

Review reminders before sliding into playground development

From convenient off-street parking to complying with the disabilities act and deciding surfaces, playground development is not child's play.

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In all my years of writing columns and articles for *City & Town*, none has been on playgrounds. If you read my columns regularly, you know that the writer is a strong supporter of parks and open spaces.

Parks and open spaces give the urban dweller space to breathe freely and to get outdoors.

Parks and recreation facilities, including the playgrounds, can serve as buffer zones between commercial/industrial and residential areas or to reduce the population density in a certain geographic location. Parks and open spaces also are a very appropriate land use for flood plains.

A playground is a unique development all into itself. Playgrounds should be designed for children to safely use the equipment and enjoy playing.

Modern playground equipment has come a long way in terms of durability and reduced maintenance.

Polymer-coated metal, stainless steel, durable plastic, ball-bearing swivels and durable plastics are just some of the items used to give longer life to playground equipment.

Three criteria precede a playground.

Swings and slides continue to be the primary pieces of recreational playground equipment. Some version of a see saw, a set of tubes or plastic pipes in some type and a rotating platform are common playground pieces. Benches are needed so that mother can sit and watch her child negotiate the playground equipment.

Developing a playground depends on three criteria—location, condition and environment. The playground must be readily accessible to children. It should be in a low vehicular traffic area, but it should have convenient off-street parking.

Many times a playground is placed in the center of a park. This discourages parents with young children from the trek from the parking area to the playground.

Often the playgrounds are located without shade and, therefore, may not be used during a big part of the Arkansas summer.

Review surfacing types when you mix playground equipment and children; the product will eventually be

an accident. Even though cities have tort immunity, playground accidents can create an awful lot of ill will. The architect or engineer and playground equipment manufacturer can be held liable.

Just think of the different types of surfacing material that you have seen on a playground. Some of these surfacing items are sawdust, sand, pea gravel, chopped rubber and, many times out of frustration, asphalt.

The perfect surfacing material for a playground is open to conjecture.

Playgrounds are an expense even if you get the playground equipment purchased by a grant. Patrons expect the playground to be clean and free of litter, and they don't want to share the habitat with animals.

Playgrounds are a potential nuisance to the neighborhood and require security patrols to discourage misuse and vandalism when closed.

Remember handicapped accessibility.

When it comes to playgrounds, we can learn from McDonald's. Pets are not allowed, and the children must take off their shoes and meet a size requirement before using the playground equipment. The playground surface is covered with three feet of plastic balls and there are safety nets. And the playground is only open when McDonald's is open.

Handicap accessibility is another major issue that must be addressed with any playground. Strictly interpreted, the American Disability Act (ADA) requires equal access to recreational equipment by disabled children.

Playground equipment has improved in durability and life expectancy, but the other considerations, too, need attention. If you're thinking about installing a playground in your community, consider:

- Place it in an area where there can be adult oversight.
- Place it where it is protected from the elements.
- Make security a complete lock out.
- Comply with the ADA requirements.

Just remember playgrounds are not all about fun!

