



Skateboarding set to roll into Columbia

The skatepark to be built in Cosmopolitan Park is expected to draw more attention to the oft-neglected sport of skateboarding.

By Chern Yeh Kwok
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Jackson Wallace, left, and Nathaniel Howland have to walk instead of ride on their skateboards at the corner of Ninth Street and Broadway. Skateboarding was banned from the downtown area in 1988.

Eric McKenzie has been arrested, had his equipment confiscated, been ticketed by the police, been to traffic court, and taken to jail, all for enjoying the sport he loves. McKenzie is a skateboarder.

"I was once yanked off (my) skateboard by a cop on a bike, and I had to go to traffic court (after that)," he said. "When the judge asked me if I had anything to say, I probably talked about 5 minutes. But I still had to pay a \$50 fine."

"Before 18, they didn't give a ticket (for skateboarding)... They'd take you to a holding cell... I didn't know who was the last drunk who was sitting or lying on that same bench I was sitting on. And I was probably arrested 5 or six times before I was eighteen," McKenzie said. He had to wait for his mother to "come pick me up" every time.

Skateboarding was banned from the areas between 5th and Short Streets in 1988. McKenzie was then one of several local skateboarders who went the Parks and Recreation Department to propose a skatepark in Columbia. They were turned away. The skateboarders then saw the ban being expanded to the area between Elm and Ash streets in 1994.

"I've (had to live) like a criminal for the past 11 years," McKenzie said. "I don't want to be thrown in the back of a cop car for having fun."

But all that seems to be coming to an end now.

Today, McKenzie is part of the Skatepark Design Committee that is working with the Parks and Recreation Department for the skatepark to be built in Cosmopolitan Park. He volunteered to be part of the committee for the project that was approved in January this year. He is involved in deciding what to put in the skatepark and how it should be built.

"I didn't think it was going to happen," McKenzie said. "Until they gave us the money, I was apprehensive (about the project)."

"It just seems like when (the skatepark was approved), everything just fell together," he added.

The Parks and Recreation Department decided to look into building a skatepark in Feb 1996. It was a regular topic in the City Council's meeting throughout the whole of last year, and a six-member Skatepark Ad Hoc Committee was formed last June to help in the choosing of its location.

The City Council's meeting on Jan 20 this year saw a unanimous vote for the project. The meeting also saw the initial allocation of \$25,000 being increased to \$39,000. Once the plans are drawn, a construction company will be selected from bids to build the skatepark.

The project has sent some good vibes into the community. Eddie Boster is a former skateboarder and the owner of Salt of the Earth, a shop located in the downtown area that has been selling skateboarding equipment for 11 years. Boster has been a supporter of skateboarding for as long as McKenzie has. His shop is a regular hangout for skateboarders, and he set up petition forms on his counter when the ban was put into effect in 1988.

"(The skatepark) is completely positive. It'll give the skateboarders a place to go... (and) give the police less trouble," Boster said.

Mike and Sherry Sutton agree. They were in Salt of the Earth buying their son Michael his sixth skateboard.

"I see it (as) benefiting the kids," said Mike. "There'll be more things to keep the kids occupied and out of trouble."

William Wood, whose son is on the Skatepark Design Committee, is grateful that the skatepark is being built.

"Skateboarding is much different (than before). It's a sport now, and the kids need an area to develop this sport," Wood said.

"It's nice to see (the city) expanding into sports which don't have as large a following," he added.

The skatepark will be built on a site that was used for overflow parking in the summer baseball season. It measures 100 by 120 feet, and will incorporate the basic features of a street course, which include obstacles such as handrails, used for skateboarders to slide on or to "grind," and ramps, which allow a skateboarder to pick up speed and to jump over obstacles. The skatepark will be made out of concrete.

At its recent meeting, the members of the Skatepark Design Committee were building a clay model of what they deem the perfect skatepark. The model was being built according to the dimensions in which the actual skatepark would be. Steve Saitta, park planner at the Parks and Recreation Department, explained the process.

"We're just getting the master plan. Once they get the model done, with the spatial relationships (between the obstacles), we'll draw it up on a computer," he said.

It will then be turned into a construction document, Saitta added. He said they would worry about the cost later, and that if the skatepark proves to be popular after a few years, the Parks and Recreation Department will improve on its design.

Competitions for skateboarders are planned for the skatepark upon

its completion. There are also plans for a professional team to do a demonstration in the first month of the opening of the skatepark.

With all the activity going on in the skateboarding community, interest in the sport is expected to increase. A report by the International Association of Skateboard Companies states that American Sports Data estimates there are already 9.3 million skateboarders nationwide taking to the streets and skate ramps at least twice a week, while more than 2 million skateboarders say they skateboard everyday.

Recent surveys also show that although more girls are being attracted to the sport, 91 percent of the participants are boys 10 to 16 years of age. Age-range for skateboarders is increasing as well, with more skateboarders keeping their boards past the age of 16.

So how does one start skateboarding?

The first thing for someone starting out in skateboarding is to buy a good skateboard, Boster said.

"Parents often go out and buy their kids a skateboard that has some parts made out of plastic, has no spring to it, don't turn right, and break easily," Boster explained. "A good analogy would be buying a guitar that won't stay in tune for someone who wants to learn the guitar."

- A well-equipped skateboarder requires the following equipment:
- Wheels \$18-26 a set
- Bearings \$8-30 a set - Bearings are what are inside the wheels, and rotate wheels. Better bearings allow a skateboard to move faster and smoother.
- Trucks \$14-18 each - Metal pieces that connect the wheels to the deck. Weight of trucks and material used, usually aluminum-alloy, determine price.
- Deck \$30-58 - Board part of the skateboard, usually made out of maple.
- Mounting hardware \$2-3 - Nuts and bolts used to attach the truck onto the deck.
- Grip tape: \$6 - Sandpaper-type tape stuck on the top of the deck to prevent the skateboarder from slipping off the skateboard.
- Helmet: \$35 (Optional)
- Elbow pads: \$25-30 (Optional)
- Knee pads: \$30 (Optional)
- Skateboarding shoes: \$75 (Optional)

Total cost: \$78- 311

In addition to selling the parts of a skateboard, Salt of the Earth and Dream Catcher Studio, another shop located in the downtown area that specializes in skateboarding equipment, sells skateboards that are assembled. These can cost from \$95 to \$140, though Salt of the Earth sells used skateboards that range in price from \$45 to \$60. Only Dream Catcher offers the safety equipment and shoes. Both shops offer to assemble new skateboards for free.

Boster, and Jason Cook, who works at Dream Catcher Studio, both recommend "blank" decks and wheels for beginners. Decks and wheels usually have graphics on them, usually , and those without these graphics, termed as "blank," costs less.

Boster said that the "blank" decks and wheels "skate just as well, they just don't have the pictures at the bottom."

But there are still some concerns. Sherry Sutton hopes the skatepark would be friendly for different levels of skateboarders.

"There has to be a place for kids to learn," she said.

She shouldn't have to worry. Rafael Stoutz, also a member of the Skatepark Design Committee, said the skatepark will accommodate all levels of skateboarders.

"There's going to be something for everyone, from basic, to intricate and complex," Stoutz said.

Another worry Sherry has is the skatepark attracting "undesirables."

"I want to be sure its safe," she said.

There is also the problem of skateboarders not having good relations with in-line skaters. Wood, whose son is an in-line skater, questions whether in-line skaters would be outcast by the skateboarders at the skatepark.

"There are some skateboarders who are stand-offish about in-line skaters," he said.

McKenzie explained that skateboarders have waited a long time to get the skatepark, and may not welcome in-line skaters. In-line skaters and skateboarders do different tricks and require different obstacles as well, he said.

McKenzie believes that all these problems can be solved one way or another, and foresees a bright future for the skatepark and the skateboarders of Columbia. He appreciates the effort put in by the people involved in the project, especially the funding from the city.

"I'm proud of the city for helping us out," he said.

McKenzie does have one gripe though. He hopes to have a skateboarder at the construction site to help with the supervision of the project's construction.

"I think there should a skateboarder's perspective involved in the construction," he said.

McKenzie is even willing to volunteer his time.

"Why can't they let me go there everyday?" he asked.

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