



New York City
Department of Parks & Recreation

Hearing before the City Council
Committee on Parks & Recreation and
Committee on Mental Health, Mental Retardation, Alcoholism,
Drug Abuse & Disability Services

Wheelchair Accessibility in New York City Parks

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INTRODUCTION

- Parks & Recreation is the steward of almost 29,000 acres of land--14 percent of New York City--including more than 4,000 individual properties ranging from Yankee Stadium and Central Park to community gardens and Greenstreets. We operate more than 800 athletic fields and nearly 1,000 playgrounds; we manage four major stadiums, 550 tennis courts, 51 public pools, 34 recreation centers, 12 nature centers, 13 golf courses, and 14 miles of beaches; we care for 1,200 monuments and 22 historic house museums; we look after 500,000 street trees, and two million more in parks. We are New York City's principal provider of athletic facilities. We are home to free concerts, world-class sports events, and cultural festivals. For more information about Parks, visit our website: www.nyc.gov/parks.
- Ensuring that our facilities are accessible to all patrons is a significant agency priority. Throughout the Bloomberg administration we have ensured that all of our capital designs have been ADA compliant. Our park designers embrace the challenge of developing accessible solutions for facilities built years ago before the current accessibility standards existed. Even though Parks faces a challenge due to funding constraints and the sheer number of facilities under its jurisdiction, we remain committed to accessibility. Many of our capital projects provide for reconstruction of a specific feature of a park or playground and do not include a full-scale reconstruction of the entire property.

BACKGROUND

- The ADA is a comprehensive civil rights law that deals with equal opportunity and integration. The intent of the ADA, under Title II, is to protect qualified individuals with disabilities from discrimination on the basis of disability in the services and programs of state and local governments. The ADA requires that each service, program, or activity conducted by a public entity, when viewed in its entirety, be readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities. In addition, requirements for program accessibility in existing buildings may require alterations to

make a building more accessible than it is at present, and can also require reasonable modifications to rules or practices, and the provision for auxiliary aids and services. Our primary focus on making our facilities accessible has been through our Capital Projects Division. When a park or playground is reconstructed our designers follow current ADA guidelines. This involves the participation of every Capital Projects division, including: Inter-Agency Coordination, Requirements, 5-Boro Comfort Stations, and Greenstreets.

- Long before the American with Disabilities Act was signed into law, Parks began exploring ways to bring recreational activities to all New York City children. As part of an early 1970's initiative to create one playground in each borough for children with disabilities, Parks opened our first Playground for All Children in Flushing Meadows Corona Park in 1984. This was the first Playground constructed in the United States for both able-bodied children and children with disabilities. It served as a prototype for similar sites across New York City, the United States, and the world. This playground was designed to accommodate children using crutches, canes, walkers, or wheelchairs, and to provide many opportunities for social, cognitive, sensory and motor activity.
- Two years ago we were the subject of a State Audit. The results of the audit indicated that many of Parks' facilities had been upgraded to improve accessibility. Seven areas were noted in which Parks could improve ADA accessibility. Those areas include: establishing a detailed transition plan, ensuring that ADA accessibility is incorporated in all new and major alteration projects, providing written guidelines for major alteration projects, appointing an ADA coordinator to oversee all ADA implementation, develop grievance procedures for handling complaints, enhance the Parks internet website to provide the public with more information about ADA accessible facilities and services, and post international signage for accessible entrances and facilities.
- In December of 2005, Commissioner Benepe named me the point person on ADA issues. In the early part of 2006 we quickly developed a grievance procedure, which can be found on our website. We prepared written guidelines for major alteration work and have made improvements to our web site at www.nyc.gov. We have also taken steps toward developing a transition plan. This is a document that provides a plan of how we are going to bring all of our facilities and the corresponding programs into compliance.
- Parks has created a facilities assessment template that field personnel have used to determine if parks and playgrounds are accessible. In the spring and summer of 2006, 1800 facility assessments for small/large parks, playgrounds and greenstreets were conducted. All the data has been entered into a database, and a draft transition plan will be ready in 2007. As we have collected the data, we have been able to pull out information about where we need signage, and will soon be adding more accessible signage to our parks and playground. Our Accessibility Coordinator, Victor Calise will use the data to write a transition plan. The inspections looked at many features including accessible entrances, accessible routes, benches, play equipment, ballfields,

running tracks bleachers, drinking fountains, spray showers, and parking spaces. There are a few more phases of inspections that will need to be done: comfort stations, outdoor pools, recreation centers, green thumb gardens, and historic houses. We are currently setting up a timetable for this. We hope our transition plan will be in a draft form in the early months of next year.

- By developing a grievance procedure, we have improved dramatically our ability to answer correspondence at one central location. Correspondence is routed to my office for a response. We have developed a close relationship with the Mayor's Office of People with Disabilities and they have been a great resource for us.
- In moving forward we will be setting up a committee of resource people outside the agency who will provide comment on ADA issues. We will be bringing more accessible programming to our facilities and working to make more of our existing events and programs available to all people. We will offer training to our recreation staff, specifically Playground Associates, so that they can offer more diverse activities at our sites and we will continue to work on our website to provide information and links to other programs in the city.

EXAMPLES OF RECENT ADA-COMPLIANT PROJECTS

- The ADA Accessibility Guidelines have affected the way Parks approaches each Capital Project, so that accessibility is incorporated into our projects from the onset. We consider accessibility to be a positive upgrade that can benefit all users in regard to spatial quality, safety and inclusiveness. Accessible design features always include providing an accessible route, and often include other accessibility considerations, such as protruding objects, curb ramps, turning diameters, clear floor space, accessible entrances and level changes. Accessible design features are diverse and varied, depending on the scope of the project. The following frequently used Parks Standard design features have been revised or redesigned to ensure ADA compliance: Handrails, ramps, landings, benches, picnic tables, drinking fountains, parking, signage, doors, toilet rooms, drains, stairs, ground level play components, and detectable warnings.
- Here are a few examples of several recent Capital Projects highlight Parks commitment to improving accessibility:
 - At Playground 70 (P.S. 199) at West 70th Street, Parks built a Playground for All Children that recognized nationally advocated standards for universal accessibility;
 - The East 54th Street Recreation Center features accessible toilet facilities and a street access elevator;
 - Hansborough Recreation Center is equipped with elevators, a wider street level entrance, and accessible toilet facilities;
 - Chelsea Recreation Center includes widened corridors and an accessible route to the pool and elevators; and

- Sorrentino Recreation Center will feature a new wheelchair lift providing broad access.
- Other significant Capital Projects have improved accessibility in our historic parks. These include constructing:
 - A new elevator in the Forest Park Golf House;
 - Providing ramping and an elevator in the 1904 Lullwater Boat House in Prospect Park, and providing ramped access to the Central Park Northwoods, the Central Park 79th Street yard, and to the Reservoir Running Track and Belvedere Castle;
 - A new second floor was added to a historic limestone structure in Riverside Park in 2003 to provide an accessible entrance into the new upper floor.

PROGRAMS SPECIFICALLY DESIGNED FOR CHILDREN AND ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES

- Parks operates special programs designed for children with disabilities, dedicated to the concept of play for all, to allow children of all abilities to play together in a safe and exciting play environment.
- **Playground for All Children in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park:** This playground for all children was the first playground built in the United States for both able-bodied and children with disabilities to enjoy. After holding a design competition in the late 1970's, Parks selected the winning design and transformed it into a real working dreamland. Opening in 1984, the pioneering playground allowed children to share meaningful play experiences, and the park quickly became a model for other playgrounds. The playground has now been re-envisioned with a current construction contract which will retain the most loved and successful pieces of equipment and add new equipment, including a Boat-glider swing that will give wings to children in wheelchairs. The new design will also feature a musical walkway, with freestanding musical notes and an accessible play village, complete with a school, a fire station, houses, cars and working traffic lights.

This playground is dedicated to the concept of play for all, to allow children of all abilities to play together in a safe and exciting play environment. The playground reaches out to all the schools in Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx. School trips include arts & crafts, games and once a month a carnival with face painting, entertainment, arts & crafts and sometimes karate lessons for children ages 3 - 12 years. When children with disabilities are included, the accompanying teachers also participate. They can handle a maximum of 200 children per day. The playground reopens to the general public after lunch. During the summer, the Playground for All children provides programs for 200 children, 5 days per week.

- **The Owen-Dolan Center:** this indoor facility provides field trips for children with disabilities aged 7-21 years. The program reaches out to children in Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens and Staten Island. The program operates on Saturdays throughout the year. During the month of July they offer summer day camp.

- **The Graniteville Outreach and Therapeutic Recreation Center:** In Staten Island, this facility provides programs and workshops for all special needs groups, including adults and children ages 5-15 years. The group includes cerebral palsy, downs syndrome and autistic children (5-10 years). Programs include crafts and outdoor playground activities. Supervision is done by staff, parents, teachers and other para-professionals. The center holds a maximum of 50 children. The building is heated and air-conditioned. Special parties with a DJ are held at Christmas and Halloween. One time each year they sponsor a fair and distribute flyers with information about their programs.
- **Bloomingtondale Park:** In Staten Island, Parks completed work to develop fifteen acres of the park for active recreation purposes. The new park design includes three fields for softball, baseball and soccer, a new playground with a spray shower and swings, two basketball courts, a bocce ball court and a comfort station. In the spring of 2006, Parks completed an addition to the existing playground that includes integrated equipment for disabled children and their caregivers. The new facility enhances the existing playground with a diverse selection of play experiences, including swings, accessible play equipment, a fitness unit and picnic tables.
- **Free Aquatic Therapy Instruction:** Bethesda Aquatics, in partnership with Parks & Recreation's Citywide Aquatics Division, offers Aquatic Therapy instruction to children and adults of all ages at five Parks pool locations. Aquatic Therapy is a complete body workout and ranges from gentle walking in water to high-energy exercise; it helps alleviate pain, improve circulation, and promote healing and muscle development for those suffering from physical ailments resulting from injury, disease or aging. Instructors from Bethesda Aquatics are specialized in providing aquatic therapy to people with the following conditions: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); Autism; Cerebral Palsy; Down Syndrome; Hearing Impairment; Mental Retardation; Multiple Sclerosis; Muscular Dystrophy; Spina Bifida; Spinal Cord Injury; and CVA (Cardio Vascular Accident)
- **Wheelchair Sports Programs:** at Highbridge Park in Manhattan and Roy Wilkins Park in Queens, wheelchair basketball practices are open to children and adults with physical disabilities; in Bulova Park in Queens, Parks runs a wheelchair softball program; in Victory Field in Forest Park, Queens, there is a wheelchair football league; and at the USTA National Tennis Center in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, Queens, there is a wheelchair tennis program.