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In This Issue
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Professionals Day



Park Spotlight: Warrington Township Lions Pride Park

Turning \$2,500 spurs
\$2 million

by Dan Hendey, Education Manager, PA Recreation & Park Society, and Ann Toole, CPRP, Toole Recreation Planning

For this year's Park and Recreation Professionals Day commemoration, Niki Tourscher and I traveled to Lions Pride Park in Warrington, Pennsylvania, for a spotlight event. I had heard about Lions Pride Park but didn't know what to expect. Needless to say, I was blown away by the park.

Located on the site of a former day camp, the community has transformed this tired area into a unique, magical public facility that is exciting, engaging, inclusive and environmentally sustainable. Created from a shared vision of the local Lions Club, Warrington Township and local school students, the park is a model of accessibility and intergenerational use.

Lions Pride Park is situated on nearly 20 acres and includes several distinct areas. Kids Mountain is filled with engaging play equipment including towers, climbers, bridges, slides and more. Many elements are barrier-free, and all can enjoy the gradually sloped sensory trail to the top of the mountain.

On top of the mountain, you are rewarded with a great view of the whole park. A suspended ramp provides access to the climbing tower. While the sledding hill off the mountain's backside offers a way down in the winter, there are several ways to climb, walk or slide down the hill year-round. One set of slides leads to a sand pond. You can climb down from the top of the tower or cross a footbridge to the adjacent climber on a smaller hill. The walking choices include returning on the accessible path or navigating the steeper slope of the mountain. It's reputed to be the highest accessible playground east of the Mississippi. This side of the mountain and the rest of the playground area is "paved" with a resilient, rubber surfacing that drains rain away from the playground.

The lower play area is packed with features, including several sand pits with diggers and rockers, a music grove with large-scale musical instruments (in tune, thankfully), and plenty of benches. Adjacent to the play area is a series of hammocks spread out under the trees for resting and a large-scale chess board complete with pieces. The site also features a large pavilion, grills, tables and a shaded central plaza for community events and activities.

Adjacent to the play area are several well-maintained soccer fields for all levels of play and a bandstand for music events. Plans include converting the pond into a wetland area for wildlife, hiking and environmental study. Lions Pride



Kids Mountain at Lions Pride Park. Photo by: Sahar Coston-Hardy via Viridian Landscape Studio.

Park will become an excellent educational field trip option for the local school districts with these natural additions.

Watching several children enjoy the playground, I wondered how it would have been to have a facility like this growing up. It would have been fantastic, so I just had to give it a whirl. The slides were exciting and more jarring than I remember (I'm sure I was over the recommended age). The hammocks were comfortable and the music sweet — what a great spot! Lions Pride Park is a place where people of all ages and abilities can spend the better part of the day enjoying the outdoors.

The Backstory: Making this Park Happen

During the development of the Township's Parks, Recreation and Open Space Plan, a new playground emerged as the top community priority. The Lions Club stepped up with interest in undertaking a public project aligned with their mission. The Township manager, Barry Luber, was concerned about Twin Oaks Day Camp, an aging and deteriorating township property. So, the Board of Supervisors gave their thumbs up to move full steam ahead on creating a great new playground — and they wanted great!

Lions Pride Park: One of Pennsylvania's Great Places

In 2021, the American Planning Association Pennsylvania Chapter named Lions Pride Park as one of the Great Places in Pennsylvania in the category of Great Public Spaces.

The next step was going to the source of what this new playground should be: elementary school students. In a design charrette, the students explored what they wanted their new playground to be. Rather than simply picking out pieces of play equipment from a catalog, they focused on experiences they wanted to have for themselves — and their siblings, parents and grandparents. They wanted to roll; tumble; hike; see from Warrington to Philadelphia; hide; climb; be alone; be with their friends; be with nature; celebrate birthdays; and spend a whole day with their families playing games, playing music, eating and snoozing.

This was going to be expensive and require special expertise in the design of great public spaces.

Here's where RecTAP came in. Rather than undertaking a one-time professional fundraising campaign, Warrington Township secured a \$2,500 no-match RecTAP grant from PRPS to hire a professional fundraiser to train the ready and willing, but not yet able, Lions Club members how to fundraise. The goal was to build capacity within the township for ongoing fundraising instead of a one-shot deal.

To raise funds, the Township and the Lions Club needed a top-notch design to generate excitement and support. They retained Viridian Landscape Studio to transform the ideas of the elementary school students and the public into an exciting accessible public play space unique to Warrington, one that would become a center piece of community life for people of all ages and abilities. Viridian rose to the challenge and exceeded all expectations. With that compelling design in hand, the Lions Club in partnership with the township went on to raise about a million dollars in private funds, \$400,000 in in-kind donations from private and township resources, \$600,000 in township labor, and \$375,000 from a DCNR grant. One of the goals of the Lions Club is to raise an endowment to cover future maintenance costs.

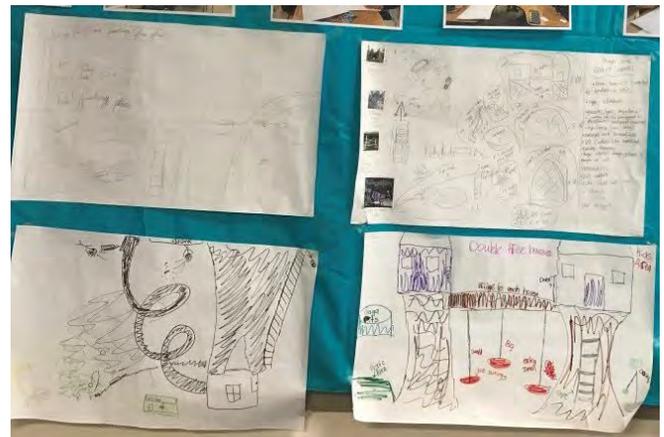


Involving Kids Matters

One of the students involved in the design charrette stated that she learned that participating in local government matters. She went on to log in 313 volunteer hours from fifth to ninth grade at playground fundraising events.

The Township was fortunate in hiring Andy Oles as the parks and recreation director. He brought all this together in the challenge of managing the infinite details of the construction process through the celebrations of groundbreaking to ribbon-cutting and on to the next important steps of maintenance. Through his work, Lions Pride Park will continue to evolve and be the crown jewel of Warrington Township.

About RecTAP: Funded through the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and administered by PRPS, the Recreation and Parks Technical Assistance Program (RecTAP) is a statewide technical assistance service designed to help organizations receive expert advice on maintenance, recreation, park and trail issues. Visit the PRPS website, prps.org, or contact Emily Gates, PRPS director of strategic partnerships, at egates@prps.org to learn more about the program.



Left: Dan Hendey trying out one of the slides. **Top:** These drawings developed by students participating in the design charrette exhibit the thematic designs and features used to create the final playground. Photo by Toole Recreation Planning. **Bottom:** Park visitors enjoying all the park amenities. Photo by Chris Ullery, Bucks County Courier Times.