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Villa Park skaters look to create new place to grind

BY JIM JAWORSKI
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Ian Escalier, a 17-year-old skateboarder from Villa Park, doesn't use his own town's skatepark that often.

There are a lot of reasons, really, but the most obvious reason is also the simplest: other skateparks in other towns are simply much better.

"It's worth the drive to go out to Glen Ellyn," Escalier said.

But he also is one of many skaters in Villa Park who are working to create a quality skatepark close to home.

Villa Park already has a skatepark near the Jefferson Pool, but many skaters say it is too small, and it has been the victim of vandalism and property damage from non-skaters who congregate there at night. But the skaters and the Villa Park Skatepark Committee are looking for a more visible and more advanced skatepark that will become a hotspot for community skaters.

"There is a big demand," said teen program supervisor Mikie Rudyk, who works with the

skaters. "Just driving from here to home, you see skaters everywhere."

A long time coming

The possibility of a new skatepark took a lot of effort from Villa Park skaters.

In September 2007, rumors began circulating in the skating community that the park district was going to close the skatepark. Superintendent of Recreation Carrie Karl said the issue was discussed because neighbors complained about graffiti, noise and gang activity, not to mention that it wasn't even very popular among skaters.

"The need to relocate and redo it came front and center after we identified what wasn't working for skaters," she said.

In an effort to save the park, seven skaters came to an October 2007 Villa Park Board of Trustees meeting in hopes that they could not only save the skatepark, but also improve it so more skaters would use it. Skater Dillon Schea spoke on behalf of the group and explained



A freight train rolls past the empty Villa Park skatepark on a Sunday afternoon.

Triblocal.com photo by Jim Jaworski

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Skatepark

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to the board that it was not skaters who were causing the trouble and damaging the equipment.

The following month, a public meeting was held to present an idea to not save the current skatepark, but to build a new and improved one in a more visible location. About 50 skaters came out to support the plan, and the Villa Park Skatepark Committee was formed.

Raising funds ... and profile

Since the committee was formed late-2007, it has hosted numerous fundraisers and events to raise awareness and money to help build the park. The village has agreed to match the fundraising dollar-for-dollar to build the park. But the group still has a ways to go: The cost is estimated at \$100,000 and the committee has raised about \$10,000 so far.

To help cover the rest, Paulina Jiménez, chair

of the Skatepark Committee, has been drafting proposals to meet with local businesses to see if they are willing to donate supplies or manpower to lower the project's overall cost.

"There are already some people in the community that are willing to help us out," Jiménez said, adding that she hopes they can break ground on the new park in spring 2010.

The committee members have also worked to make sure the new park avoids the problems that plague the current park.

To ensure they are making a park that is attractive to the skaters, local children and teenagers are invited to meetings to give input. The overall design is almost entirely based on what the users want.

The second problem was the location. The current park is near Jefferson Pool. Not only is it poorly lit and in a relatively unsupervised area, but it is also very close to homes, which has caused neighbors to complain. The new park will be located on the southeast corner of the Iowa Community Center park. The skatepark will be well-lit, a reasonable distance from homes and equipped with a security camera.

"[The current park] is too close to residen-

tial areas," Jiménez said. "I feel for the people who live there. I understand why people don't want it there."

As far as vandalism is concerned, Karl said it is almost unavoidable at any park facility. But the extra light, visibility and security camera should be a deterrent for anyone looking to damage the park. Not to mention that the skaters will protect it.

"They are going to take pride in what they got," Karl said.

A lack of facilities

According to industry groups, there is a relative lack of skateparks in the country. This is due to many reasons, one of which is a stereotype of skaters and skateparks, said Miki Vuckovich, executive director of the Tony Hawk Foundation, which funds and advises skatepark initiatives.

One problem, he said, is that skateparks are often poorly designed and shoved in out-of-the-way areas, which can lead to gang activity and damage. The public then assumes it is the skaters who are causing the trouble.

"Skaters aren't going to damage their own

parks," he said. "There is a sense of ownership."

While the sport of skateboarding is more than 50 years old, Vuckovich said alternative sports like skateboarding, snowboarding and motocross didn't gain mainstream acceptance until major sports networks like ESPN started covering events in the mid 1990's.

This has led to a lack of facilities even though the sport is rapidly increasing in popularity, Vuckovich said. The foundation estimates there are about 13 million skaters in the country but only 2,000 skateparks.

The foundation, which has been working with Villa Park, began because founder and professional skateboarder Tony Hawk had a skatepark to call home when he was a kid but realized many do not.

"It was a place where he could go and practice what he was passionate about," Vuckovich said. "Most kids don't have that."

It's clear that community already exists in Villa Park—they just need a good place to go.

"Now all the little kids are starting to come out to skate," Escalier said. "It's cool. You get to see them growing up and becoming better skaters."