.

The Universal Design choice is to install a rubberized surface or artificial grass. This surface meets not only safety impact standards for falls but provides a surface that does not require constant care to maintain its usability. This design offers a smooth transition and easy access to the playground surface providing adequate space to approach these areas.

Swings

Consider locating the swing set across from the playground that is separated by a walkway. Designing the swings in this location provides safety in equitable use. Like the playground, the swing area should have a rubberized surface up to and even with the walkway surface and large entry spaces. This location, separate from the playground, allows for safety from children accidentally running in front of someone swinging. Add swings with back and neck support designed for a person with a more severe physical disability. Newer swings that allow the parent to swing opposite the child in the accessible swing are now available.



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Raised Water Feature and Garden Bed

A park offering a raised garden bed with a water feature addresses the need for tactile experiences that all children crave. The water flows out of a bubbling fountain at one end of the raised garden bed. The water cascades down into a trough at the side of the raised bed and flows to the other end. The heights at the beginning of the fountain are higher and easier for a taller person or a person with back issues to touch the water. The water trough gently slopes until it is at a height that a child, short adult or a person in a wheelchair could easily touch. These height variations allow natural interaction with the water at the easiest height for an individual. Parents of children with autism suggested this enhancement of the design to allow for increased ability to explore and be more tactile. Consider adding outlined impressions of sticks, leaves, pinecones and nuts to create outlines that people can touch while putting their hand in or near the water. The intent is to provide a tactile experience for everyone, especially a person who is blind or has low vision.

Other considerations could be interactive elements that spray water into a bowl that collects the fountain flow. Interactive panels can also be used that only require a touch or light pressure to activate. To better serve people with different types of abilities and reaches, the activation plates are located at various heights for someone in a wheelchair or a person sitting on the ledge or the ground so a child or adult just steps on it or could even roll over it with their wheelchair. These various ways to activate elements provides the opportunity for everyone to participate.

Picnic Tables and Shelter

Consider a small shelter with fixed mounted picnic tables. To provide options for a person using a wheelchair, minimally have two of the three picnic tables be accessible. Locate one picnic table in the direct sun while the other one is under a shade structure. These locations give individuals options as to what is more comfortable for them. Some individuals taking certain medicines must avoid direct sunlight due to extreme sensitivity. Other determinations would be related to comfort and protection from the elements.



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Overall Grounds Design

A park is used by local residents as well as by people driving to the park. The parking and the walkways should provide minimum slopes to allow for easy access.

If the park is located near a moderately busy street, the site designer should consider including a slight berm at the park's edge, along with fencing and plantings on top. This design solution allows for the park to remain open while also providing a visual barrier and an intuitive boundary. The slope of the berm naturally helps slow down a running child, allowing a parent or caretaker to catch up to them. This is a major concern shared by all parents, especially those of children who are runners.

There are countless beautifully designed Universal Play Spaces throughout Illinois that Allow Access for All and include Multigenerational play! We must applaud our achievements and strive to create universally inclusive environments for everyone to participate in!

Consider visiting some of these parks & playgrounds with "Universal Design" Principles incorporated.

Woodridge Park District's
Park District of Oak Park's
Pleasant Dale Park District's
Elmhurst Park District's
Streamwood Park District's
Oakbrook Park District's

Lisle Park District's
Darien Park District's
Champaign Park District
DeKalb Park District
New Lenox Community Park District
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Tree House

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Designing an outdoor playground requires considering both form and function. It involves careful consideration of various factors, such as safety, durability, maintenance, and environmental impact. Synthetic turf, also known as artificial grass, has emerged as a superior material for playground surfaces, offering a range of benefits that make it an excellent choice for creating safe, well-designed, and enjoyable play areas.



INNOVATIVE GREEN DESIGN:

Plainfield Park District Embraces Synthetic Turf for Playgrounds

By **Dwayne Branum**, General Manager, ForeverLawn Chicago

ForeverLawn, who is celebrating 20 years in business, has seen more and more agencies implement synthetic turf over traditional playground surfaces. The use of synthetic turf in many markets has increased significantly in the past 10 years. Nationally, in the early 2000s, usage on playgrounds specifically was minimal. However, by 2017 synthetic turf usage on playgrounds exceeded 1 million square feet, and as of 2023 was just under 3 million square feet.

Synthetic turf is continually finding its home in Illinois parks. Plainfield Park District has incorporated ForeverLawn's Playground Grass™ into several playgrounds over the past few years. Bob Collins, Plainfield's director of planning, says they've been turning to turf because "it looks great, is safe, and fully ADA accessible."

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Why Surfaces Matter

Safety is a top priority when designing any playground, and synthetic turf excels in this area.

A nationwide study¹ that focused on playground equipment and surfacing conducted several safety tests and concluded that playgrounds that utilized loose-fill and rubber unitary surfaces showed serious shortcomings, especially when it came to higher fall heights. Some of the results were unsettling, including findings that 75% of loose-fill playground surfacing material had been displaced from its intended location at the time of testing, and that 40% of loose-fill material had deteriorated surrounding each play structure it was intended to protect.

The study concluded that “it is critical for owner/operators and consumers to be aware of playground safety, maintenance, and the importance of having an appropriate surfacing material under and around all play structures.”

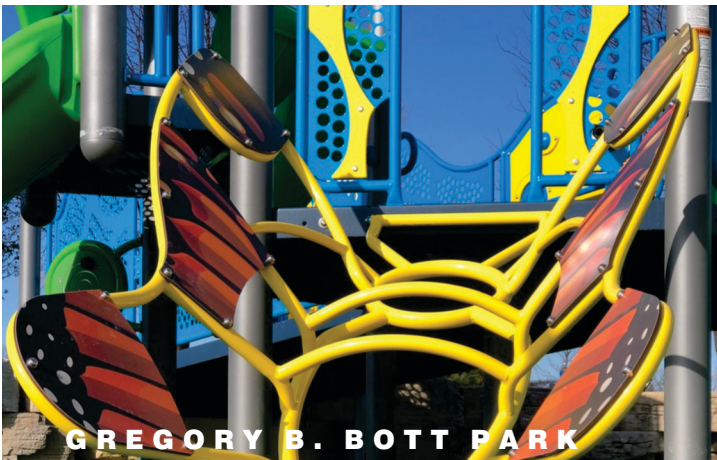
“We use turf at our community parks whenever we update them, said Collins. “We’ve been very happy with the turf to date. It seems to hold up

better than rubber and it has great safety and ADA performance.”

ForeverLawn has completed extensive research on Playground surfaces, compiling data into a Whitepaper “Why Playground grass is the Superior Choice, and the Evolution of Play Spaces.” This research thoroughly outlines trends of where the market has been and where the market is going. In the search for more ideal safety surfaces to exceed vs. meet ASTM Attenuation and Fall Height Requirements, as well as the desire to increase outdoor play among children AND meet the needs of today’s playground design trends, synthetic turf has become the safety surface of choice among city planners, playground decision makers, designers and end users. Because synthetic turf has performed so well on athletic fields, more and more designers are specifying it for playgrounds.

Below is a ranking of the feedback attained from agency decision makers across the playground industry which help lead to the development of specific turf products focused on playgrounds that focus on safety and inclusivity.

ITEM	RANKING	ITEM	RANKING
Cleanliness	9.2	Passive Spaces	7.7
Overall Appearance & Appeal	8.7	Safety and Age Appropriate Signage	7.7
Overall Fun Factor	8.7	Active Spaces	7.5
Socialization Spaces	8.2	Natural Play Elements	6.7
Regular Maintenance	8.0	Strict Safety Factors/Such as Fall Height Compliance	6.3
Safe Play Elements that Look Risky	7.8	Allergen-Free	6.2
Design/Elements for All Ages	7.7		



Playground Grass™ is making play accessible for all kids. Crafted with careful consideration and components. Playground grass is firm, stable, ADA accessible and antistatic ensuring no kid is left behind. By considering aspects such as wheelchair accessibility, antistatic accommodations, and sensory management Playground Grass products create space where all children can experience free, creative play together.

“Accessibility is the top feature of Playground Grass. Hands down,” said Shane Hamilton, Director of Parks & Facilities, Carol Stream Park District. “I was never in this world [of accessibility] until I had a child with special needs.”

We’re seeing a trend of people looking at alternative surfaces – mainly synthetic turf products – because they are very accessible and add sensory elements”.

Synthetic turf provides a soft, cushioned surface that reduces the risk of injuries from falls, a crucial feature for areas where children play. Many synthetic turf systems

include padding or shock-absorbing layers beneath the surface, enhancing protection and meeting or exceeding safety standards set by organizations such as ASTM (American Society for Testing and Materials) and IPEMA (International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association).

Durability and Resilience for the Long Term

Collins appreciates the durability of synthetic turf. “Some rubber play surfaces at key community park sites were cracking and wearing out. We tried turf at one site as a test and found it to be superior, so we’ve begun using it at community parks as noted above when we renovate them,” he explained. “Synthetic turf has held up well, even in high wear areas, and it provides a safe and enhanced ADA accessible experience.”

Outdoor playgrounds endure constant use and exposure to the elements. Synthetic turf is highly durable and can withstand heavy foot traffic without wearing down. Unlike natural grass, which can become muddy, patchy, and uneven, synthetic turf remains consistently lush and even



throughout the year. It is also resistant to various weather conditions, including UV rays, rain, and extreme temperatures, ensuring a long lifespan with minimal degradation.

Low Maintenance = Time Savings

Something to strongly consider when designing an outdoor playground is care and maintenance. A standout feature of synthetic turf is its self-sufficiency. Synthetic turf requires only occasional grooming to remove debris. This ease of maintenance makes synthetic turf a cost-effective option in the long term, reducing the need for constant upkeep and repairs.

Regular maintenance with a blower, brush, and/or sweeper should be performed to remove dirt or debris, which accumulates on the turf from use. Based on location and frequency of use, this should be done regularly to avoid excessive accumulation. Groom with a plastic leaf rake, stiff bristled push broom, or power broom to help keep the grass looking fresh. While not required, an occasional rinse with water will keep the grass clean.

It's Green in More Than One Way

Although synthetic turf is made from artificial materials, it offers several environmental advantages. ForeverLawn has creatively crafted their products for a better world. For instance, the environmentally friendly backing utilizes all natural bioproducts, a 100% renewable resource, and recycled materials from Project Yellowstone. Additionally, synthetic turf conserves water, an important consideration in drought-prone areas. Many modern synthetic turfs are also designed to be recyclable, contributing to sustainability efforts.

For years agencies have gone with alternative surfaces like pour in place which brings maintenance and repair cost over time, plus costly disposal fees when it must be removed. ForeverLawn has, and continues to partner with agencies for creative solutions, such as gaining approval to use pour in place as the impact attenuation layer helping eliminate disposal cost, and increase aesthetic appeal with a longer lasting, environmentally friendly turf product.

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Aesthetic and Functional Appeal for Timeless Designs

What makes Playground Grass™ a great design solution is its adaptability. It conforms to flat surfaces as well as unique installations such as over hills and playground mounds. One example of this is Plainfield's new Wheatland Park opening in the Fall of 2024. The park will feature a customized design in the 2–5-year-old area incorporating various custom colors of Playground Grass, PlayMounds™, and Funserts™. “Wheatland Park already features a traditional playground in the existing southern areas, explained Collins. “So, we wanted to create a unique, nature-themed play experience in the expanded north section.”

Synthetic turf fulfills a tactile experience many children seek on playgrounds today. It can provide a consistently green and customized appearance, featuring vibrant colors with visually appealing surfaces that encourage children to enter a world of imaginative play. This aesthetic appeal, combined with functional benefits, like antimicrobial and antistatic technology manufactured into the blades, make synthetic turf an ideal choice for outdoor playground design.

Plainfield's playground users have been very receptive to

synthetic turf. “We have received positive feedback for accessibility and the natural turf look,” said Collins. Which is a testament to the park district's community-focused objectives.

In conclusion, synthetic turf offers a combination of safety, durability, low maintenance, environmental benefits, and aesthetic appeal, making it an excellent material for designing outdoor playgrounds. Its many advantages ensure that playgrounds remain safe, functional, and attractive spaces for children and families to enjoy.

1. Market intel and case study work has shown some agencies are still choosing alternative surfaces. Respondents viewed pea gravel as strictly a price play, mainly considered only when dealing with strict budget constraints. They indicated that wood-based materials and rubber mulch were one step up from pea gravel in quality for a safety surface but still less than ideal because of the tendency for it to be displaced, the “dirty” factor and choke hazards. Next came rubber tiles, synthetic turf and poured-in-place. The ultimate in quality and performance in respondent's minds is synthetic turf specifically designed for playgrounds with a safety foam or pad underneath the turf to cushion falls. As more markets continue to utilize synthetic turf for its aesthetic appeal, longevity, ADA accommodations, safety rating and environmental friendliness benefits we believe more agencies will move toward and plan for synthetic turf on their playgrounds. National Study of Playground Equipment and Surfacing.” Source: The National Program for Playground Safety (March, 2019)

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TRANSFORMATION OF NELSON GOLF COURSE:

A Tale of Success and Revitalization

Once a thriving 18-hole golf course decades ago, the Nelson Park Golf Course in Decatur, Illinois faced a challenging future as it struggled with low attendance numbers and increased operational costs. However, through a bold and innovative approach by the Decatur Park District, the site was transformed into a thriving recreational hub, attracting over 150,000 guests every summer.



With the influx of over 150,000 guests every summer, the once-struggling Nelson Golf Course has been reimagined to offer an array of experiences, from thrilling water adventures to family-friendly activities and entertainment.

Declining interest in traditional golf, a shrinking local population, increasing operational costs, and a slower rate of income growth in Decatur were among the key reasons that led to the challenging decision to repurpose the Nelson Golf Course. The need for capital expenditures, such as cart path extensions, parking lot projects, golf cart replacements, HVAC improvements, equipment replacements, and irrigation system updates, further highlighted the financial strain associated with maintaining the course.

Seeking professional insights, the staff and park board of commissioners at the Decatur Park District engaged with ERA Golf Studies to assess the market dynamics and determine a course of action. The study revealed

that the primary golf market in Decatur was oversupplied by 1-2 public 18-hole courses, indicating a surplus of courses that severely impacted golf rounds and revenue generation. The closure of one or more courses was projected to result in an increase in rounds and revenue at the remaining courses, emphasizing the need for strategic decision-making to ensure the sustainability of golfing facilities in the region.

With a deep understanding of the economic and operational challenges facing the Nelson Golf Course, the visionaries behind the transformation saw an opportunity to revitalize the space and create a destination that would resonate with a broader audience. The park board of commissioners made the difficult but necessary decision to close the Nelson Golf Course on February 19, 2009, paving the way for a new chapter in the site's redevelopment.



In 2011, the Nelson Park Redevelopment Plan was adopted, setting the stage for the transformation of the former golf course into a multifunctional recreational complex that would cater to diverse leisure interests. The strategic vision to repurpose the site into attractions such as Splash Cove Water Park, Overlook Adventure Park Mini Golf and Ropes Course, and the Devon Lakeshore Amphitheater not only brought new life into the space but also created a dynamic hub for community engagement and entertainment.

The development of the Overlook Adventure Park Mini Golf and Ropes Course in 2014 added a dynamic element to the recreational offerings the Decatur Park District already provided. The mini-golf course features thirty-six holes of professionally themed mini-golf holes that provide a challenging yet enjoyable experience for all ages. The three-story ropes course elevates the sense of adventure and outdoor recreation. The course includes a ground level children's course and an elevated rope course complete with a zip line. The combination of these quality attractions encouraged active, family-friendly fun and the community began to see the area as a must-visit destination.

The creation of the Devon Lakeshore Amphitheater in 2019, added a new, unique amenity for the community and has brought a new level of tourism to the revitalized park. Thanks to a generous gift from the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, the 3,400-seat amphitheater became *the*

summer venue for live concerts, community events, and performing arts, drawing in crowds that enjoy a diverse entertainment line-up. Artists such as Lainey Wilson, Kevin Costner, REO Speedwagon, Cheap Trick, Trace Adkins, and hundreds of others have already graced the stage at the Devon. Other top-notch tribute acts have been another hit that often results in a Thursday through Sunday schedule that does not stop from Memorial Day to Labor Day. In the beginning, we struggled to connect with booking agencies to play a new, unknown venue. Now, the Devon is on the map and word has made its way back to the entertainment communities in Nashville, Los Angeles, and New York. Artists who have played in Decatur rave about the experience, the setting, and the service the amazing team at the Devon and our park district provide.

Many of the shows each summer also bring in guests from surrounding states that patronize our local hotels, restaurants, gas stations, etc., making it a powerful economic driver for the community. Several hotels have now purchased shuttle buses so that they can transport guests to and from the Devon Amphitheater. Boaters drop anchor on the backside of the Devon and listen to concerts as well. It is not uncommon to see up to fifty boats anchored for some of the larger concerts. The scenic location on Lake Decatur, combined with an open-air setting, made it a unique and memorable spot for gathering and enjoying performances.



In 2021 Splash Cove Water Park brought a new level of excitement to the area, offering families a fun and refreshing way to beat the summer heat. The main attraction at Splash Cove is a unique set of four water slides designed by Klarer Switzerland. They include the *Fallstart*, a drop style slide, the *Infinity Jump* slide which includes several videowalls integrated into the slide that display storyline that the rider chooses upon entry to the slide, the *Freestyle* waterslide where a rider stands and surfs down the slide, and the *Racer* slide, a three-lane slide where you and two of your friends participate in a timed race to the bottom!

Splash Cove also features a 306,000-gallon, nine lane competition pool complete with one meter and three-meter diving boards, a rock wall, and a zip-line. A zero-depth entry pool complete with a children's play structure and the iconic dump bucket, and a two-thousand-foot lazy river. Splash Cove has become a beloved attraction for locals and visitors alike. The water park's success not only provided a much-needed amenity to replace an outdated well-style pool but has also contributed to the local economy. Splash Cove attracts patrons not only from Central Illinois but from surrounding communities as well. The park created over one-hundred and twenty job opportunities for lifeguards, concession employees, aquatic attendants, and customer service employees. The complex is so large that twenty-four lifeguards are required to be on deck when the facility is open.

Other park amenities include a large playground complete with turf located between Splash Cove and Overlook Adventure Park that is open year-round to the public. There are also two retail establishments including the park district's own *Over the Top Ice Cream Shop* serving creamy Tillamook Ice Cream and Del Carmen's Pizza, a local favorite, opened earlier this year.

The success of the transformation of the Nelson Golf Course into a multifaceted recreational complex demonstrates the power of adaptive reuse and creative urban planning. By repurposing the underutilized golf course, the Decatur Park District was able to give life into the area, stimulating economic growth, and creating a vibrant center for entertainment and leisure.

With the influx of over 150,000 guests every summer, the once-struggling Nelson Golf Course has been reimagined to offer an array of experiences, from thrilling water adventures to family-friendly activities and entertainment. The site's transformation serves as a testament to the potential for revitalization in the face of decline, showcasing how strategic redevelopment can create dynamic spaces that enrich communities and attract visitors from near and far. Closing the Nelson Park golf course was not an easy decision. However, we now have a unique recreational destination, and the two remaining golf courses, Red Tail Run and Hickory Point, are thriving and continue to generate strong revenue streams each year.



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