

the review

January / February 2019

the official magazine of the  michigan municipal league

Local Government Basics

FRASER'S MCKINLEY PARK

Barrier-Free Playground Wins 2018 Community Excellence Award





FRASER'S MCKINLEY PARK

Sliding Fun and Understanding into Barrier-Free Playground

By Lisa Donovan

A child in a wheelchair can roll right up to the sand and water area. Kids with and without physical and mental challenges can joyfully interact with each other and all the fun, colorful playground equipment. Parents or grandparents with mobility issues can easily move around the park as they watch their laughing kids at play. These priceless moments are now possible at Fraser's McKinley Barrier-Free Park and Playground for People of ALL Abilities, winner of the Michigan Municipal League's 2018 Community Excellence Award.

"This award represents the culmination of 12 or more long years of work, fundraising, and thousands and thousands of volunteer hours by a dedicated group of people," said Michael Lesich, Fraser councilmember and member of Fraser First Booster Club, after winning the award at the Michigan Municipal League's 2018 Convention in Grand Rapids.

"This park has really given our community an engaging, exciting place for people of all abilities and all ages," added Christina Woods, Fraser Parks and Recreation director. "I really hope this park will serve as a reminder to all the volunteers who have

been involved that with hard work, dedication, and passion you can make big things happen. Hopefully, it will spur other volunteer efforts in the future."

The Power of Volunteers

More than a decade ago, McKinley Park was just a dreary hangout for teenagers. The city's Parks & Recreation department had begun formulating a plan to revitalize the park when the Great Recession dealt a blow to their budget. Fraser First Booster Club, a nonprofit organization comprised completely of volunteers, sprang into action. Under the direction of Vania Apps, founder and executive board member, they approached the city with the idea of transforming the park into a place that people of all abilities could enjoy. "If we raise the money, will you build the park?" How could the city say no?

The next step was to get the community on board. An essential part of that plan was to educate people on just what barrier-free means and who benefits from outdoor play. One of the clever methods they used was "Walk in My Shoes" challenges. With assistance from Fraser First founding member Karen Silverthorn—a special education teacher—as well

2018 WINNER!



COMMUNITY
Excellence Awards



“This park has really given our community an engaging, exciting place for people of all abilities and all ages.”





as a physical therapist and a local business that made prosthetic feet, Fraser First designed a set of engaging challenges. The challenges encouraged people to experience what it would be like to be missing an arm or a foot, the loss of feeling in your hand, or impaired sight. How might people with these challenges be excluded from play at a conventional park? Fraser First took the “Walk in My Shoes” challenges to city and school events to show that it’s the community that loses when we don’t have outdoor play that includes everyone.



“We believe barrier-free play can cure ignorance,” said Apps. “Once someone sees how a person with physical or mental challenges navigates in play, they see that we all have challenges. It’s how we deal with our challenges that is important, and inclusiveness benefits the total community.”

Next up? Fundraising! Building a truly barrier-free playground was going to cost more than a few dollars. Fraser First was definitely up to the challenge. The city has invested about \$150,000 primarily in in-kind donations. In contrast, Fraser First—the primary funding source for the project—has raised well over \$600,000 to date. They’ve received grants from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, as well as other grants and significant private donations. They’ve also held a variety of fundraisers—everything from Valentine’s dances and raffles to spaghetti dinners. “The Fraser First Booster Club was the power behind making that happen,” said Lesich.

“This community came together to build this park. It wasn’t corporations saying we’re going to build this for you,” said Sherry Stein, who became president of Fraser First in 2018. “I feel like if you put more effort into it, you feel more pride, more ownership.”



Build It and They Will Come

In addition to fundraising, Fraser First has been an integral part of designing and planning the park, funding a professional grant consultant, and working directly with the city administration on a regular basis. In 2015, their efforts resulted in the grand opening of Phase 1 of the new and improved McKinley Park, which included a parking lot, "Walk and Roll" path, drainage, and comfort station. Two years later, a toddler sand lot, benches, and colorful play structures became part of Phase 2's entertaining landscape. And just recently, swing sets were added.

In keeping with the park's mission, all the amenities are accessible. The parking lot has no curbs to hinder access for people in wheelchairs or walkers. And all the playground equipment has a ramp or transfer pad so people in wheelchairs can access all parts of the playground.

"The really cool thing about the park is, because we're doing it in a real grassroots way, it has come together in phases," said Woods. "The next step will be looking into adult outdoor gym equipment and maybe a pavilion—things that will really cement that area as a place that people can come to and spend the entire day."

Fun for All

In the three years since the transformed McKinley Park debuted, it has become a very popular community attraction. People from the surrounding subdivisions and the adjacent Hanover Grove co-op—home to about 600 children—are now enjoying the park on a daily basis.

"It has really transformed the neighborhood," said Lesich. "People who said, 'Why are you doing this?' are now out there every day using the park and walking on the path."

Fraser resident Brian Laubert, father to two autistic children, is one of those believers. "I've watched the park go from absolutely nothing to something great," said Laubert in a video on the Fraser First website. "I was drawn to the sand park by my kids. They have sensory issues and love the sand. It helps them in their activities."

"To be able to provide an area where everybody can come together and play on the same playing field helps promote understanding of people who are unlike ourselves," said Woods. "We've been seeing a lot of that." 

Lisa Donovan is the communications specialist and editor for the League. You may contact her at 734.669.6318 or ldonovan@mml.org.